University of
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Title   To take the flow of leisure seriously: A
           theoretical extension of Csikszentmihalyi's flow

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Abstract

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) 'flow' theory has been extensively developed and utilised, providing the leading explanation for positive subjective experiences in the study of leisure. The prescriptive tenets along with the archetypal descriptive characteristics of the flow state have been well documented. What is less explicit, however, is what occurs within experience in the instances immediately prior to the onset of flow and those immediately following: in what the author has come to term as pre-flow and post-flow experience (Elkington, 2006 and 2007). This research approaches the dearth of knowledge concerning pre- and post-flow experience from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology with the aim of bringing clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow and with it a more complete and holistic understanding of flow experience. The research explores the intricacies of flow experiences of participants from one activity characteristic of each of Stebbins' (2007a) amateur, hobbyist, and career volunteer serious leisure categories, namely: amateur actors, hobbyist table tennis players, and volunteer sports coaches. Using narrative meaning as an interpretative tool to generate descriptions of the specific experiential situations and action sequences that comprise pre- and post-flow produced a single representative narrative of pre- and post-flow experience, and the first empirical insights into the phenomenology of such phases of experience. Examining flow in the context of serious leisure has revealed there to be significantly more to the act of experiencing flow than depicted in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) original framework, re-conceptualising flow as a focal state of mind in a broader experience-process model comprising distinct, intricate, and highly-personalised phases of pre-flow, flow-in-action, and post-flow experience. Combining flow and serious leisure has evoked the affinity of serious leisure activity for flow experience and the discovery that serious leisure and flow are not two disparate frameworks, but are structurally and experientially 'mutually reinforcing' of one another, revealing an explanatory framework of optimal leisure experience. The newly-emerged process view of flow was used to provide insights into the phenomenology of flow in serious leisure, adding to the explanatory capacity of Stebbins' serious leisure theoretical framework. Conflating flow and serious leisure in this way provides for significant and exciting opportunities for knowledge transfer between these two established leisure-related frameworks and signifies new vistas for future research in both fields.

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Acknowledgements

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Bedfordshire. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Name of Candidate: Sam Elkington   Signature:

Date: June 2009

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

> At the time of the performances I reach a place where I am completely content with myself and the task before me [...] I don't think about 'what ifs' [...] my focus is clear and my intentions true [...] it is a wonderful feeling to have.
>
> <div align="right">Amateur Actor</div>

> When you're in this place, it's like you can't do anything wrong, playing the most difficult shots seems to be effortless [...] you become more imaginative and creative in your play because you feel as if you can make any shot [...] it's what makes you want to play the game.
>
> <div align="right">Hobbyist Table Tennis Player</div>

> It's all about the moment, you know, that moment with that individual or that group [...] your concentration is just so focused. It's like you're cut off from the world [...] you're in your own little reality if you like and nothing else matters other than there and then.
>
> <div align="right">Volunteer Sports Coaching</div>

It is the primary intention of this research to significantly contribute to the understanding of a particular type of experience, exemplars of which are captured in the opening comments from participants in this research, termed 'flow'. The term flow was first articulated by the Humanistic Psychologist Csikszentmihalyi at the beginning of the 1970s to connote an optimal psychological state in which complete absorption in an intrinsically motivated activity leads to a number of positive psychological features which include: the perception that personal skills and the challenges provided by an activity are in balance, focused attention, loss of sense of self, clear feedback to a person's actions, feelings of control over our actions and environment, and momentary distortion of time. Though Csikszentmihalyi's flow concept has since been employed in both the human and social sciences, it has perhaps generated its most significant bank of research among those studying the

psychological and sociological implications of free-time, providing the most notable explanation of positive subjective experiences in the realm of leisure. The wide appeal of the flow concept, its deployment in a variety of contexts, and more significantly the absence of corresponding empirical contemporary analysis of the experience itself, particularly relating to experience immediately prior to flow and experience immediately following, lie behind the decision to undertake this empirical investigation of flow which aims to bring clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow and with it a more complete and holistic understanding of Csikszentmihalyi's flow experience.

This opening chapter sets out the field of study of this research, offering first an introduction to studying leisure and how optimal 'flow' experience stems not from simple participation in some activity, rather it is derived from a positive attitude and active or serious engagement on the part of the individual. The chapter then presents an overview of the research rationale and closes with an outline of the structure of this thesis, by chapter.

1.2 Studying the Leisure Experience

When discussions in the leisure literature refer to the 'leisure experience' often more is being suggested than merely the experience accompanying an engagement or episode (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997; Mannell *et al.*, 2007). Exactly what constitutes a legitimate leisure experience has been a prevalent topic for leisure researchers within a wider philosophical debate surrounding the definition of leisure[1], with the traditional charter of Leisure Studies expressing leisure objectively, in terms of the possession of free-time or the pursuit of certain types of activity. Leisure conceptualised as free-

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[1] For a detailed account of the philosophical debate surrounding the definition of leisure see Kelly (1996).

time, frequency of participation in leisure activities, or the availability of leisure spaces has received criticism because it does not sufficiently capture the true value of leisure, minimising its importance as an opportunity for fulfilment (Kelly, 1996), fostering a sense of escapism in leisure and a passive lifestyle (Iso-Ahola, 1997). De Grazia (1962) has argued that the possession of free-time, or participation in a recreative act, is no guarantee that one will experience leisure, and that to best understand leisure, an alternative *subjective* conceptualisation of leisure is necessary. For de Grazia (1964), happiness depends on leisure, and the capacity to use leisure well is the basis for a person's whole life. He continues:

> Leisure and free time live in two different worlds. Anybody can have free time. Not everybody can have leisure. Leisure refers to a state of being, a condition of man, which few desire and fewer achieve.
>
> (de Grazia, 1962: p. 5)

Leisure as a way of living is characterised by a sense of freedom, learning for its own sake and as being undertaken for self-development (de Grazia, 1962). Pieper (1963) asserts further that leisure is 'a mental and spiritual attitude, characterised by serenity, receptiveness and affirmation' (p.40) and 'forms the very criterion for the quality of life' (p.65). Pieper implied that to pursue the essence of oneself is 'to leisure'. On the basis of this subjective ideal of leisure, simply to participate in an activity is not 'leisuring', unless individuals are engaged in expressing and enhancing their spirit (Neulinger, 1981; Mullet, 1988).

The subjective dimension of leisure experience has gathered substantial momentum with scholars placing more and more emphasis and importance in understanding leisure as an experience, as opposed to the more traditional temporal,

spatial and activity based interpretations. This view has led to substantial interest in two interrelated approaches to the study of the nature of leisure states – the definitional and the immediate conscious experience approaches. These approaches are similar in that leisure is viewed to be most profitably understood from the subjective perspective of the participant with each providing a theoretical basis for understanding the nature of leisure experiences and the social psychological mechanisms involved, yet they differ in how this subjectivity is conceptualised and measured. The social psychology of leisure originated, in part, due to researchers' attempts to translate philosophical and tentative ideas as to the special nature of leisure experiences and states into constructs that enabled systematic investigation within the social sciences (Mannell *et al.*, 2007[2]). In this regard, the social psychological constructs of perceived freedom and intrinsic motivation are the pillars on which a great deal of leisure theory has been constructed. These constructs were introduced into leisure theory by Neulinger in his 1974 'leisure paradigm' to clarify the psychological nature of leisure and provide a better link with social psychological theory and research.

Classified as a definitional approach to leisure (*see* Mannell, 1980), Neulinger's leisure paradigm is concerned with identifying the factors that influence whether people label their engagements as leisure or non-leisure. For Neulinger, the primary defining criterion of leisure is the inference of a subjective freedom (Neulinger, 1981). In his leisure paradigm, the idea of 'freedom' translates into the social psychological constructs of 'perceived freedom' and 'perceived choice'. The dimension of perceived freedom denotes the 'prime distinction between leisure and

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[2] See Mannell *et al.* (2007) for a useful historical account of the social psychology of leisure in North America and the UK.

non-leisure' (Neulinger, 1981: p. 18). Individuals perceive they are experiencing leisure when their participation is a result of a deliberate choice, rather than from coercion (Neulinger, 1981). Though influential in the study of leisure, Neulinger's leisure paradigm concentrates primarily on the place of motivation and the prescriptive tenets of leisure as a state of mind, as opposed to describing experientially what it is to be *at* leisure. It is here that scholars and commentators have come to turn to what is classified as an 'immediate conscious experience' approach to leisure, concerned as it is with 'the phenomenological topography of leisure experience and its content' (Mannell, 1980: p. 14), that is, 'the meaning/quality, duration, intensity, and memorablility of leisure' (Mannell, 1984: p. 14).

On the basis of the immediate conscious experience approach, the leisure experience has been further conceptualised as similar to a variety of highly involving psychological states. The most positive or 'optimal' experiences in leisure are reported in activities such as sports, games, arts, and hobbies, that merge the fun and well-being experienced in leisure with focused attention and engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a; Bassi and Delle Fave, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2003; Kleiber *et al.*, 1986). Optimal experiences are states of high psychological involvement or absorption in activities or settings. From this perspective, a high-quality leisure experience is seen to be similar to a variety of highly involving psychological states (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). Of these optimal experiences, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) flow model has had the greatest influence on theorising about leisure experience.

1.3 Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Concept

Proceeding from an empirically derived model of enjoyment, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) flow model provides insight into how the activities of everyday life come to be invested with meaning and experienced as optimal (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). The flow state describes an optimal mental state, one involving total absorption in the task or activity occurring when an intrinsically motivated individual experiences fun and deep enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Using methods of modern psychology, Csikszentmihalyi's flow model was originally developed through research on individuals taking part in leisure activities such as rock climbing, dance, chess and in certain work settings. According to Csikszentmihalyi, 'the metaphor of flow is one that many people used to describe the sense of effortless action they felt in moments that stand out as the best of their lives' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a: p. 29). Typically, flow experiences do not occur in periods of relaxation; rather, flow occurs when the activity requires the individual to stretch his or her physical and mental abilities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). In addition to the need to be challenged and having the skills to meet the challenge, conditions which set the stage for flow include clearly identified goals and specific feedback associated with personal behaviour. 'Games are obvious flow activities', claims Csikszentmihalyi (1992: p. 12), 'and play is flow experience *par excellence'*. Activities that create flow, such as games and play, often result in the narrowing of a person's attention on a clearly defined goal. In turn the focusing of an individual's attention creates a state of deep concentration and loss of conscious attention to the surrounding environment and individual action; thus, the individual is able to focus exclusively on the task at hand.

Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework has been extensively developed and utilised, providing the leading explanation for positive subjective experience in the study of leisure. Though leisure settings are recognised as potentially the best sources of flow experience, it is acknowledged that such experiences can take place in a 'wide-variety of activities and settings' (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997: p. 90), and any activity can be adapted and enhance life by making that activity enjoyable and meaningful (Csikszentmihlayi, 1992). According to Stebbins, Csikszentmihalyi's flow concept is perhaps 'the most widely discussed and studied generic, intrinsic reward in the psychology of work and leisure ... although comparatively few types of work and leisure generate flow for their participants, those that do are found primarily in the 'devotee occupations' and the 'serious' forms of leisure' (Stebbins, 2005a: p. 40).

In over forty years of research the prescriptive conditions along with the archetypal descriptive characteristics of the flow state have been well documented (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b and 1992; Carli *et al.* 1988; Haworth, 1997 and 2004; Bassi and Delle Fave, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2003) What is less explicit within this literature, however, is research detailing exactly how a flow state is reached, in an experiential sense, during leisure. This quandary becomes especially apparent when attention is turned to what occurs within experience in the instances immediately prior to the onset of flow and those immediately following; in what will be referred to throughout this study as pre-flow and post-flow experience. The flow literature offers only implicit references alluding to the presence of such phases of experience, due mainly to the continuous prescriptive application of the original flow model by contemporary proponents of flow leaving a degree of uncertainty surrounding the experiential nature of what goes before and after flow. This research readdresses this

balance by exploring the nature and significance of pre- and post-flow experience so as to bring some degree of clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow and with it provide a more complete and holistic understanding of flow experience.

Shifting focus away from the overly prescriptive content of conventional interpretations of flow and getting back to studying flow as a phenomenon, to flow as it is lived out by individuals, this research returns to those activities from which the original flow concept was developed, to leisure activities. More specifically, this research is situated within serious leisure, as developed by Stebbins (1992a), drawing for the first time in empirically-based research, on the clear theoretical affinity of flow for the 'serious' forms of leisure. As will be fully developed in the following chapter, both Csikszentmihalyi (1992 and 1997a) and Stebbins (1992a and 2007a) have been key contributors to the belief within leisure research that 'good leisure' needs to be much more than simply a pleasant and/or diversionary experience. In his serious leisure framework, Stebbins has considered individual involvement in amateur leisure and professional work (Stebbins, 1977), focusing on barbershop singers (Stebbins, 1992b), jazz musicians (Stebbins, 1968), and stand-up comedians (Stebbins, 1990) sporting and artistic hobbies (Stebbins, 1996a and Stebbins, 2005a), as well as volunteering as a leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 1996b). The serious leisure framework was developed to explain the extent and depth of an individual's involvement in leisure activities, with each of its amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer categories of leisure offering different levels of intensity and outcomes for participants. Stebbins' serious leisure framework provides a clear picture of what it means to be committed

to a leisure activity and the characteristics of these activities most likely to require and foster the kind of high investment necessary for flow.

Whilst some may question the place of a predominantly psychological concept within what is a pragmatic sociological leisure framework, this research argues such a theoretical linkage should be taken seriously as there are significant implications for research that develops an understanding of how flow is lived-out in serious leisure activities. From within their respective frameworks both Stebbins (2001a) and Csikszentmihalyi (1992 and 1997a) have observed that few people intentionally seek out activities or situations that command the investment of significant psychological and physical energy that is likely to produce the deep enjoyment associated with a state of flow. In the words of Csikszentmihalyi (1997a: p. 65), 'having leisure at one's disposal does not improve the quality of life unless one knows how to use it effectively, and it is by no means something one learns automatically'. The contention of this research is that an explicit understanding of what goes before and after a flow state in serious leisure would allow for more accurate depiction of how people come to find such deep enjoyment in their leisure experiences, and with it a more fulfilling and better quality of life.

Whilst a researcher's theoretical studies may unearth facets of a particular theory that are less developed, the absence of a detailed knowledge of a phenomenon or process itself also represents a useful starting point for research. Csikszentmihalyi's flow is an example of a theory in this mould. Exploration of pre- and post-flow through the lens of serious leisure signifies a movement forwards in researching the flow framework which is so often extended and developed within itself.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This study builds upon the brief introduction to the concept of flow in the context of leisure provided above to map out a more in-depth understanding of the research problem in Chapter Two. Presented within a theoretical triangulation the chapter provides a detailed conceptual and theoretical background appreciation of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework and its proliferation as both model and framework, critically considers what the literature does not tell us about flow, the limited existing evidence of pre- and post-flow experience, and how Stebbins' Serious Leisure framework came to form the context for the research. Attention then turns to the issue of research design in Chapter Three. The originality of the research problem meant an original research design was needed. The main part of Chapter Three is thus devoted to a detailed re-telling of how this research design came to be manifest, from the decision to approach the research problem from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology, using participant-centred modes of data gathering and interpretation, to the analytical significance of narrative meaning in the crafting of the first descriptive accounts of pre- and post-flow experience.

Chapter Four presents the histories of the sample amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching serious leisure groups used in this research along with descriptions of each as a form of serious leisure. The histories and descriptions are short as the primary intention is to provide a working knowledge of each activity-context to foreground the central focus of the later chapters of this research and the first empirical documentation of pre- and post-flow experience. Next, Chapter Five examines and authenticates the nature of research participants' descriptions of their own flow experiences so as to understand what it is about the sample serious leisure activities that makes them rich sources of flow. In Chapter Six

both narrative descriptions of pre- and post-flow experience are presented and subjected to deconstructive interpretative analysis, drawing out for the reader the core phenomenological structures involved. Chapter Seven revisits the core structures of pre- and post-flow experience to propose an experience-process model of flow-based serious leisure experience and to present a more accurate depiction of the broader process 'as-lived' by serious leisure participants in this study. Chapter Eight focuses more specifically on flow-based serious leisure experience to better understand the conditions and features of the activities that lead to flow in serious leisure. The study culminates in a summary of the main contributions of this research in Chapter Nine, synopsising the key findings and implications, and emergent avenues for further flow-related research.

Chapter Two: A Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to document the development of the conceptual framework on which this research is based. In order to fully understand the significance of the intended contribution of this research it is necessary to have a sound grasp of what has gone before it. Early sections of the chapter thus provide a detailed conceptual and theoretical background appreciation of Csikszentmihalyi's flow and its proliferation as both model and framework. Succeeding sections endeavour to map out a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the research problem within a theoretical triangulation. Turning first to what the literature does not tell us about flow, there is critical consideration of the limited evidence within the literature that points to the existence of experience before and after a state of flow. Moving away from the relative stricture of the flow literature, the chapter steps next into a review of leisure theory that offers compelling insights into the potential multi-phasic, dynamic, and emergent nature of flow experience. Following on from this review of leisure theory, Stebbins's (1982; 1992a; 2007a) Serious Leisure framework becomes the focus, as the chapter explores the theoretical affinity of flow experience for the 'serious' forms of leisure. The chapter closes with a summary of anticipated implications that such research would engender.

2.2 Challenging Tradition: the origins of flow

Csikszentmihalyi began studying what would later come to be known as *flow* following observations made in the course of his doctoral research on a group of male artists in the late 1960s. He found that while painting, the artists were completely immersed in their work, enjoying it immensely. And yet, Csikszentmihalyi observed it

to be quite typical for the artists to lose all interest in the painting once it had been finished. Csikszentmihalyi turned to psychological theory in an attempt to find an explanation for the deep fascination that painting had for the artists being studied. However, he found the theoretical models of human action that psychologists had constructed at that time to be overly mechanistic, biased in favour of pathology, and generally neglected the phenomenology of the person (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). They tended to explain the reasons for action in functional terms, that is, by considering outcomes rather than processes. He claimed that psychologists had, in an attempt to be as scientific as possible, developed reductionist accounts of human action 'discounting the most obvious aspect of the human phenomenon, namely, the existence of a conscious self' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 15). It was in light of the demerits of these available psychological approaches that Csikszentmihalyi looked to provide evidence on which a more realistic model of human behaviour could be built.

Csikszentmihalyi's observations had suggested that the reasons the artists painted might be contained within the activity; 'the rewards of painting come from painting itself' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 4). Put another way, they appeared to be intrinsically motivated. At the time when these initial observations were made only a handful of psychologists had taken an interest in the concept of intrinsic motivation. Csikszentmihalyi drew upon the intrinsic motivation behaviour programmes of Lepper and Greene (1978), Deci (1971), and deCharms (1968). His principled argument was that it is important to observe individuals in those moments when their lives reach peaks of involvement that produce intense feelings of enjoyment and excitement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971). Failure to account for these aspects of experience condemns models to one-sided and thus

incomplete interpretation of human behaviour (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For Csikszentmihalyi, 'what ultimately counts most for each person is what happens in consciousness; the moments of joy, the times of despair added up through the years determine what life will be like' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993: p.29). Early flow-related research (i.e. Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a; Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971; Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels, 1973) was built upon a desire to understand the phenomenology of those instances in life when we are most free, when we are totally submersed in something that is found to be deeply enjoyable and attempted to unravel the psychological mechanisms, that is, the role of consciousness, in determining the nature of such experiences.

2.2.1 Consciousness and the Quality of Experience

In conjunction with his initial work into the psychological origins of intrinsically motivated behaviour, Csikszentmihalyi (1975a; 1982; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) advocated a basic phenomenological precept about the nature of experience, suggesting that it is how an experience is appraised in consciousness that determines both its quality and meaning. Oriented thus, he proceeded to develop a general model of experience that emphasised the phenomenology of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). According to this model, consciousness has evolved to become a complex system for selecting from the vast amounts of information that individuals are confronted with in day-to-day life, processing it and storing it (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Expressed most generally, consciousness is composed of three functional subsystems; 1) Attention; 2) Awareness; and 3) Memory. 'Attention' takes notice of information available and is recognised as a general and unconditional power in the sense that at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness (Merleau-

Ponty, 2006); 'Awareness', interprets the information selected by attention; and 'Memory' stores that information. From this perspective, subjective experience can be thought of as the content of consciousness (Massimini and Carli, 1988). Information enters into consciousness because we intend to focus attention on it with both the shape and content of life turning on how attention is utilised (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Entirely different realities will evolve containing diverse life paths and goals depending upon the investment of attention. As it is the determinant with regards to the content of consciousness, Csikszentmihalyi suggests 'it is useful to think of attention as *psychic energy*... ultimately, we create ourselves by how we choose to invest this energy [emphasis in original]' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 33).

Although Csikszentmihalyi's treatment of consciousness implicates attention - and on a more profound level, awareness - as the primary datum of consciousness, he identifies that there is another crucial agency at work. Phenomenologically, consciousness is an awareness of our own mental episodes in the same sense that we can reflexively examine that we are aware of (being aware of) something; this is Sartre's (1990) reflective, thetic, or positional self-consciousness. The 'self' is an 'epiphenomenon of conscious processes' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 20); the product of consciousness becoming aware of itself, the structure of which gains shape as information related to one's existence is inwardly digested (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Containing the sum of all information that has passed through consciousness, the self is a blend of all the defining actions, memories, pleasures, and pains experienced in daily life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). It is important to note here, however, that consciousness and its many interlinking processes is far from being an orderly, linear system. Instead, consciousness consists of a paradoxical stream of interweaving processes ever-focused by the self and its attentional lens (Churchland, 1993). Within

this complex system, the self and attention share an interdependent relationship; that is the self adds focus to the direction of attention, while the investment of attention ultimately redefines the structure of the self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

Phenomenological observation regarding the nature of consciousness is fraught with difficulties, owing to the nature of consciousness and the problems in observing it. According to Valle *et al.* (1989: pp. 3-16) there are three essential points of agreement that tend to arise again and again across investigations of consciousness, all of which resonate with Csikszentmihalyi's (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) model. The first point of agreement is the claim that consciousness is primary; referring to the fact that consciousness forms the basis of all knowledge by transcending the split between knower and known and uniting both in the experience of consciousness. The second point is the agreement that consciousness is a field or 'gestalt' experience (Gurswitsch, 1964). The field of consciousness consists of a multitude of perceptions, emotions, and thoughts bound to the fabric of experience such that the contents of consciousness are continuous and harmonious with each other (Valle *et al.* 1989). The final point would seem to be the agreement that consciousness is a stream of continuous flux; referring directly to its fluid and changeable nature. Csikszentmihalyi (1992) has acknowledged that, in reality, the ebb and flow of thought processes is less orderly than might be expected; in fact, it could be argued that chaos and not order is the default state of consciousness; a chaotic review of one's fears and desires, wherein a coherent line of thought is an occasional fluency of the mind culminating in a phenomenological state Csikszentmihalyi has come to label 'psychic entropy' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 22). Kant (1983) suggests such internal discord is inescapable as it is sown into the very essence of humanity. He prefigures that it is by facing and overcoming challenges, by

experiencing our limited material existence, that we create our understanding of the world and, through it, ourselves.

Crucially, however, through his research, Csikszentmihalyi found there are times when information entering consciousness compliments the internal goal structure of an individual creating order. The term 'psychic negentropy' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 24) refers to such instances when all the contents of consciousness are in harmony with each other, and with the goals that define the self. When the information that keeps coming into consciousness proves to be congruent with internal goals, 'psychic energy seemingly flows effortlessly' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 39), creating an order in consciousness based not upon external direction but instead upon an internal logic. Such a highly ordered state of mind is characteristic of what Csikszentmihalyi has come to describe as 'optimal' experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 2000).

2.2.2 Optimal Experience

Optimal experience occurs in those situations wherein attention can be freely invested to achieve a person's goals, as there are no perceived threats that may prove potentially detrimental to the self. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1988: p. 24), 'these are the subjective conditions individuals recognise as pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, and enjoyment'. Such an optimal state of consciousness represents a transformation of the mental field; a new way for the objective constituents of an activity or situation to be present in consciousness whilst concomitantly being a new way for consciousness itself to be present to the constituents of that activity or situation. As a result of experiencing an optimal state of consciousness, individuals are said to develop a stronger more confident and complex self, due to psychic energy being successfully

invested into self-chosen goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; 1985). It is when an individual is able to organise his or her consciousness so as to experience this optimal state, suggests Csikszentmihalyi (1992) that the quality of experience is inevitably going to improve. Indeed, as will become apparent throughout the course of this study, the achievement of this optimal experiential state is found to both deeply exhilarating and valued by those involved.

In subsequent work, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues (Csikszentmihalyi, 1969; 1975a; 1975b; Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971; Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels, 1973) have endeavoured to develop an understanding of optimal experience and the phenomenology of intrinsically motivated behaviour leading to the evolvement of a well-established research tradition; the relevance of which extends across both the social and human sciences. Having established its origins, attention is now turned to this body of research in order to gain a more complete understanding of exactly what constitutes Csikszentmihalyi's optimal experience.

2.3 The Structure of Optimal Experience

Subsequent to its initial conception, substantial investigation (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1982 and Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) into what constitutes an optimal experience unearthed a psychological state whose conditions seemed to be generic to every culture, religion, race, and gender: a psychological state that could be, and was being, experienced the world over, regardless of education or occupation, a state that was not bound by the object necessity of everyday life, but one that instead stemmed from a discipline of the mind. Csikszentmihalyi coined the term 'Flow', based upon his pioneering empirical studies regarding the experiences of a variety of groups including: artists, factory workers, composers, dancers, politicians,

volunteers, scientists, businessmen and women, devotees of sport, and people from all walks of life, all of whom, when describing how it feels when they are doing something for its own sake, 'use terms that are interchangeable in their minutest detail' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 29). From his research, Csikszentmihalyi deduced 'optimal experience and the psychological conditions that make it possible seem to be the same the world over' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p.49) and can be found in a wide variety of activities and settings.

2.3.1 Finding Flow

So much of what is done in our ordinary daily routines has no value in itself, it is done only because it must be or in anticipation of some future payoff. Occasionally, flow may occur purely by chance, arising not because of personal intent but due to a fortunate momentary coincidence of external and internal conditions. However, Csikszentmihalyi's research has indicated that there are certain activities that tend to elicit the flow state more efficiently and freely than others, such activities as making music, rock climbing, dancing, sailing, reading, and chess (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; 2000). What makes these activities so conducive to the flow experience is that their structural design makes an optimal state of consciousness easier to achieve. They facilitate concentration and individual involvement by making an activity as distinct as possible from the 'paramount reality' of everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

All flow-producing activities contain a vital ingredient, that is, it is an end in itself, a condition Csikszentmihalyi coined as '*Autotelic*'; the term given to the nature of the experience (taken to mean *auto* = self, *telos* = goal; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). An autotelic activity or state is one that strongly associates with intrinsically motivated behaviour (Guastello *et al.* 1999), 'what differs is that when the experience

is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake, when it is not the attention is focused on its consequences' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 67). Such flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyment for those involved. Due to the manner in which they are constructed, they aid participants in achieving an ordered state of mind that is highly rewarding within and of itself. A state of mind occurring in an existential middle ground achieved when a person perceives a balance between the challenges associated with a situation and his/her capabilities to accomplish or meet these situated-challenges. The term 'Flow' is a metaphor for a process:

> In which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: p.36).

The flow framework is best understood when reduced to its constitutive parts or what Csikszentmihalyi identifies as the salient elements or the key conditions of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: pp. 48-70). Csikszentmihalyi's early theorising had distinguished a set of seven common structural components that aggregate to represent an *autotelic* or *flow* state:

- Challenging activity requiring skills
- Clear goals and feedback is immediate
- Merging of action and awareness
- Concentration on the task at hand
- Paradox of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

However, in a later text, Csikszentmihalyi (2003: pp. 42-56) moved to subdivide these seven components into two distinct sets: 1) the Conditions of flow and 2) the Characteristics of flow. 'Conditions' refer to the prerequisite elements present in certain circumstances and environments that are assumed to be conducive to flow experiences. 'Characteristics', on the other hand, refer to the experiential nature of the flow phenomenon itself, that is, what people feel while in flow. Distinguishing between the conditions and characteristics of flow has proven useful for optimising the applicational scope of the flow framework (Csikszentmihlayi, 2003). The conditions and characteristics of flow are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Conditions and Characteristics of Flow

Conditions	Characteristics
• A balance between opportunity and capacity	• The present is what matters
• Goals are clear and feedback is immediate	• Concentration deepens
	• Control is no problem
	• The loss of self-consciousness
	• Sense of time is altered

Another notable adaptation of the original list of conditions is primarily with regard to terminology as opposed to changing the meaning; for example, challenging activity requiring skills becomes "a balance between opportunity and capacity"; the merging of action and awareness becomes "the present is what matters"; and the paradox of control becomes "control is no problem". To understand what makes the flow experience so gratifying each of the conditions and characteristics identified above are now looked at in greater detail.

2.3.2 The Conditions of Flow

A balance between opportunity and capacity. From the beginning Csikszentmihalyi has indicated the crucial importance of the dynamic between opportunity (challenges) and capacity (skill) for the flow experience to occur (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b; 1988; 1990; 1992; 2003). By far the most overwhelming proportion of optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and rule bound, activities that 'require the investment of psychic energy, and that could not be done without the appropriate skills' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p.49). This condition is reminiscent of the concept of optimal arousal (Berlyne, 1960; Hunter, 1965), but differs from it in highlighting the fact that what counts at the phenomenological level is the perception of the demands and abilities, not recognising their actual presence. It is important at this juncture to clarify that an activity need not be one demanding physical involvement nor need the skill needed to engage in the activity be one of physical orientation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1992). For example, reading and listening to music have been reported to reap great amounts of enjoyment for participants (Bidwell *et al.* 1997). Csikszentmihalyi (1992: p. 50) suggests that 'any activity contains a bundle of opportunities for action (challenges) that require appropriate skills to realise'. As it unfolds, the flow experience is shaped by both person and environment in an open system referred to as 'emergent motivation' (Csikszentmihlayi, 1985):

> What happens at any moment is responsive to what happened immediately before within the interaction, rather than being dictated by a pre-existing intentional structure located within either the person or the environment. Here, motivation is emergent in the sense that proximal goals arise out of the interaction (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002: p. 91).

A critical element in the skill-challenge equation is that perceived challenges of the environment and the individual's perceived skill be in balance and above his/her usual or average level of experience (Fewtrell and O'Connor, 1995). By way of illustration consider the casual act of reading a book. An individual may enjoy reading, comfortable in the knowledge that they have the ability to differentiate between the meanings of words and decipher the use of different modes of language. But the same individual may perceive understanding a text enough to reduce it down to its subsequent plots and sub-plots and piecing together a complex narrative to be a completely new (above average) task. Csikszentmihalyi (2003) suggests that a good flow activity is one that offers challenges at several levels of complexity. Indeed, activities efficient at producing flow experiences are not easily exhausted, for they have high ceilings of complexity.

The matching of personal skill with opportunity to act implicates perceived competence. According to Mitchell (1988: p. 44) 'competence emerges when a person's talent, skills, and resources find useful application in meeting commensurate challenge, problem, or difficulty'. In sum, the competent individual's perceived abilities are roughly equal to their perceived task. Deci and Ryan (1985; see also Ryan and Deci, 2000) suggest that competence in flow is an integral component of intrinsic motivation and more broadly of what they term 'self-determination'; when self-determined, an individual acts out of personal choice rather than obligation or coercion (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Specifically, people who perceive themselves as having more competence are more intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, because flow involves a balance between challenges and skill, having more skills (or competence) provides a person with greater opportunity to meet challenges, thereby producing more flow-like experiences. However, Deci and Ryan (1985: p. 332) are quick to

emphasise the related, and implicit conditions that are believed to be necessary for flow, namely the experience of self-determination. In their self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that self-determined behaviour is only expressed under specifiable conditions. Flow research, they claim, has placed much emphasis on those conditions that elicit and sustain this special type of motivation/experience.

Goals are clear and feedback is immediate. Goals, by their very nature, direct action and provide focus (Csikszentmihalyi & Jackson, 1999; Iso-ahola and Mobily, 1980). Knowing what is needed in order to be successful within an activity creates clarity of intention, helping to focus attention and avoid unwanted distractions. When in flow an individual seemingly possesses a movement-by-movement awareness of what is needed from them (mentally and physically), allowing the individual to assess the potential of meeting their goals and thus, become completely involved in the activity (Jones *et al.* 2003). Most flow-producing activities contain coherent, non-contradictory rewards and provide clear, unambiguous feedback regarding a person's actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Their value lies in their capacity to structure experience by channelling attention rather than being ends in themselves consequentially limiting awareness to a restricted field of possibilities (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It follows that the goals of some activities are not always as clearly defined as others, and that feedback is often more ambiguous than when compared to more simplistic tasks. However, there is always the need for the individual to negotiate the continually changing environmental demands that are part of all experientially involving activities (Reset and Scherl, 1988).

Whilst, in some cases, the activity will provide the necessary feedback, Csikszentmihalyi warns that a person will not find enjoyment within such an activity unless they learn to set goals and to recognise and gauge feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). Thus, it is developing the ability to set goals and understand the nature of the feedback produced that determines whether or not an individual enjoys a certain activity. Developing the ability to recognise when an individual has been successful in achieving their own goal(s) and understanding the reasons behind their success creates an order within consciousness, and reinforces the structure of the self (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). It is deciphering the meaning of the symbolic messages contained within achieving personal goals that makes this information invaluable, suggests Sutton (2007). Rather, whilst the ultimate goals of, for instance, reaching the summit, winning the game, or completing a piece of art work are all important, Csikszentmihalyi professes 'true' enjoyment to come from the steps taken toward attaining a goal, not actually reaching it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a).

2.3.3 The Characteristics of Flow

The present is what matters. Perhaps the most distinguishable feature of flow, this characteristic is brought about when all of an individual's skills are required to cope with the perceived challenges of a specific situation, so much so that the person's attention is especially absorbed by the activity (Mitchell, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi (1992) has reported that respondents, when describing the flow experience, have reported 'becoming one with the experience', through the investment of attention leading to total involvement within an activity. Individuals are so absorbed in the task at hand that they 'cease being aware of themselves as being separate from the actions they are performing' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 53), experiencing a parity of individual action and awareness. In flow, both action and

awareness are focused exclusively in the present. According to Mitchell (1988: p. 55), 'individuals in flow neither apprehend their deeds nor do they reflect upon them whilst simultaneously lacking fear of the future and guilt for the past'. However, here lies what is the fundamental paradox in this particular feature of flow, that is, a person in flow has a dualistic perspective; he/she is aware of his actions but not of the awareness itself (Zerubaval, 1991). When describing flow, participants have reported that actions seamlessly 'flow' from one to the next, whilst the flow is maintained, 'attentional resources are fully invested in the task at hand, and consciousness works smoothly, action follows upon action seamlessly' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 54). For flow to be maintained, suggests Zerubavel (1991), individuals cannot reflect upon the act of awareness itself as to do so causes awareness to become split, so that the activity is perceived from the outside interrupting the flow of experience. It is recognised therefore, that flow is difficult to maintain for any length of time without at least momentary interruption (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Such a merging of action with awareness is made possible by a fourth characteristic; the concentration of attention on a limited stimulus field.

Concentration deepens. A frequently described characteristic of the flow experience is the absolute concentration invested into a singular activity it engenders (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; 1988; 2003). This particular feature of the flow experience offers an intriguing scenario for its participants as 'in normal everyday existence we are the prey of thoughts and worries intruding unwanted into consciousness' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 58). When in flow, concentration is invested in its totality within an activity which provides clear goals and immediate feedback. The outcome of such intense concentration is that it leaves no capacity to focus upon any concerns or worries that may develop during daily life, the 'clearly structured elements of the

activity impose an internal order, leaving no room for rumination or obsessive dwelling upon negative thoughts thus, enabling the elimination of the possibility of interference or disorder of consciousness' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 15). What is significant within a flow state of mind is that only a select range of information is permitted entrance into consciousness, meaning an exclusion of the normal troubling thoughts that may previously have interrupted attention. It is in this 'standing back from our objective routines, of being in a separate reality defined by the rules of an activity' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: p. 48), rather than the rules of some external system, where the real quality of experience can be found. Learning to eliminate negative thoughts and emotions from consciousness while instead realising the ability to focus, optimally, on the task at hand is not only a sign of a disciplined mind but also a stepping stone to realising a better quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Control is no problem. In his research, Csikszentmihalyi has cited many cases where people in a wide variety of different activities have described experiencing a strong sense of being in control of the situation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Worrying about whether we can succeed at what we are doing, suggests Csikszentmihalyi (1992), is one of the major sources of psychic entropy in everyday life, and its reduction during flow is one of the reasons such experiences become enjoyable and thus rewarding. Critically, it is not discarding all awareness of the potential negative implications of an action, indeed participants in flow are aware of such potential outcomes; they are quite simply not the chief concern as individuals surrender to the moment-by-moment requirements of the situation. What occurs is not total control, but instead a state of perceived freedom to make what one wants to happen reality, something, suggests Csikszentmihalyi, that is seldom possible in day-to-day living (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). What people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but

the sense of exercising perceived control in difficult situations/activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). In a sporting context, individuals and athletes have reported experiencing 'an unshatterable feeling of self-esteem' when in flow (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: p. 27). Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) also cite athletes and participants in sporting events as claiming a feeling of 'invincibility' when in a flow state, an intense empowerment for the challenging tasks to be executed. Similar experiences reported have included feelings of great power, enhanced confidence within a situation or activity, and a sense of complete calmness (Jackson, 1992; 1996; Jackson and Roberts, 1998; Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Flow is seen as representing an optimal example of a positive state of mind based on a one-dimensional focus. It is a delicate balance; too much control and the individual is pushed out of flow, forced back into object reality through fear of consequence; too little control and the individual may be overcome by the fear of failure and be consumed by anxiety. A feeling of being out of control not only creates anxiety and enhanced fear of failure but additionally elicits a feeling of helplessness (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi (1999). When control is perceived to be beyond one's personal capacity we experience a drop in confidence which subsequently minimises involvement and lowers risk-taking within that particular activity/situation. However, in the clearly circumscribed world of flow, as long as the challenges of the activity are respected and the appropriate skills developed in order to meet them, there is a good chance of being able to cope with the demands of the situations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

The loss of ego. A lack of perceived personal control over our experiences not only lowers our willingness to be involved in an activity, but as a result, our self is thrust back into conscious thought, putting an end to any chance of a prolonged flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1997a) posits self-consciousness to be a significant central barrier in experiencing optimal enjoyment suggesting that self-awareness in an activity is 'crippling', as such self-centred egotism, as he describes it, disrupts the order in consciousness necessary for flow to occur. Respondents frequently describe a loss of self-consciousness during flow (Samdahl and Kleiber, 1989; Montea and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Without the required attentional resources, 'the self-reflective processes that often intrude into awareness and cause attention to be diverted from what needs to be done are silenced, and the usual dualism between actor and action disappears' (Mitchel, 1988: p. 45). Enjoyable activities have as part of their structure clear goals, rules, and challenges, well matched by skills, leaving little or no opportunity for the self to be threatened. Though, it is important to note here that it is not a loss of self and certainly not a loss of consciousness that occurs here; rather, an individual's concentration is so intense that the self is simply not a consideration, it is a loss of consciousness of the self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Put simply, what escapes the threshold of awareness is the concept of the self, not the self in its entirety.

On a philosophical note, Csikszentmihalyi is quoted as suggesting 'a loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed back' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 64). Such self-transcendence may be experienced when an individual invests all of their attention into an activity, for example, when reading a book. They themselves become, in effect, part of the system of action greater than what the individual self had been

previously. In essence the individual becomes part of the book, seamlessly involved within the plot as if they themselves were the chief character. This system of action takes its form from the nature of the activity, and derives its energy and meaning from the manner in which a person's attention is invested (Bloch, 2000).

Sense of time is altered. When describing flow, respondents invariably discuss the experience of an alternate experience of time. In flow, suggests Csikszentmihalyi, by virtue of total absorption in the task at hand, 'time no longer passes as it ordinarily does as objective time is rendered irrelevant by the rhythms dictated by the nature of the activity' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 66). Participants in flow have described two common facets of this dimension. On the one hand, time has been said to pass really fast, hours pass like minutes, minutes like seconds (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). On the other hand, there are activities where knowing the time precisely, instead of interfering with flow, is a condition for experiencing it; take surgeons or track athletes for example, 'awareness of time, in these particular cases, is not extraneous information signifying boredom, but a challenge that the person has to overcome in order to do well at the activity, thus enhancing rather than detracting from the enjoyment of the experience' (Jackson, 1995). This intense moment by moment scrutiny of time creates a sense of having more time in an experience than there really is. Individuals may pick up aspects of the activity with more clarity and focus, producing a potentially endless time frame in which to experience an activity (Conti, 2001).

To briefly summarise, according to flow theory, there are seven features of flow separated into conditions and characteristics. These features include: the perception that personal skills and challenges provided by an activity are in balance, a centring of

attention, loss of sense of self, unambiguous feedback to actions, feelings of control over actions and environment, and momentary distortion of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: pp. 38-48). Beyond these features of flow, researchers have conceptualised and tested additional indicators of flow experience. For example, in a study of daily leisure experiences conducted by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the broader flow indicators of positive emotion, affect, activation, cognitive-efficiency, and intrinsic motivation have been assessed to represent daily subjective experience. In addition, the construct validity of flow has been tested by Mannell *et al.* (1988) with eight indicators including positive mood, tension, freedom of choice, intrinsic motivation, concentration, competence, physical awareness, and potency. The association of these additional flow features with the flow state suggested that there may be more to the experiencing of flow than is portrayed in the original model (outlined previously) and prompted researchers to develop more differentiated flow models. However, whilst flow is descriptive of what Csikszentmihalyi terms as 'optimal experience', it must not be confused with *peak* performance or experience (Privette and Bundrick, 1991), a distinction that is now discussed in greater detail.

2.4 Peak Experience is 'not' Flow Experience

A common misconception is that flow and peak performance and/or experience are one and the same phenomenon. It is, however, possible to distinguish flow from peak performance and peak experience (Jackson, 1996). Firstly, peak performance, according to Jackson (1996: p. 76), 'denotes a standard of accomplishment rather than a psychological state'. On the surface there seems to be a closer relationship between flow and peak experience, 'with the main difference being one of intensity of experience' (Jackson, 1996: p. 76). Peak experience is not inherently an optimal experience as it is typically recognised as superior functioning,

exceeding an individual's probable performance quality or full potential in an activity and is predominantly confined to the realm of sporting/athletic performance (Forbes, 1989; Jackson, 1992; 1995; Privette and Bundrick, 1991). In comparison, flow, by its very nature, is ubiquitous, able to transcend both the temporal and spatial stringency of everyday life. The concept of flow has been found to bring clarity to the descriptive data on peak experience (Jackson, 1992 and 2000). Jackson and Roberts (1992) claim flow is the psychological process underlying peak experience, citing supporting evidence from their investigation into college athletes' experiences during performance. Positive associations were found between flow and perceived ability, a task-oriented focus, and perceptions of peak performance. Though, even with this evidence of a functional relationship between flow and peak experience, Csikszentmihalyi warns it may be best to downplay the apparent connection, because a shift in emphasis from the experience to what can be gained or accomplished by using it allows everyday life, governed as it is by extrinsic consideration, to once again encroach upon internal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Such peak experiences may be pleasurable but by their very nature they cannot be wholly enjoyable. Experiencing pleasure, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1992), embodies a feeling of contentment achieved whenever information in consciousness informs that expectations determined by biological programmes or social conditioning have been met. Pleasure is an important component of the quality of life as it helps to maintain order within consciousness. However, it does not produce psychological growth and by itself cannot create new order in consciousness required to bring about happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Flow, on the other hand, is enjoyable by definition, occurring not only when predetermined expectations are satisfied but also when a person has ventured beyond what that individual has been programmed and

conditioned to do and achieved something entirely unexpected (Scanlan and Simmons, 1992; Scanlan *et al.* 1993). Enjoyment follows optimal functioning of consciousness characterised by this movement forward achieved through the unusual (creative) investment of attention and effort (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Scanlan *et al.* 1991).

It is not an easy skill to transform an ordinary experience into flow, though just about anyone can improve their ability to do so (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Some people seemingly have an inborn ability to turn potential obstacles into challenges and thus better realise individual potential without the distractions of self-consciousness (Scanlan and Simmons, 1992). Csikszentmihalyi defines such a natural disposition to change obstacles into challenging opportunities for personal growth as the foundations of what he calls an 'Autotelic Personality' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 21). From his initial research into intrinsically motivated behaviour, Csikszentmihalyi (2000: p. 22) acknowledged a common autotelic trait to be when a person seems to have the ability to enjoy situations that others find totally unbearable. Such individuals effortlessly turn bleak objective conditions into subjectively controllable experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In essence, suggests Csikszentmihalyi, the autotelic personality encapsulates the 'ability to open cultivation' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 83).

Flow can thus be seen to involve particular characteristics creating a very positive state of consciousness and leading to deeply enjoyable intrinsically motivating experience (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997). However, although depiction of flow, in terms of 'what it is', seems straight forward, it is actually quite complex, for though every activity might engender it, an activity cannot sustain it for long unless

both challenges and skills become more complex. In his research, Csikszentmihalyi has found such progressive complexity to be key to every flow activity in that it provides a sense of discovery, pushing the individual to ever-higher levels of performance (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1985). The developmental significance of this inner-dynamic has been a central feature in flow's evolution as both model and framework. Attention is now turned to the various flow models to have evolved since its conception in 1975.

2.5 Early and Contemporary Flow Models (1975 -)

Csikszentmihalyi (1975b) originally summarised the features and operations of early flow theory in a simple three-channel model. The model, outlined in Figure 1 uses the ratio of challenge to skill to predict three experiential states: Flow, Anxiety, and Boredom. This tripartite of a model is based upon the axiom that, at any moment in time, people are aware of an number of opportunities which challenge them to act. At the same time, they are also aware of their skills, that is, of their capacity to cope with the demands of the imposing situation. A flow state is typically characterised by the matching of challenges and skills greater than the respondent's average (2.3.2); this balance, however, is intrinsically fragile. When challenges are perceived to be greater than the respondent's average with individual skill perceived as being less than is required, the individual will enter a state of 'Anxiety'. On the other hand, when challenges are perceived to be below average, with individual skill level perceived as greater than required, individuals tend to enter a state of 'Boredom' (LeFevre, 1988).

Figure 1: The Original Three-channel Flow Model
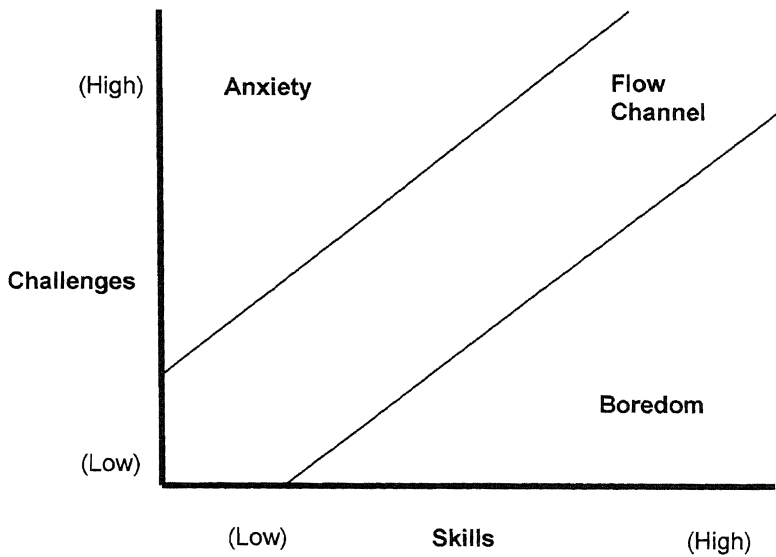
(Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 74)

A key characteristic of Csikszentmihalyi's flow model is 'interactionism', that is, 'rather than focusing on the person abstracted from context, flow research has emphasised the dynamic system composed of the person and environment, as well as the phenomenology of the person-environment interactions' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002: p. 90). This original model not only provided a theoretical foundation to support the propositions of early flow theory, but also offered an insight into how the activities of everyday life come to be invested with meaning and experienced as optimal. Csikszentmihalyi and others have attempted to validate this original model of flow which assumes that the flow experience, as represented by a series of flow indicators (2.3.2 and 2.3.3), is dependent on the match of challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Voelkl and Ellis, 1998; Massimini and Carli, 1986). However, these studies have failed to significantly predict the majority of flow indicators with the match of challenge and skill.

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An important development of the three-channel model of flow (Flow, Anxiety, Boredom) was made by Massimini and Carli (1986) by varying the level of challenge (e.g. greater than, equal to, or less than) to give more differentiated models. Massimini and Carli offered a four-channel model (see Figure 2) predicting only high-challenge, high-skill situations produce 'Flow', whereas, 'Apathy' will be the result when challenges and skills are in balance but low, with these being below a person's mean level of skill and challenge. When the flow model was reformulated in this way studies into positive psychological states using the 'Experience Sampling Methods' (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987), yielded results that were far more harmonious with the theoretical propositions of flow than results of those studies using the original three-channel model. A more in-depth review of the ESM will be provided in Chapter 3 (3.7.3); for now it sufficient to say applications of the ESM typically involve randomly prompting subjects to complete an 'Experience Sampling Form' (ESF), a brief series of mostly single item measures, eight times a day for one week in order to capture their immediate conscious experience.

Studies utilising the four-channel model and ESM have showed the most positive states to be when challenges and skills were in balance and when both were above respondents' average (Carli *et al.* 1988; Massimini and Carli, 1986). For instance, a sample of Milanese teenage respondents reported that they concentrated more, felt in more control, were more happy, strong, active, involved, creative, free, excited, open, clear, motivated, and satisfied with their performance when both challenge and skill were in balance and above a person's average level (Carli *et al.* 1988). When applying the ESM, the four channel model has also been shown to predict small but significant differences in varying types of flow indicators (Carli *et*

al. 1988) prompting Massimini and Carli (1988) to develop an 8-channel model, later

to be labelled 'the Experience Fluctuation Model' (Delle Fave *et al.* 2003).

Figure 2: The Four-channel Flow Model
(Adapted from Jones *et al.* 2003: p. 20)

Personal Average — Challenge — Above / Below

ANXIETY | FLOW

Person's Average Challenge Level

Person's Average Skill Level

APATHY | BOREDOM

Below ← Skills → Above
Personal Average
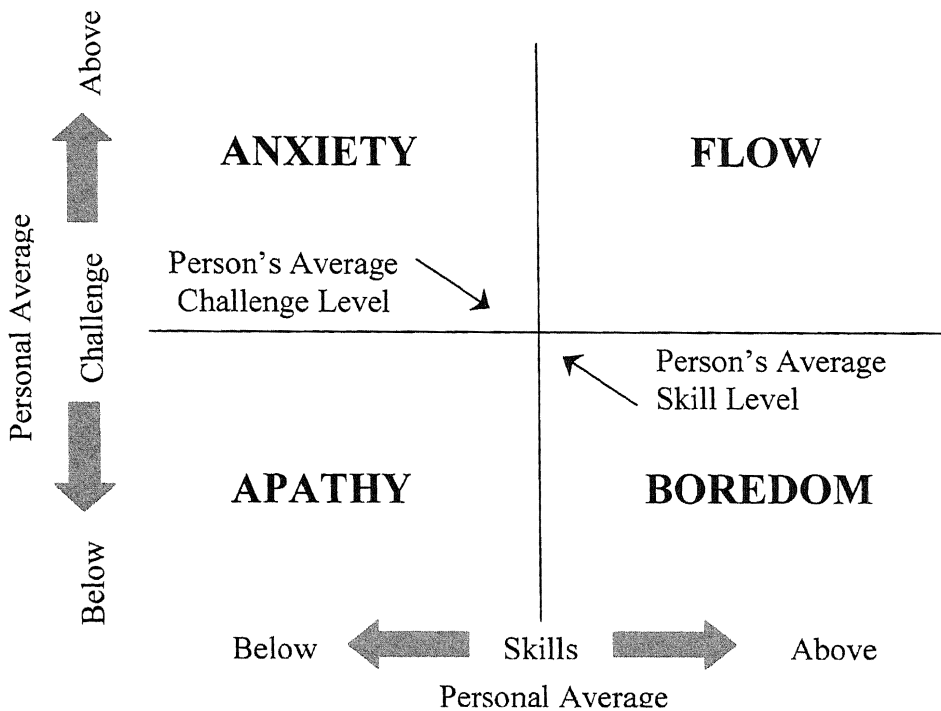
2.5.1 Flow in Daily Life

As people journey through their daily routines it is practically impossible to

attempt to be in flow at all times; the ebb and flow of life simply will not allow it

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). In reality we face up to many different situations and tasks

each day, all of which contain diverse levels of challenge and require the use of old or

the development of new skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1985). The unstable nature of

people's daily routines suggests that there will be variances in the nature and quality

of experience depending upon the context people find themselves within. Flow

research has shown that most daily activities can be associated with optimal

experiences, though the situation should be sufficiently challenging to require active engagement and to provide satisfaction in the use of personal skills (Delle Fave and Massimini, 2003; Massimini and Dele Fave, 2000). The dynamic relationship shared between perceived challenge and perceived skill level can push subjective consciousness into a number of experiential dimensions other than a state of flow (see Figure 4). Massimini and Carli's (1988) research found that various combinations between the level of perceived challenge and skill were reported in terms of eight different ratios between the individuals' challenge and skill scores:

1. High challenge and average skills (arousal)
2. High challenge and high skills (flow)
3. Average challenges and high skills (control)
4. Low challenges and high skills (boredom)
5. Low challenges and average skills (relaxation)
6. Low challenges and low skills (apathy)
7. Average challenges and low skills (worry)
8. High challenges and low skills (anxiety)

(Adapted from Haworth 1997: p.90)

Figure 3 illustrates a useful way of viewing how other combinations of perceived personal challenges and skills produce feelings of worry and arousal (when challenges outweigh skills), or control and relaxation (when skills outweigh challenges).

Figure 3: The Map of Everyday Experience

(Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: p. 72)
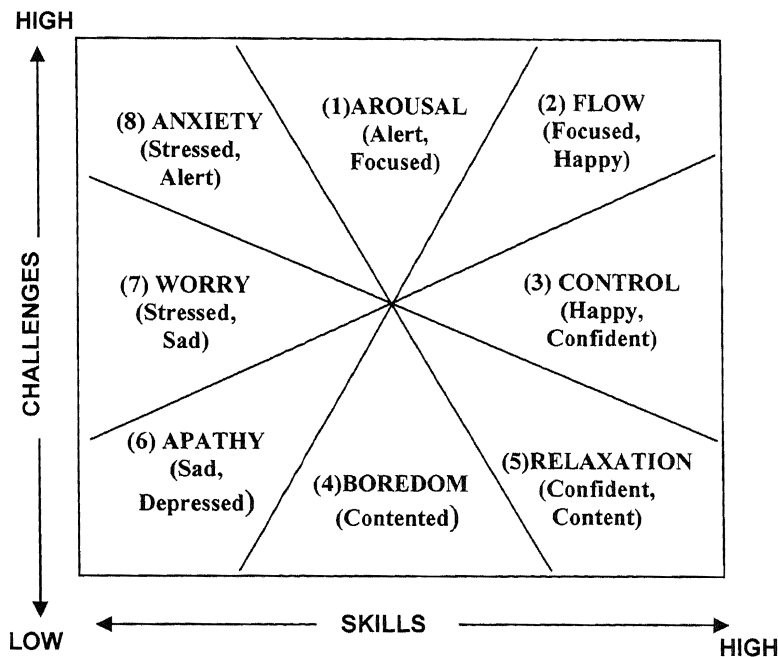
NB: Each "channel" is numbered to correspond to Haworth's eight ratios.

Massimini and Carli's (1988) research into of a sample of teenage students in a classical lyceum in Milan, channel 2 (Flow) was found to be the most positive of the 8 channels; when both challenges and skills were high respondents reported concentrating significantly more than usual, they felt in control, happy, strong, active, involved, creative, free, excited, open, clear, satisfied, and wishing to do the activity at hand (Massimini and Carli, 1988). The opposite of this experience was reported in channel 6 (Apathy), and a similar although somewhat less negative state held in channel 7 (Worry) and channel 8 (Anxiety), whereas, channel 4 (Boredom) reflected an essentially neutral experience. The study also indicated that teenagers who reported a greater frequency of responses in channel 2 (Flow) also reported being more happy, cheerful, friendly, sociable, excited, relaxed, and satisfied (Haworth, 1997).

Somewhat different results, however, were found in a sample of American adolescent students from Chicago (Carli *et al.* 1988). Results indicated that the most positive responses tended to occur in channel 3 (Control) where the ratio of skill is higher in comparison to the challenge provided by the situation. Thus, the American adolescents reported a subjective preference for situations of higher personal control, situations in which their skills are perceived to be more than adequate for coping with the situational opportunities for action (Haworth, 1997). Similar results were found by Clarke and Haworth (1994) in a study of 30 UK adolescent college students. The study examined the importance of 'macro-flow' (representative of high skills and high challenge) and other skill-challenge relationships. The study utilised the skill-to-challenge ratio, more specifically, the level of challenge, to define channels of subjective experience based upon Massimini and Carli's (1988) original 8 channel model. Operationalising the skill-challenge ratio in this way offered a more rigorous definition of flow as involving the highest of challenges. As with the American college students in Massimini and Carli's (1988) study, the UK students expressed a subjective preference for the 'control' channel, in that this channel, and not the flow channel (where perceived skills equal high perceived challenges) was associated with high levels of enjoyment, interest, relaxation, and happiness. The theoretical states deemed by Massimini and Carli (1988) to be associated with the other channels of experience were found to be generally the case for the British college students, though channel 4 'Boredom', was also found to be high in positive subjective states.

Massimini and Carli's 8-channel elaboration of the flow model offers a useful summary of how individual feelings change as a result of different combinations of opportunities to act. Though, perhaps more importantly, the model, along with its ensuing research, has given substance to the proposition that the usage of 'flow' as

synonymous with enjoyment is unjustified, as high enjoyment is also associated with channels outside that of optimal experience. Indeed, the research indicates the importance of lower challenges for positive subjective states. Also, there was concurrence in relation to happiness and relaxation indicating that subjective experiences such as high levels of happiness and relaxation can be associated with channels other than flow and, that such experiences may play an integral role in people's lives in contexts away from the flow experience.

The evolution of differentiated flow models, whilst useful, has unearthed a number of issues in relation to the conceptualisation of flow. Firstly, one of the key problems is determining if only one or all of the flow elements must be present in order for flow to occur. That is, can flow be experienced with only focused concentration, or put a different way; can focused concentration occur in absence of clear goals and feedback? Secondly, are some of the characteristics more important than others when experiencing individual experience in different contexts? And, if so, should an indication of flow be restricted to a balance of challenge and skill, but only at high levels? Or, should a balance indicate flow even if the levels are relatively low?

More recent research findings (e.g. Jones *et al.* 2003; Delle Fave and Massimini, 2003; Massimini and Carli, 2000), along with models derived from contemporary understanding of flow (i.e. the experience fluctuation model), indicate that the balance between challenge and skill is much less predictive of flow than is forecast by early flow theory. Such findings suggest that Csikszentmihalyi's popular early graphic (shown in Figure 1) may have resulted in an overemphasis on the importance of the challenge and skill balance in the generation of flow.

Csikszentmihalyi alludes to a potential solution in defence of his three-channel model claiming:

> [it] is a composite diachronic model illustrating how the flow experience proceeds through time, in a single activity from enjoyment of small challenges when a person's skills are limited, to ever-complexifying enjoyment of higher challenges requiring increasingly rare skills.

(Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 261)

Csikszentmihalyi (2000) also suggests that because flow is a subjective state that varies in intensity, depth, and strength of purpose it is best seen on a continuum, as opposed to an all-or-nothing phenomenon. One end of the continuum represents high complexity, the realm of 'deep flow experiences' or what Haworth (1997) refers to as 'macroflow'. The polar opposite of macroflow are the trivial, sometimes automatic behaviour patterns that require less skill, but are intrinsically rewarding, enjoyable and may even facilitate involvement with more structured activities. As these trivial activities appeared to fit the flow model, although at a lower level of complexity, Csikszentmihalyi labelled them 'microflow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Microflow may involve such activities as daydreaming or more clearly structured activities like listening to music or reading a book. Essentially, microflow is representative of those activities that provide activation, structure, and goals to cope with the gaps in our daily routines (Haworth, 1997). However, the notion that these lesser intensive occurrences may represent microflow events and that 'truly memorable occasions' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 183) of deep flow occur less often seems to be nothing more than a convenient distinction. Conceptually and

theoretically, lower intensity (micro) flow experiences simply do not fit with the requisite tenets of the flow framework.

Essentially, in microflow, Csikszentmihalyi has attempted to tie all subjective experience to the flow framework, a notion that is existentially flawed on the grounds that one cannot seek to be in flow, in its purest sense, at all times. In addition, though this conceptual difference in flow intensity may provide a partial explanation for a lack of explanatory power of available flow models, it also suggests that 'deeply involving' optimal experiences should be predicted with a much more complex set of parameters than the flow indicators, namely the balancing of skill and challenge. It is important to reiterate at this juncture, however, that the flow framework, including its differentiated models, is built upon the adage that only the perceived balance of challenge and skill is relevant to flow, not the absolute values (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). That is, an activity could offer very little challenge, yet could still produce flow if the skills of the person are commensurately low. It is this dynamic feature that is characteristic of how flow activities lead to personal growth and discovery.

2.6 Flow, Personal Growth, and Complexity

As has been established above, experientially, a state of flow is manifest when there is a 'perceived equilibrium between personal resourcefulness and task demand, resulting in feelings of competency when the challenge stretches capability but leads to mastery' (Fewtrell and O'Connor, 1995: p.147). As mastery of a given situation is realised, the challenge recedes and, as the theory goes, the subject's abilities level with or overtake that required to meet the complexity of the task at hand. At this point, boredom begins to enter the affective state and flow experience no longer prevails, thus:

To remain in flow, one must increase the complexity of the activity by developing new skills and taking on new challenges... This inner dynamic of the optimal experience is what drives the self to higher and higher levels of complexity. It is because of this spiralling complexity that people describe flow as a process of 'discovering something new'... Flow forces people to stretch themselves, to always take on another challenge, to improve on their abilities (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p.261).

Following a flow episode the organisation of the self is more complex than before, it is in these instances that the self is said to grow. The awareness of self that follows a flow experience often includes recognition of enhanced and extended skills and a broader reach of understanding and mastery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The sense of an enlarged and more complex self reinforces the intrinsic motivation that brought it about in the first place (Kleiber, 1999). Furthering the complexity of the self is a product of two broad-ranging psychological processes that in combination shape our (inner and social) character: Differentiation and Integration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). The process of 'Differentiation' is characterised by a movement forwards, toward uniqueness, separating one individual from another. 'Integration', on the other hand, is the opposite: a union with others, with ideas and entities beyond the boundaries of the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these two processes (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). The well-ordered mind that follows a state of deep concentration helps to integrate the self. However, it is only when an individual invests equal amounts of psychic energy in these two processes, avoiding the lure of selfishness and conformity that the self is likely to proceed to higher planes of complexity. Csikszentmihalyi has observed that 'so enjoyable and rewarding are these instances of personal growth and development, individuals will

redouble their efforts to experience it again; this is the way the self grows'
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 41). The phenomenology of flow suggests that 'the reason
why we enjoy a particular activity is not because such pleasure has been previously
programmed in our nervous system, but because of something discovered as a result
of some interaction' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: p. 189).

Experiencing flow is thus a motivational force for expansion in relation to the
individual's goal and interest structure, as well as for the growth of skills in relation to
existing interests (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2002). The emergent motivational
nature of flow is well substantiated; it is after all the subjective experience of intrinsic
motivation and has proven a useful construct for explaining individual involvement in
personally meaningful activities. However, there is evidence to suggest that such
involvement and the personal growth and expansion contained therein is less orderly a
process than is predicted by the flow framework. Research by Gaustello and his
colleagues examined the motivational capacity of flow in a study of university
students' daily routines (Gaustello *et al.* 1999). They found the dynamics of
motivational flow to be chaotic over time for all participants. In sum, they purported
that in light of the dynamical history of motivation and the temporal nature of flow, it
follows that the flow experience should fluctuate over time in a non-linear manner.

It is in this fashion that Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework has evolved as an
attempt to explain the human characteristic of endeavour as the tendency to seek out
personally challenging situations that are repeatedly at the limits of individual
capability (Fewtrell and O'Connor, 1995). The potentiation of the inner dynamic of
flow is thus considered in light of its import for human development and, as such, the
association between enjoyable subjective experience and high skill and challenge has

been found 'in a wide variety of activities and settings' (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997: p. 90). For example, flow has been studied in educational settings (Carli *et al.* 1988; Clarke and Haworth, 1994; Gammon and Lawrence, 2003; Montea and Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997); business leadership (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003); the determination of consumer behaviour (Block, 1986); during internet usage (Rettie, 2001); and relating to travel and holidays (Gnoth *et al.* 2000; Jones *et al.* 2003).

The flow state has also been found to be a valued experience and source of motivation for many individuals undertaking physical activity whether in high-level competitive sport or as fitness endeavour (Jackson, 1992). Researchers have also examined flow in high-risk adventure sports such as whitewater kayaking (Jones *et al.* 2003), rock-climbing (Heywood, 1994 and 2006), and surfing (Stranger, 1999). Sports present 'a special opportunity for flow to occur' (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: p. 6). Susan Jackson, a leading proponent of flow in sport, suggests 'being able to attain flow during sport or exercise participation can elevate an experience to higher levels of enjoyment and achievement. Flow in physical activity remains, however, an elusive concept that is difficult to define precisely or describe in its fullness' (Jackson, 1996: p.76). To this end, studies examining flow states (e.g. Catley and Duda, 1997; Kowal & Fortier, 1999; Stein, *et al.* 1995) have focused primarily on understanding experience through the eyes of the athlete, endeavouring to understand the factors that may make it more or less likely that flow will occur during athletic performance.

A further field in which the impact of the concept has been substantial is the recently evolved literature on happiness or subjective well-being (Waterman, 1993;

Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003; Bryce and Haworth, 2002). In this line of investigation, the flow model is usually seen as the leading activity-based theory of happiness. The typology of subjective experience derived from differentiated models like the flow model, have been found useful in the prediction of subjective well-being (Gianinno *et al.* 1979; Csikszentmihalyi, 1982) and the overall quality of life.

Flow has generated perhaps its most substantial bank of research among those who have studied the psychological and sociological implications of free-time, most notably in the realm of leisure (e.g. Carli *et al.* 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b; 1997 Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Lefevre, 1989; Csikszentmihlayi, 1997; Graef *et al.*, 1983; Mannell *et al.*, 1988; Massimini *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, leisure settings are recognised as potentially one of the richest sources of flow experiences. Such is the flow concept's compatibility with leisure activities it is commonly construed as a 'leisure-related theory' (e.g. Gammon & Lawrence, 2003; Roberts, 1999; Rojek, 1995). For example, flow stands as the fulcrum in Tinsley and Tinsley's (1986) seminal theory of leisure experience. In their theory, they state that the experiences that accompany leisure activities may vary in the level of involvement; however, they regard 'pure' or 'true' leisure, what they term 'the leisure state', as occurring only when flow experience is achieved. Subsequent research has suggested that the presence of flow within leisure-related activities represent some of the most positively enjoyable experiences for those involved (e.g. Bidwell *et al.* 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; 1997a; Jones *et al.* 2003; Massimini and Carli, 1988).

Whilst flow has been employed in a variety of theoretical contexts, each of which has tended to draw on particular dimensions of this relatively complex concept that happen to be relevant to the context at issue, the detailed conceptual and theoretical background appreciation of Csikszentmihalyi's flow model presented in this chapter has revealed there to be a lack of empirical contemporary analysis post-2003 of the dimensions of flow experience that serve to underpin this theoretical discourse. Wider reading reveals that contemporary discussions of flow are most likely to fall under the rubric of positive psychology.

2.7 Flow and Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a contemporary perspective advocated by Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman (2000) as being 'the most recent attempt to counter the formerly pessimistic mood within much of psychology' that 'claims to build upon the vision of humanistic psychology but through use of more empirical research than in the past' (Nesti, 2007: p. 151). Though an exact definition of positive psychology does not exist, the most sensible way to get a sense of this movement is to cite its leading proponents. In a recent publication, Csikszentmihalyi professes positive psychology to signify a new direction that 'is distinguished by an interest in the more desirable aspects of behaviour – what used to be called the 'virtues'' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006: p. 3). The perspective of positive psychology, he continues, 'is intended as a connective both to the value-free stance of experimental approaches on the one hand, and to the exclusively pathology oriented views that have permeated much of clinical psychology on the other' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006: p. 5). According to its originators, the fundamental purpose of positive psychology is:

> To begin to catalyse a change in focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive

qualities. The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experience: well-being, contentment, satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (in the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity to love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality and wisdom and high talent. At the group level, it is about the civil virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nuturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic

(Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman, 2000: p. 5)

Whilst this would appear to be a worthy charge, the premise of positive psychology has been strongly challenged, with many within humanistic psychology pointing out that, in not equally equating itself with the negative side of life, it represents a one-sided account of human existence (e.g. Greening, 2001; Held, 2004; Rathunde, 2001; Resnick *et al.* 2001; Taylor, 2001). In an article entitled "does the positive psychology movement have the legs?", Lazarus (2003a) claims the inherent polarity within the positive psychology movement 'represents two sides to the same coin like structure and process, stability and change, stress and coping and so-called positive and negative emotions (Lazarus, 2003: p. 94). According to Lazarus, it is not possible to separate positive and negative and make good sense, 'to do so is to lose needed perspective – there is nothing wrong with giving more attention to the positive but not at the expense of the negative, and above all, they should not be regarded as separable' (Lazarus, 2003: p. 94). By emphasising what is good or virtuous in human nature, positive psychologists are, according to Held (2004), only adding to what she has termed 'the tyranny of the positive attitude' (Held, 2002; 2004). By this she means that contemporary culture, owing in large part, 'to the dominant, separatist

message of the positive psychology movement' (Held, 2004: p. 12), has become 'saturated with the view that we must think positive thoughts, we must cultivate emotions and attitudes, and we must play to our strengths to be happy, healthy, and wise' (Held, 2004: p. 12). Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003: pp. 14-15) typify the response of humanistic psychologists to positive psychology's dominant, separatist message of polarization, they claim:

> A psychology of human strengths should not be the study of how negative experience may be avoided or ignored, but rather how positive and negative experience may be interrelated... the positive and negative are by definition dependent on each other; that is, human existence seems to be constituted by basic dialectics.

Such preoccupation with 'the positive' (Lazarus, 2003b) has seen a thematic shift in contemporary discourse concerning flow since the inception of the positive psychological movement in the year 2000. Scholars and researchers alike are tending to move away from the conventional experiential content towards an objective conception of flow and the prescriptive operationalisation of its structural features, perhaps explaining the absence of empirical analyses of the flow experience itself during the intervening years. As a consequence of this positive shift not only has the flow state lost much needed perspective, becoming increasingly isolated from negative experience, but concomitantly our understanding of the experience of flow itself has remained static leaving a number of fundamental conceptual and theoretical questions unanswered in relation to how flow is lived-out by individuals in different contexts.

2.8 Beyond Flow: what the flow framework does not tell us

Whilst the flow state is a very real phenomenon, it has become bound up with the 'positive thinking' movement, often described as being overly 'ethereal' bordering on the 'mystical', lacking the hard, concrete objectivity that a pragmatic psychological concept should have (Marr, 2001). Although direct critiques of flow are few and far between, in general, criticism levelled at the flow framework has either questioned Csikszentmihalyi's over-reliance on anecdotal evidence and metaphorical colloquialism (Marr, 2001; Woolfolk, 2002) or simply neglected the whole notion of flow altogether (Pols, 1992; 1998). However, the substantial body of evidence which supports the existence of flow is more than sufficient to disprove the assertion that it is a utopian state. The term 'flow' stands as an established metaphorical expression for the dynamic 'flowing' nature of experience that follows the optimal functioning of consciousness, and, despite criticism, has grown to hold a certain *gravitas* within both the social and human sciences to the extent that the flow narrative could almost be considered conventional knowledge. And yet, as will be discussed, Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework is not above reproach. This section presents how the mass appeal of the flow framework (due, in part, to its associations with positive psychology) would appear to cloak a number of significant ambiguities within the flow dynamic. Rather, it is that so much literature has been substantiated in its name in so varied an arena that people have lost sight of the full picture.

Flow is based upon a specific experience, treated within the literature as self-evident and transparent, that is, the experience is in no need of explanation or interpretation. The enduring appeal of flow and its conveyance within a variety of contexts has been responsible for the development of literature explicating the conditions which constitute an optimal 'flow' experience (*see* Kleiber *et al.* 1986;

Carli *et al.,* 1988; Massimini & Carli, 1988; Mannell *et al.,* 1988; Clarke and Haworth, 1994; Haworth and Evans, 1995; Haworth, 1997; Bassi *et al.,* 2003; Jones *et al.,* 2003). The prescriptive tenets along with the archetypal descriptive characteristics of the flow state have been well documented. What is less explicit within the literature is what occurs in the instances immediately prior to the onset of flow and those immediately following, when the flow has either run its course or is disrupted for some reason. Given its dynamic nature, characterised as it is by a requisite balance between perception of high situational challenge and adequate personal skill, deep concentration, sense of control, and clear, continuous task-specific goals and feedback, it is hard to imagine flow to be an instantaneous manifestation of internal harmony, devoid of both *a priori* and ensuing phases of experience (Elkington, 2006). However, the relative stricture of the current flow framework would seem to render it conceptually and theoretically incapable of catering for any form of phasical experience. In actuality, what the literature portrays is a single somewhat detached state of experience isolated by a dearth of knowledge concerning what goes before and after a state of flow. Furthermore, the expression of flow as a singular state would seem to be at odds with the linguistic meaning of the term 'flow' that befits a sense of movement, growth, and transcendence – an inconsistency that would appear to have also gone unnoticed by researchers.

The notion of there being, what I have come to term 'pre-flow' and 'post-flow' phases of experience (Elkington, 2006, see Appendix A: pp. 393) makes intuitive sense. Just as a track sprinter cannot expect to hit top speed without first gradually building up momentum and at some point having to slow back down again, one cannot be expected to routinely happen upon an ordered state of consciousness, equally, one cannot be in flow, in its purest sense, at all times. There are some who

can start a flow episode by simply channelling their awareness so as to conform to the requirements of flow (i.e. those with an *autotelic* disposition); most people, however, tend to rely on external cues, such as the structural characteristics of the activity in order to enter flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Although an individual can enter flow while engaged in any activity, some situations, such as games, art, and sports would appear to lend themselves almost exclusively to inducing enjoyment for participants (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As has already been established (2.3.2), when the literature discusses the *conditions* of flow it refers at once to the pervasive prerequisite elements present in certain circumstances and environments that have proven to be conducive to the flow experience. From the beginning, Csikszentmihalyi has indicated the importance of the dynamic between opportunity (challenges) and ability (skill) for the flow experience to transpire (*see* Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). By far the most overwhelming proportion of flow experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and rule bound. However, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) acknowledges that, empirically, there are clear limitations tied to the flow framework; the problem being that experiencing a state of flow does not turn entirely on the objective nature of the challenges present or on the objective level of skills possessed.

Flow is seen as a positive mindset, wholly dependent upon the individual's 'perception' of what the challenges and skills are and whether they are matched favourably (2.3.2); translating into highly subjective thresholds for experiencing flow. Since each individual undoubtedly has his/her own threshold for entering and leaving the flow state, the borders that delimit the state of flow from other experiential states, as predicted by the various flow models, are at best illustrative assumptions. Clearly then, for certain activities and for certain individuals such borders might be much narrower or much wider. By his own admission, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) concedes

that the various flow graphics show only the direction of relationships, not the precise limits of their being. More significant for this research, however, is Csikszentmihalyi's admission that the transition points that would seem to interject the various experiential states predicted by the flow model remain to be determined empirically (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). By professing to the presence of interjecting points of transition Csikszentmihalyi exposes a transient quality to flow, and, in so doing, reveals the need for there to be adjoining phases of experience, since an individual must move experientially from and to somewhere. But such a discovery begs some important questions; firstly, what occurs beforehand (pre-flow) that enables us to move from a state of non-flow to a state of flow? Secondly, what occurs afterwards (post-flow) when the flow experience has played out? And, perhaps most importantly, are such experiential phases necessary in order to experience flow?

For Csikszentmihalyi the journey of flow is in the 'doing' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p.37), a truism with which few could argue. However, given the phenomenological nature of flow, it makes more than intuitive sense to hypothesise that the journey of flow extends beyond the experiential parameters mapped out by the current framework. Phenomenology does through its doctrine of truth and meaning states that experiences 'do not just exist' (Sokolowski, 2000: p.14), rather, an experience is placed within a 'stream of experience' (Husserl, quoted in Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2005: p.38). Each individual experience is thus interpreted as an element in a process, wherein experience must in some way be reached and subsequently, at some stage, be left behind. From a phenomenological viewpoint, then, pre- and post-flow would seem to be relationally constituted, that is, for there to be post-flow there must first be pre-flow. Concomitantly, in order to understand the true meaning of flow each facet of the experience (including what goes before and after it) must be

considered. This is a concern also conveyed by Scott (1992) who argues for the experience of flow to be situated not just within specific structures but across systems of experience that are in need of their own interpretation, analysis, and critique. From this viewpoint, to simply posit the experience of flow prescriptively, as how one ought to be like, without consideration of the systems that structure the experience is to miss the essence of flow altogether.

2.8.1 Existence of Pre and Post Flow: The Evidence

Closer scrutiny of the flow literature reveals that the ambiguity surrounding pre- and post-flow is bred not from their questionable existence; as will be discussed shortly, there is reference within flow literature alluding to the presence of both pre- and post-flow experience. Instead, such uncertainty stems from an inappropriate understanding of the experiential composition (the phenomenology) of such phases, which itself stems from an enduring tendency of researchers to overlook the conceptual and theoretical need to acknowledge pre- and post-flow experience, choosing instead to run with the existing theoretical framework.

2.8.2 Pre-Flow: the path to optimal experience

A study by Delle Fave and Massimini (1988) into the changing contexts of flow in work and leisure provided evidence to suggest that entry into flow required a degree of preparation. Respondents (from a variety of professions and leisure endeavours) reported the importance of reaching a state of 'physical readiness' and 'psychological security' in anticipation of forthcoming optimal experiences. The notion of preparing for flow is reiterated within the realm of competitive sport, wherein discussions with elite athletes led Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999) in 'Flow in Sports', to coin the term 'optimal preparation' to cite the significance of preparing mentally and physically well for competition.

In related research, Moore and Stevenson (1991) found the concept of 'trust' to be a necessary pre-condition for flow-like experience. Moore and Stevenson introduced the notion of trust as a psychological skill in which individuals (most notably athletes) release conscious control over well-learned physical movements. The trust dialogue predominates in the context of sport where it is viewed as an 'ideal performance state' (Thompson *et al.* 1998). A trust-state is said to be achieved when an individual is able to free themselves of expectations, fear, or other conscious activity and maintain a clear and present focus necessary to attend to higher aspects of performance (Moore and Stevenson, 1994). Given its performance-related nature, however, it may be argued that the trust-state state be more directly related to the achievement of peak experience than a state of flow. It has already been established (2.4) that peak experience is not flow experience. The former is typically recognised as superior functioning, exceeding an individual's probable performance quality or full potential in an activity and is predominantly confined to the realm of sporting/athletic performance (Jackson, 1992; Jackson and Roberts, 1992). By comparison, the latter reflects the positive affect associated with complete investment of attention and sustained concentration and effort (Kleiber, 1999). Flow has thus been claimed to be the psychological process underlying peak experience (Jackson and Roberts, 1992) of which trust is more likely to be a part.

In 'Finding Flow' (a synthesis of a far-reaching ESM study based upon thousands of interviews) Csikszentmihalyi (1997a: p.68) claims that each flow-producing activity requires *a priori* investment of attention before it can begin to be enjoyable. He terms this initial investment of attention as 'activation energy', stating 'one needs such disposable activation energy to enjoy complex activities'. He

continues, 'should an individual be overly tired, anxious, or lacking in the necessary mental discipline to overcome that initial obstacle, they must settle for something that although less enjoyable, is ultimately more accessible' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a: p. 68). Perry, in her study of flow and creative writing (Perry, 1999: p. 22) gives further credence to the notion of pre-flow activation observing 'something else stands out in the vast majority of the disparate metaphors; a sense of active participation in making flow happen'. The movement in many of these metaphors, suggests Perry (1999: p. 23), 'demonstrates a sense of agency, activity or wilfulness'. Such expressions carry with them the possibility that an individual does not have to wait passively hoping to chance upon flow, but can instead 'actively invite the muse to join you at your desk' (Perry, 1999: p. 23). From here, Perry goes on to identify numerous mechanisms for realising flow, including the construction of personalised routines and rituals. However, whilst Perry's observations of creative writers are without doubt the most direct scholarly reference to pre-flow experience to date, like all of the pre-flow evidence considered here, they are empirically limited and remain prescriptive in nature.

2.8.3 Post-Flow: a phenomenological significance

Evidence of post-flow is less prevalent than that of pre-flow, however, there is, within the flow literature, implicit reference as to the significance of post-flow experience. For example, Csikszentmihalyi offers that:

It is later - in thinking back on the (flow) experience, individuals will usually conclude that for the duration of the flow episode, their skills were adequate for meeting demands - where the most intense enjoyment is to be found (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p.44)

At first glance, such a statement given what is known of the completely absorbing self-transcending nature of the flow-state would appear to be commonsensical and in need of no further elaboration. However, if the manner in which an individual experiences flow is analysed from a phenomenological perspective, it is discovered that, typically, an individual first experiences flow and then follows the experience with an attempted explanation or description of it. The differences between the two are so rarely considered in the flow literature that they are both assumed to be one and the same unitary *flow* experience. Spinelli (1992: p. 23) adds, 'in the process of any experience taking place, no explanation or description can be given; it is only once the experience has occurred that we may both describe and explain it to some degree of adequacy'. As it is, the experience itself, as it takes place, stands beyond the realm of description or explanation, it is said to be unlanguaged (Van Manen, 1998). Thus, it is only after an experience has occurred that any form of description can be attempted. Dilthey illustrates this point by stating:

> A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflective awareness of it because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective (Dilthey, 1985: p.223)

Phenomenological inquiry makes a clear distinction between the experience as it happens – the 'lived-experience' (van Manen, 1998), and the interpretation of that experience. The former is said to be prereflective experience, the latter is recognised as being reflective experience (Spinelli, 1992). Prereflective experience is action-based, the activity of experiencing itself as it occurs 'as-lived'. Spinelli asserts, 'any statement of description or explanation occurs subsequent to the experience and is

limited by the amount of explanation/description that is practically possible' (Spinelli, 1992: p.24). On the other hand, one enters reflective experience when attempts are made to describe or explain what has been experienced. In contrast to prereflective experience, reflective experience turns on the notion of time and requires a structured system of communication. It is from here that individuals are able to formulate meaning and begin to understand the significance of what was experienced. Csikszentmihalyi appears to acknowledge flow's prereflective nature stating 'realisation and elaboration take place when the action has ceased: where there is opportunity to solidify the experience through reflection' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 47). Considered from this perspective, Csikszentmihalyi's earlier claim that enjoyment is only to be found later 'when thinking back on flow' is unsurprising given that it seems flow experience can only be cognitively realised *after* a flow episode.

Despite there being implicit inferences within the flow literature alluding to the presence and import of pre- and post-flow, this evidence has been shown to consist of fragmentary and empirically-limited insight that, when considered together, provides a rather patchy and incoherent understanding of exactly what constitutes such experience in the broader act of experiencing flow. Much remains to be explained about the way individuals come to experience flow. There are fundamental and urgent questions concerning the nature of the psychological processes that foster a flow state and the way in which optimal psychological practices are formed and lived out by individuals. In Csikszentmihalyi's own words, 'we lack an analysis of the phenomenon that addresses the possibility of emergent qualities, whether with respect to dimensions, dynamics, conditions, or function and affects' (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2002: p. 102-103).

Given the evidence considered above, it is conceivable that the longevity of flow, not only as a leisure-related theory but as a theoretical framework is, in part, tied to its ability to see past the flow-related leisure experience as being an experientially isolated phenomenon. However, whilst the notion of multi-phasic flow experience remains, at this stage, propositional, the phasical nature of leisure experience is well documented in a research tradition spanning over forty years. A review of this established body of leisure experience literature may bring some much needed clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow.

2.9 Multi-phasic Leisure Experience

Four decades ago Clawson and Knetsch (1966) characterised five sequential phases of outdoor recreation. They discussed their "seminal idea" (Stewart, 1998) of an evolving recreation experience by arguing there to be as many as five distinctly different phases to the recreation experience and that these phases occur in sequence and are each necessary for a recreation experience. Their research categorised these five phases as being: 'Anticipation': the anticipation stage may in actuality far outrun the later reality. And, while pleasurable anticipation is almost requisite, excessive optimism at this stage may lead to later disappointment and frustration; 'Travel to': necessary in almost every circumstance; 'On-site': represents the actual on-site experience which many seem to think to be the 'total' experience; 'Travel from': likely to be distinctly separate from the 'travel to' phase, as even if the route is the same, individuals are different, that is, state of mind, tiredness, memories, and anticipation of going back to work all impinge on this phase of leisure experience; 'Recollection': recollection of an experience may produce feelings quite different from the actual experience. Individuals may share these recollections with friends,

relatives and associates. It was predicted that majorly positive leisure experiences will be strong and long lasting, with recollection of one experience often providing the starting point for anticipation of another. However, although Clawson and Knetsch's (1966) work is widely known, has been in no way controversial, and, as will be shown later, has relevance beyond outdoor recreation, 'it has not been influential nor integrated into the study of leisure' (Stewart, 1998: p. 391). Other than supportive follow-up studies by More and Payne (1978) and Hammit (1980) into the utility of a multi-phased leisure model in outdoor recreation environments, their work has attracted limited discussion within the leisure research community (Stewart, 1998).

This early research into multiphasic recreation experience foregrounds a body of leisure experience literature that advocates a more edifying conception of leisure be achievable when it is viewed as emerging states of mind; a collection of interconnected sequences of transaction between an individual and their environment, woven together to create personal stories with temporal and spatial qualities that culminate to represent lived experience (Stewart, 1998). Stewart (1998) cites a number of key disconnections between multiphasic leisure and the philosophical, theoretical and methodological traditions of leisure theory that reveals a structural and theoretical parity to further potentiate the notion of multi-phasic flow-related leisure experience. Firstly, leisure is professed to not simply be a state of mind but *states* of mind that might, for example, subsume personal meanings associated with the challenges of leisure environments and cognitions related to individual competence within such environments. Secondly, these multiple states are dynamic, evolving, and dependent, in part, on context. This perspective elaborates further upon the original work of Clawson and Knetsch (1966) by suggesting 'on-site' leisure experience to also be multiphasic. Real time measures of the dynamic nature of leisure states (e.g.

Kaplan and Talbot, 1983; Talbot and Kaplan, 1986; Walker *et al.* 1998) have suggested distinctive phases of leisure states across time. Research found that as participants learned the skills, knowledge and approaches needed to cope with situational demand, concerns about the environment became less important. Over time perceptual responses to the environment tended to include more detail, with participants describing a sense of revelation as the relationship between environment and self were newly perceived and appreciated, later developing into feelings of awe and exhilaration (Walker *et al.* 1998).

From this perspective, along with a state of mind that evolves, the content of the leisure state is also a central concern. A leisure state, as characterised by Mannell (1980; see also Tinsely and Tinsley, 1986) invariably involves a collection of positive experiences that are 'accompanied by satisfying and pleasurable moods, emotions and feelings' (Mannell, 1980: p. 177). However, whereas characterising leisure as a 'state of mind' is a truism with which few of us would argue' (Stewart, 1998), the work of Stewart and others propounds an important distinction in that there are 'states' of mind that encompass the pursuit of leisure. Their work implies the leisure state to be episodic in what is a phasical and dynamic process, one that is both constructive and progressive, where there is evidence to further expound the developmental significance of the interface between personal capacity and situational challenge, drawing further comparison with the flow framework.

The work of Patterson *et al.* (1998) exemplifies the phenomenological insight that a phasical model of leisure experience can provide. They argue that prevailing trait-like motivational paradigms have difficulty accounting for emergent leisure experiences, in that antecedent states, in their view, are the start of a linear sequence

that imposes a determining influence on outcomes. In their study, participants reported spending a period of time immediately following an intense outdoor recreation experience sorting through and analysing the meaning of what occurred. Patterson *et al.* (1998) focus on the meaning that leisure practitioners create as being the enriching content of leisure experiences, and that these meanings become whole within the context of stories that people tell about themselves and others (Patterson *et al.* 1998). From this perspective, phenomenologically speaking, the stories individuals tell of their respective experiences are significant as they represent the principal tool in constructing the meaning of a particular leisure episode.

In the context of the current debate surrounding pre- and post-flow, the foregoing discussion of the multi-phasic leisure experience literature brings to light a number of important points. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that the act of experiencing leisure is not an isolated phenomenon, containing not just multiple phases of experience (e.g. anticipation – on-site – recollection) but emergent and interconnected states of mind. This in turn has illustrated the conceptual and constructive complexity of the leisure experience and that there are, much like when studying flow, internal and existential dimensions to be considered. From here, it could be suggested that there is a very real need to view the flow-related leisure experience as a 'package deal', where individuals may pass through multiple states of experience when at leisure. It may also be suggested, such is their affinity, that identifying relevant phases and states of experience and assessing their dynamic and emergent qualities represents just as important a direction for flow research as that of contemporary Leisure Studies. However, though such an affinity may be propositioned on the evidence considered in this chapter, it is still unclear as to the

nature of the association between flow experience with leisure experience and whether this is true of all forms of leisure.

2.10 Flow and Leisure: compatible concepts?

The use of flow as an exemplar of 'pure' leisure is problematic; there are theorists, including Csikszentmihalyi himself (e.g. Fox and Walker, 2002; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a), who do not so readily equate flow states with leisure states since it has been comprehensively demonstrated that flow experiences can occur in a wide variety of activities and settings far removed from the realm of leisure (Fox and Walker, 2002). On the one hand, it seems conceivable that leisure is more conducive to the flow mindset than other domains. Leisure activities encapsulate a greater freedom to select and control individual activities that, in theory, allow the achievement and maintenance of a match between challenges and skills (Lee and Schaffer, 1998). On the other hand, however, those people who regularly select relaxing and passive avenues of leisure devoid of challenge are unlikely to experience flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). Studies of adult workers (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989) and retired older adults (Mannell, et al., 1988) found flow to be more frequently experienced in work or obligatory non-work tasks than in leisure. Respondents consistently chose passive activities for leisure, thus the things they had to do frequently proved more challenging and demanding of high level skill.

In a study into the daily experiences of older adults, Mannell and his colleagues found more freely chosen activities were accompanied by increased pleasure, provided a decrease in tension and more frequently produced flow than non-freely chosen activities (Mannell et al. 1988). However, counter to expectation, the

highest level of flow experiences were reported when activities were freely chosen but were done so for the benefit of others or for some long-term personal benefit. A later study by Bryce and Haworth (2002), into the flow experiences of a sample of male and female office workers, found work to be an integral source of flow for both men and women. There is evidence, thus, that a sense of obligation and/or commitment requires greater effort, and, it follows, appears to be important for the promotion of personal investment and highly enjoyable experiences (Bryce and Haworth, 2002).

Of course, suggests Csikszentmihalyi (1997a: p. 67), 'if one uses leisure to engage in a sport, an art form, or hobby', examples of what he terms 'active leisure' activities, 'then the requirements for flow will be present'. Such activities are akin to what leisure researchers (e.g. Kelly *et al.*, 1987; Mannell, 1993) have termed 'high-investment' activities, that is 'activities that have developed over time, require a great deal of effort and resources and acquisition of skill and are more likely to yield outcomes of an enhanced sense of competence and worth' (Kelly *et al.*, 1987: p. 197). But free time with nothing specific to engage attention will leave a residue of listlessness and dissatisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi 1997a and Stebbins, 2001a). Instead, there are certain conditions that must be met by these activities if they are to successfully attract high investment from participants in their freely chosen pursuits. Consequently, high-investment activities are typically those that involve commitment, obligation, discipline and even occasional sacrifice (Mannell, 1993). Stebbins (2005a) claims Csikszentmihalyi's flow is perhaps 'the most widely discussed and studied generic, intrinsic reward in the psychology of work and leisure' and 'although comparatively few types of work and leisure generate flow for their participants, those that do are found primarily in the 'devotee occupations' and the 'serious' forms of leisure' (Stebbins, 2005a: p. 40). Although the idea of 'serious leisure' originates

within the work of Stebbins (1982) and has, therefore, an intellectual history that is separate from that of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework, experiencing flow is commonly reported as an important motivational force for serious leisure participants (Stebbins, 2005a).

Both Csikszentmihalyi and Stebbins have been key contributors to the belief within leisure research that 'good leisure' needs to be much more than simply a pleasant and/or diversionary experience, kindling substantial interest in the concepts of commitment, serious leisure and flow; a triad of concepts that that would appear to provide an established theoretical basis for understanding the nature of such high-investment leisure activities (Mannell, 1993). However, whereas the flow framework focuses more on the phenomenological experience of high levels of commitment or involvement, Stebbins's theory of serious leisure provides a more pragmatic depiction of what being committed to a leisure activity entails and the characteristics of those activities most likely both to require and to foster such intensity of experience. Before examining the nature and significance of the relationship between serious leisure and flow, a review of Stebbins's Serious Leisure framework is undertaken drawing out for the reader the key features and outlining its basic types and sub-types.

2.11 Getting 'Serious' About Leisure

Through the theoretical framework of 'Serious Leisure' Stebbins (1982; 1992a) offers a descriptive typology of leisure that is distinctly separate from the more residual modes of differentiating between leisure usages. As Roberts (1999: p. 149) observes:

> Instead of dividing uses of leisure into tourism, sport, television watching, painting, and the like, it is possible to distinguish the 'serious' from the

'casual' and to recognise that serious leisure may link experiences in ostensibly different domains such as listening to radio programmes about, and taking holidays devoted to, a particular interest.

Serious leisure is one facet of what has recently come to be widely accepted as the 'Serious Leisure Perspective' (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 1), the contemporary guise for an area of leisure research that dates back to the 1980s. The phrase 'serious leisure perspective' is the name given to a theoretical framework that synthesises three main forms of leisure, more commonly known today as serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2007a). Stebbins is quick to point out that though the perspective takes its name from the first of these forms, it does so simply because the serious strand was the first to evolve, and, as a consequence, has deeper, more established theoretical and empirical roots (Stebbins, 2007a). Furthermore, serious leisure 'has become the benchmark from which analysis of the other two have often been undertaken' (Stebbins, 2007: p. 1). This notwithstanding, all three share common ground in that each evolves around a 'core activity' (Stebbins, 2007a). According to Stebbins, 'a core activity is a set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve an outcome or product that the participant in the larger activity finds attractive' (Stebbins, 2007: p. 20-21). He continues, 'engaging in the core activity and its component steps and actions, is a main feature that attracts participants to the leisure in question and encourages them to return (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 21).

2.11.1 Serious Leisure

The serious leisure facet of the perspective, originated by Stebbins in 1982, has grown to be sufficiently expressed as:

The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centred on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 5).

In the 'serious' forms of leisure, it is argued that people are able to derive a long-term sense of accomplishment, which may, provided people have and maintain such leisure, lead to greater overall well-being (Roberts, 1999). In order to gain a more complete understanding of the serious leisure concept it is necessary to focus more closely on the nature of serious leisure, more precisely its three basic types: Modern amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers.

2.11.2 The Modern Amateur

In contemporary society as the cloak of professionalism spreads from one occupation to the next, what was once considered to be mere play in some spheres of life has now taken a new form, most accurately described as 'modern amateurism'. Amateurs, according to Stebbins, 'are found in art, sport, and entertainment, where they are inevitably linked in several ways with their professional counterparts' (Stebbins, 1992a: p.10). However, a significant shift in the contemporary socio-economic climate has meant that there are now amateur pursuits in which certain individuals are able to earn a substantial living devoting themselves to an activity as a vocation rather than an avocation (Stebbins, 1992a).

In developing a typology of the modern amateur sub-category, Stebbins's research unearthed two important dimensions along which further distinctions may be drawn. Perhaps the more prominent of these is the dimension of 'seriousness'; those amateurs who are highly dedicated to their chosen activity may be referred to as

'devotees'; those who show only a moderate interest, but significantly more so than dabblers, may be referred to as 'participants' (Stebbins, 1992a). The second dimension concerns the distinction between career paths. Stebbins's research initially identified three types of amateur along this dimension; the 'pre-professionals' are amateurs who intend to join the professional ranks; the 'pure' amateurs who have never seriously considered making the step to professional status; the 'post-professionals' who though they have abandoned their profession, still wish to participate in its activities part-time. A further career category 'conditional pre-professional' also emerged. This category is characteristic of those amateurs who aspire to eventually make the step up to becoming a professional in their chosen field. Pre-professional amateurs are valid serious leisure practitioners as 'although they are learning to become professionals, they are doing so in a pursuit they have freely chosen, at which they are still unable to make a living, and which they derive a great deal of enjoyment' (Stebbins, 1992a: p. 47). A modern amateur's involvement in serious leisure involves an entwined alter-ego relationship with the professionals of that leisure activity. Stebbins (2002) defines this relationship in a professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system. Summarising the P-A-P system, Zane and Zink (2004: p. 336) write:

> There are monetary, intellectual, organisational, and technical relationships between amateurs and professionals, with professionals benchmarking the prestigious activity standards while constantly being scrutinised by the amateurs. The public is differentiated from both through lack of activity involvement and knowledge and, in this way, either amateurs or professionals can 'serve' the public through displays of their leisure

2.11.3 The Hobbyist

Although both hobbyists and amateurs are practitioners in definite and lasting pursuits, it is important to note there are a number of clear differences between the two: Firstly, as the name suggests, hobbyists lack the professional alter ego characteristic of their amateur counterparts, and, as a consequence, are not part of any macro-sociological system (i.e. the P-A-P system). In addition, despite having commercial equivalents and the occasional public following expressing an interest in what they do, 'a hobby is a specialised pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit of particular interest to the individual that is enjoyed because of the durable benefits offered' (Stebbins, 1998: p. 50).

Stebbins's work suggests hobbyists can be classified according to one of five categories: *Collectors:* (e.g. stamps, rare books, butterflies, violins, minerals, paintings, or antiques). Through their specialist areas of interest collectors develop an acute technical knowledge of the particular commercial, social, and physical circumstances in which the desired items are acquired. *Makers and Tinkers:* Including enthusiasts of invention, furniture, toys, automobile repair, boat builders, and quilters to name but a few. *Activity Participants:* pursue a particular form of leisure 'requiring systematic physical movement that has intrinsic appeal and is conducted in non-competitive, rule-based pursuits' (Stebbins, 1998: pp. 49-68). Activity participants look to such activities as mountaineering, Morris dancing, barbershop singing, sailing, wave surfing, alpine skiing, playing video games, and gymnastics. *Players of Sports and Games (where no professional counterpart exist):* the continual and systematic pursuits of a sport/game in which players relate to each other according to a recognised set of rules that structure their actions during a contest. Stebbins identifies such activities as softball, table-tennis, target shooting, field hockey, badminton, and

outdoor bowls, dirt bike racing, long distance running, role playing games, martial arts, swimming, and track and field. *Enthusiasts in one of the liberal arts:* Liberal arts hobbyists are deeply committed to the systematic acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, for instance, reading substantially in a field of art, sport, cuisine, languages, history, science, philosophy, politics, or literature.

2.11.4 The Career Volunteer

Volunteering as leisure has been an unremitting point of contention for leisure theorists who have ordinarily regarded volunteering in the same way as they regarded paid work: as having external, or extrinsic leanings (Henderson, 1984; Stebbins, 1996). This contrasts sharply with the view held of leisure as oriented by internal, or intrinsic, interests wherein participants enjoy the activity because it is an end in itself and for the self-expression and self-actualisation that it may engender (Henderson, 1984). It is only recently that the two have come to be recognised as companionable in the realm of leisure (see Stebbins, 2004a; 2004b). For Stebbins, volunteer activity is a form of serious leisure, defined as 'uncoerced help offered either formally or informally with no or, at most, token pay and done for the benefit of other people and the volunteer' (Stebbins, 2004b: pp. 4-5).

Including volunteerism as one of the three principle facets of the serious leisure framework has coerced Stebbins into further theoretical elaboration of three main aspects of the volunteering. Firstly, serious leisure volunteers are enthused both by a strong sense of altruism and self-interestedness. Self-interestedness is fundamental to all serious leisure though, when expressed in the realm of volunteering, 'enters into an intricate relationship with altruism' (Stebbins, 1992a: p. 16). Secondly, serious leisure volunteering is, more precisely, referred to as 'career

volunteering', wherein it is more likely that self-interestedness will drive pursuit of such a career than a sense of altruism. Self-interestedness, it would seem, is the stronger motivator in encouraging a volunteer to continue a serious leisure career in voluntary action as the majority of voluntary pursuits requires specific skills, knowledge, or training and often combinations or all of these, the acquisition of which is highly rewarding (Ross, 1990; Stebbins, 1996; 2004a). Finally, the development of careers and self-interestedness within volunteering shapes and is, in turn, shaped by the search for the special rewards found in all types of serious leisure. Career volunteers are distinguishable from other forms of serious leisure practitioner by 'the exceptional number of enriching experiences they gain by way of aiding others' (Stebbins, 2004a).

The act of career volunteering is usually played out in association with some form of organisation. In 'After Work' (Stebbins, 1998: pp.74-80) Stebbins published a taxonomy consisting of 16 types of organisational volunteering. Career volunteers provide a diverse range of services in fields such as education, science, civic affairs, spiritual development, health, economic development, religion, politics, government, human relationships, recreation, and the arts. In more recent work, Stebbins (2007d) has formulated a broader leisure-based typology of volunteering incorporating all three forms (serious, casual, and project-based) of the Serious Leisure Perspective, centring on both formal and informal, predominantly non-organisational, volunteer activity. Unlike the previous (1998) taxonomy, the typology is built upon a volitional definition of volunteers:

People who feel they are engaging in enjoyable serious, casual, or project-based leisure activity that they have had the option to accept or reject on their own terms (Stebbins, 2007d: p. 10).

Proceeding from this volitional stance, Stebbins posits volunteer activities are motivated, in part, by one of six types of interest in activities focused on: people; ideas; things; flora; fauna; and the natural environment. Each of these types offers its volunteers an opportunity to pursue, through an altruistic activity, a particular kind of interest (Stebbins, 2007d). For instance, volunteers who are interested in working with certain groups of people (e.g. the disabled or the elderly) are attracted to people-based volunteering, while those with environmental interests (e.g. conservation) are attracted to natural environment-based volunteering. Drawing jointly on the Serious Leisure Perspective, the typology also sets out the motivational and contextual (the socio-cultural, historical) foundations of the three leisure forms. The typology is organised along the intersection of these two dimensions, interest and form, to present seven main types of volunteer: 1) Popular volunteer; 2) Idea-based volunteer; 3) Material volunteer; 4) Floral volunteer; 5) Faunal volunteer; 6) Environmental volunteer; and 7) Mixed types. Still, defining volunteerism in terms of serious leisure focuses attention on to voluntary action 'in which participants can find a career, in which there is continuous and substantial helping', as opposed to a single act or one-time donations of money, services and the like (Stebbins, 2004a: p.202).

Further definition of the serious Leisure Framework: Serious leisure is further defined by six distinctive qualities, found among amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers alike: the first such quality is the need for a degree of *perseverance*. It is generally accepted that whilst participants take away pleasant memories of such activities, there are moments that are not so positive in comparison; for instance,

anxiety, fatigue or injury in sport, or suffering stage fright. Stebbins posits that the positive feelings about such activities are derived from perseverance in the face of adversity (Stebbins, 2005a).

A second quality of serious leisure, as identified by Stebbins, is the 'tendency for amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers to have *careers* in their endeavours' (Stebbins, 2001a: p.6). These endeavours are enduring pursuits built upon their own unique backgrounds, histories, turning points, and stages of achievement or involvement. The notion that serious leisure practitioners develop and maintain leisure-related careers has received criticism. Parker (1996: pp. 327-328) professes the term 'career' to be inherently tied to work and as such should not be considered in the realm of leisure. Similarly, Rojek (2000) suggests importing the notion of career into leisure discourse is problematic as 'by conjoining the concept of serious leisure to the concept of career, Stebbins reproduces a paradigm which points leisure as driven by rational, purposive activity' (Rojek, 2000: p. 19). In recourse, Stebbins suggests such tendencies to see the notion of career as applying only to occupations are parochial, and notes that his own use of the term extends Goffman's (1961) elaboration of the possibility of a 'moral career' (Stebbins, 1992a). Conceived in this manner, careers are available in all substantial, complicated roles, including those in work, leisure, deviance, politics, religion, and interpersonal relationships (Stebbins, 2001a). The construction and maintenance of serious leisure careers invariably turn on a third quality: the requirement of *significant personal effort* based on specifically acquired knowledge, training, and skill (Stebbins, 2001a). Stebbins' research has unearthed such characteristics as showmanship, athletic prowess, manual dexterity, scientific knowledge, verbal skills, long-experience in role, and above all persistent individual

effort that differentiate the amateurs and hobbyists from the dabblers and the general public, and volunteers from employees.

Stebbins's research also turned up eight *durable benefits* or broad outcomes, commonly found by amateurs in their chosen pursuits, including; self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and long lasting physical products of the activity (Mannell, 1993). Stebbins claims the foregoing benefits are 'the more or less routine values that attract and hold its enthusiasts' (Stebbins, 1996a: p. 217). Together they co-constitute the object of self-interestedness, that is, they are what someone motivated by self-interestedness hopes to achieve through amateur, hobbyist, voluntary involvement. However, Stebbins warns that these durable benefits fall amongst the consequences of pursuing serious leisure and are not to be confused with the rewards of such activity (Stebbins, 2004a).

Any given serious leisure career frames and is in turn framed by the enduring search for its distinctive set of rewards 'that are not only satisfying within and of themselves, but function as 'counter-weights' to the inevitable costs that come with partaking in amateur, hobbyist or voluntary roles' (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 13). It was revealed, over the course of a number of exploratory studies of amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers, that each activity contains a distinctive set of rewards for those involved (Stebbins, 2001a). In these studies, Stebbins discovered that a participant's leisure satisfaction typically stemmed from 'a constellation of particular rewards gained from the activity, be it boxing, ice climbing, or giving dance lessons to the elderly' (Stebbins, 2005a: p. 35). These rewards are summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Rewards of Serious Leisure (adapted from Stebbins, 2007a: p. 14)

Personal Rewards

1. Personal enrichment (cherished experiences)
2. Self-actualisation (developing skills, abilities, knowledge)
3. Self-expression (expressing skills, abilities, knowledge already developed)
4. Self-image (known to others as a particular kind of serious leisure participant)
5. Self-gratification (combination of superficial enjoyment and deep satisfaction, i.e. flow)
6. Re-creation (regeneration) of oneself through serious leisure after a day's work
7. Financial return (from serious leisure activity)

Social Rewards

8. Social attraction (associating with other serious leisure participants, with clients as a volunteer, participating in the social world of the activity)
9. Group accomplishment (group effort in accomplishing a serious leisure project; sense of helping, being needed, being altruistic)
10. Contribution to the maintenance and development of the group (including senses of helping, being needed, and being altruistic in making the contribution).

The drive to gain satisfaction in serious leisure is the drive to experience these rewards, such that its costs are perceived as more or less insignificant by comparison; 'this is at once the meaning of the activity for the participant and his or her motivation for engaging in it' says Stebbins (2004a: p. 11).

A fifth quality that further defines the serious leisure concept is the *unique ethos* that evolves around each serious leisure activity. As a consequence of the foregoing qualities, amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers tend to develop exclusive

spheres of interest in the form of special social worlds. In the words of Unruh (1980: p. 277):

A social world must be seen as a unit of social organisation which is diffuse and amorphous in character. Generally larger than groups or organisations, social worlds are not necessarily defined by formal boundaries, membership lists, or spatial territory... A social world must be seen as an internally recognisable constellation of actors, organisations, events, and practices which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interest and involvement for participants. Characteristically, a social world lacks a powerful centralised authority structure and is delimited by... effective communication and not territory.

According to Gillespie *et al.* (2002), such serious leisure worlds create 'cultures of commitment' for participants. Stebbins (2004a: p. 203) has added 'because it [a social world] is so diffuse, ordinary members are only partly involved in the full range of its activities' since a social world may extend locally, regionally, nationally, and even internationally.

The sixth and final quality of serious leisure is inextricably linked to the preceding qualities in that participants *identify* strongly with their chosen serious leisure pursuits, an identity, suggests Stebbins (2001b), which grows from considerable emotional, moral, and often physical investment. For Gillespie *et al.* (2002), one of the key characteristics of serious leisure is that it is able to provide participants with a sense of social identity. As Gillespie *et al.* (2002) suggest serious leisure is able to generate its own social identities. This is especially the case when, as Shamir (1992) notes, it expresses and affirms the individuals talents and/or capabilities, it provides the individual with some form of social recognition, and it

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According to Gillespie *et al.* (2002), such serious leisure worlds create 'cultures of commitment' for participants. Stebbins (2004a: p. 203) has added 'because it [a social world] is so diffuse, ordinary members are only partly involved in the full range of its activities' since a social world may extend locally, regionally, nationally, and even internationally.

The sixth and final quality of serious leisure is inextricably linked to the preceding qualities in that participants *identify* strongly with their chosen serious leisure pursuits, an identity, suggests Stebbins (2001b), which grows from considerable emotional, moral, and often physical investment. For Gillespie *et al.* (2002), one of the key characteristics of serious leisure is that it is able to provide participants with a sense of social identity. As Gillespie *et al.* (2002) suggest serious leisure is able to generate its own social identities. This is especially the case when, as Shamir (1992) notes, it expresses and affirms the individuals talents and/or capabilities, it provides the individual with some form of social recognition, and it

affirms the individual's cultural values and beliefs. In certain cases, suggest Jones and Symons (2001), serious leisure is able to provide individuals with a positive social identity that their work or other roles may not. In more recent work, Jones (2006) has investigated how social identity theory can be used to examine the 'special qualities' of serious leisure. Presenting an alternative 'identity-based' definition of serious leisure, Jones (2006: p. 57) redefines serious leisure as 'any leisure activity that is able to provide the participant with a valued social identity'.

The concept of serious leisure, however, has not been without its critics. For instance, in her feminist critique of the concept of serious leisure, Rainsborough (1999) lists among its strengths that it changes hedonist constructions of leisure; enables an exploration of deferred gratification and of participants' continual evaluation of costs and rewards; and, by envisioning leisure as 'not-fun', allows leisure research to escape the conceptual burdens of enjoyment, freedom and celebrations of choice. Serious leisure's main weaknesses, she argues, is that it remains largely apolitical, 'the view that serious leisure (as with other forms of leisure) may be sites where societal power relations are at once resisted and reproduced, has escaped analysis' (Rainsborough, 1999: p. 67). However, exploration in serious leisure has continued since Rainsborough's comments. Bartram (2001) found that female kayakers often experienced rejection by males as partners on kayaking trips on the grounds that the females were insufficiently aggressive and tolerant of risk and injury. King's (2001) study of quilters focused on an essentially female hobby, the products of which express the "women's voice". In his study into the benefits and costs of serious running, Major (2001) found that a common way in which male and female runners were distinguished was by a fear for personal safety, felt exclusively by the latter.

With much more to be discovered about the 'construct and meaning of serious leisure' (Wang, 2003: p. 221), the extension and application of the concept is ever-growing. For instance, a small number of researchers have used Stebbins' serious leisure as a framework for studies in the tourism field. Zane and Zink (2004) use Stebbins' theoretical framework to help understand adventure tourism, whilst Frew (2006) has used the serious leisure framework to explore the realm of humour tourism. Serious leisure has also been considered within particular populations. For example, Kleiber, Hutchinson and Williams (2002) suggest that serious leisure acts could become an important element in the rehabilitation process for the disabled. Similarly, Patterson (1997: p. 26) considers serious leisure as an alternative to employment for disabled people and suggests that, for a disabled person "whether participating in a scientific project, an artistic performance, or an athletic context, the person is making a contribution to society that is appreciated by someone'.

2.11.5 Project-Based Leisure and the serious-casual leisure dichotomy

More recently, Stebbins (2005b) introduced a third concept as a distinct form of leisure pursuit from the established serious and casual forms; namely project-based leisure. Project-based leisure is described as 'short-term, moderately complicated, one-shot or occasional though infrequent, creative undertaking carried out in free-time. It requires considerable planning, effort and sometimes skill or knowledge, but is for all that neither serious leisure nor intended to develop into such' (Stebbins, 2005b: p. 1). Stebbins further suggests that project-based leisure participants may be hobbyist in character and may include some examples of maker and tinker and, the liberal arts hobbyists. Project-based leisure may also contain aspects of volunteering and amateur-like projects such as entertainment/theatre.

Patterson (2001) has usefully extended the serious-casual leisure dichotomy in referring to a continuum of casual and serious leisure. Stebbins has recently added that project-based leisure falls somewhere in the middle, fitting into 'leisure lifestyle in its own peculiar way as interstitial activity' (Stebbins, 2005b: p. 3). However, as the concept of project-based leisure has only recently been added to the serious leisure theoretical framework, apart from Stebbins's conceptual statement (Stebbins, 2005b), little empirical research has been conducted in the area to date. For this reason, project-based leisure is not considered in further detail here; instead focus now moves from the serious end of Patterson's continuum to the opposite casual end.

2.11.6 Casual Leisure

The term 'Casual Leisure' was first coined by Stebbins in 1982 as a way of distinguishing the popular leisure of the 20th century. By way of definition it can be seen as an 'immediately, intrinsically, rewarding, relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it' (Stebbins, 2001b: p. 58). Stebbins's eight recognised types of casual leisure:

- Play (e.g. including dabbling)
- Relaxation (e.g. sitting, napping, strolling)
- Passive entertainment (e.g. through TV, books, recorded music)
- Active entertainment (e.g. games of chance)
- Sociable conversation (e.g. gossip, "idle chatter")
- Sensory stimulation (e.g. sex, drinking, eating, sight seeing)
- Casual Volunteering (e.g. handing out leaflets, stuffing envelopes)
- Pleasurable aerobic exercise

(Adapted from Stebbins, 2007: p. 39)

All are hedonic, providing a significant level of pure pleasure, or enjoyment, for those

involved. And yet, such casual forms of leisure 'are by no means frivolous', claims

Stebbins (2005a: p. 38) 'for there are some clear benefits in pursuing it' and 'unlike

the evanescent hedonic property of casual leisure itself, its benefits are enduring'.

Stebbins has identified five benefits of casual leisure:

- Occasional creativity and discovery.
- 'Edutainment': partaking in mass entertainment, e.g., watching films, listening to popular music, and reading popular books/articles.
- Opportunity for regeneration or re-creation.
- Development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.
- A sense of well-being.

(Adapted from Stebbins, 2001b: pp. 305-306)

Involvement in such casual activity, however, is unlikely to produce the deep

sense of satisfaction or the achievement of a fuller existence characteristic of more

serious leisure pursuits. Stebbins has noted that 'the fundamentally hedonic nature of

casual leisure explains, in large part, why this kind of leisure fails to produce a sense

of optimal experience for those involved, at least when estimated according to the

strictest application of Csikszentmihalyi's eight components' (Stebbins, 2005a: p. 21).

Absent from casual leisure pursuits, the enjoyment of which commands lower-level

skill and knowledge, is the component of feeling competent to execute the task at

hand. To generate flow, an activity must present substantial, yet manageable

challenge for those participating in it, who upon finding flow, feel competent to

accomplish that challenge. Many recognised casual leisure activities like watching

television and engaging in sociable conversations lack, to a significant degree, the

component of feeling in control over how these activities proceed.

Though traditionally cast as the hedonic counterpart of serious leisure, recent developments of the serious leisure perspective (e.g. Stebbins, 2001b) have seen casual leisure recognised for its role in interacting with more serious engaging leisure endeavours. The optimal leisure lifestyle, itself a product of this fresh outlook, combats the 'othering' of casual leisure by transcending the serious and the casual as isolated facets of leisure, offering instead that each has a role to play in a broader leisure lifestyle (Elkington, 2006: see Appendix A). Defined as 'the deeply satisfying pursuit during free-time of one or more substantial, absorbing forms of serious leisure, complemented by a judicious amount of casual leisure' (Stebbins, 2001b: p. 307), leisure practitioners come to find an optimal leisure lifestyle by engaging in those leisure activities 'that individually and in combination realise human potential and enhance quality of life and well-being' (Stebbins, 2005a: p. 40).

From within their respective frameworks both Stebbins (2001a) and Csikszentmihalyi (1992 and 1997a) have observed that few people intentionally seek out activities or situations that command the investment of significant psychological and physical energy. Indeed, Stebbins (2001b) has suggested that such persistence of habitual *casual* leisure stems from the public's apparent ignorance of more intensive, rewarding, and *serious* leisure alternatives. In its purest form, psychological flow is more likely to be felt in certain serious leisure activities 'that are rewarding for their self-expression, cherished experiences, self-gratification and tendency to refresh mind and body' (Stebbins, 2005a). It is important to note here, that while there are clear similarities between the concepts of flow and serious leisure, there are some fundamental differences; on the one hand, serious leisure is a pragmatic activity-centred typology of leisure involvement, on the other hand, flow is individual/experience-centred and was not initially intended as an explanatory

framework for leisure. However, despite their differences, closer scrutiny reveals that serious leisure and flow-related leisure experience share a unique and unexamined theoretical kinship, one that will now be considered in greater detail.

2.12 Flow in Serious Leisure

Stebbins (1992a: p. 112) has observed that the conditions outlined by Csikszentmihalyi to produce flow are highly similar to those provided by serious leisure; rather to mention flow-related leisure experience more often than not is to mean experience derived from the 'serious' forms of leisure for which flow is commonly expressed as a principal motivator (Stebbins, 2005a). Stebbins (2001b: p. 53) notes that serious leisure is 'profound, long-lasting, and invariably based on substantial skill, knowledge, or experience, if not a combination of these three' which captivates its participants with 'its complexity and many challenges'. He adds that serious leisure generates rewards or benefits for its participants which range from 'expressing one's skills and knowledge, having cherished experiences, and developing a valued identity' to being so wrapped up in the activity that the individuals temporarily forget 'about the worrisome cares and woes plaguing them in other parts of their lives' (Stebbins, 2001a: p. 53). And, while Csikszentmihalyi does not refer to serious leisure specifically, he has acknowledged that activities requiring commitment, discipline, and effort are more likely to provide the conditions for flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: pp. 162-163). The commitment and intense involvement associated with such activities can help facilitate the experience of leisure and enjoyment by way of structuring experience. What makes these (serious) leisure activities so conducive to the flow experience is that their structural design makes an optimal state of consciousness easier to achieve, that is, their core activities facilitate concentration and individual involvement by making an activity as distinct

as possible from ordinary life. This structure, suggest Delle Fave and Bassi (2003), is manifest in the form of a clear set of rules and procedures, that can be associated with personal engagement, concentration, and effort toward meeting challenges and achieving goals.

2.12.1 'Letting go' in Leisure

At first, the notion of responding to a set of requirements (i.e. the established rules and goals of an activity) appears to be paradoxical because it surely involves relinquishing choice, and freedom of choice is commonly referred to as a necessary condition for leisure (see Neulinger, 1981). However, it is important to note here that freedom should not be so readily equated with choice, nor is it a reliable reflection of control (Mannell, 1993). The absence of choice, suggests Mannell (1993: p. 8), 'can certainly compromise a sense of freedom, but it also does not follow that a bounty of choices enhance that experience'. Rather, the feeling of liberation that typically accompanies the act of relinquishing control stems from making the initial decision to let go. From here, 'freedom is undergone as one is drawn into an activity and acts in accordance with it. This kind of surrendering to the activity relinquishes choice in the interest of full commitment' (Mannell, 1993: p. 8), and while 'a sense of obligation in such activities might seem to render the motivation extrinsic rather than intrinsic, making a commitment can put one in a better position to relax and surrender to whatever happens' (Mannell, 1993: p. 8). It may be that such surrendering stands as the precursor to the sense of complete absorption characteristic of experiencing flow in such high investment leisure activities, and how structured leisure activities such as sports, games, arts, and hobbies merge the fun and well-being of leisure with focused attention and enjoyment (Kleiber *et al*. 1986). From here, it is easy to see how such flow experience is rewarding and, it follows, highly valued to endow it with many of

the qualities of serious leisure and vice versa, thereby, in many ways, rendering the two inseparable, bound as they are by the 'seriousness' that characterises the pursuit of each.

2.12.2 The 'Seriousness' of Flow-based Leisure

The emerging relationship between flow and serious leisure activity is further strengthened by a growing bank of research proposing such variables as situational involvement and psychological commitment are important mediators of leisure involvement, also referred to as 'enduring involvement' in the literature (e.g. Funk and Jones, 2002; Havitz and Mannell, 2005; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004). Leisure or enduring involvement reflects peoples' beliefs about their leisure participation, including the importance of, and interest in such participation and symbolic values derived from it (Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004). Situational involvement, on the other hand, reflects a more temporary sensation of heightened involvement that accompany a particular situation (Havitz and Dimanche, 1997), whereas psychological commitment represents the attitudes held toward certain leisure pursuits and has been conceptualised as a key linking variable between the two former constructs (Iwasaki and Havitz, 1998; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004). In more recent research Havitz and Mannell (2005) found strong and consistent relationships between enduring involvement, situational involvement, and flow, with participants reporting higher quality experiences (more flow-like experiences) in those activities for which they have greater enduring involvement. Enduring involvement was also found to partially mediate the level of situational involvement in a specific episode of participation in that activity, leading Havitz and Mannell (2005) to postulate that higher levels of enduring involvement and situational involvement in a particular activity would increase the likelihood of individuals achieving flow therein.

The activity involvement of devotees of serious leisure reveals a degree of intensity that is consistent with experiencing flow. But more than this, such seriousness about an activity forges a connection with other individuals or groups that share their interests, a pattern of commitment that joins them with others in a unique ethos of shared meaning and perseverance. The associated activities are likely to be preferentially selected and cultivated in the long-term (Delle Fave and Bassi, 2003), in many cases, taking on the character of careers. Commitment, belonging, and the ethos of a defined culture are at the core of serious leisure, suggest Zane and Zink (2004). Involvement and progression in the form of a career provides a framework that outlines a developmental process whereby individuals progress to higher planes of involvement the longer they participate in a serious leisure activity (Zane and Zink, 2004). Stebbins has noted that if leisure is to make a positive contribution to psychological well-being and overall quality of life, it is likely to be characterised by 'necessity, obligation, seriousness, and commitment as expressed by regimentation (e.g. rehearsals and practice) and systematisation (e.g. schedules and organisation)' (Stebbins, 1992a: p. 9). Csikszentmihalyi (1997a: p. 22) concurs, noting:

> The quality of life does not depend on happiness alone, but also on what one does to be happy. If one fails to develop goals that give meaning to one's existence, if one does not use the mind to its fullest, then good feelings fulfil just a fraction of the potential we possess.

He continues to emphasise that:

> A person who achieves contentment by withdrawing from the world to cultivate his own garden cannot be said to lead an excellent life... without dreams, without risks, only a trivial semblance of living can be achieved (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a: p. 22).

The notion that flow both reflects and is a consequence of high personal investment in an activity is clear in Csikszentmihalyi's work:

> Flow experiences are the best moments of our lives, are not passive, receptive, relaxing times... but occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: p. 3)

In a similar vein, the endeavour and perseverance of amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers to meet the challenges of their leisure is predicted to engender feelings of accomplishment and provide particular psychological benefits, including: self-enrichment, self-gratification, self-actualisation, self-expression, positive social identity, a feeling of contributing to a group, and of course, instances of flow (Stebbins, 2007c).

The present discussion evokes the affinity of serious leisure activity for flow experience and the discovery that both serious leisure and flow share a theoretical reciprocity and are not two disparate concepts but are, in fact, compatible frameworks. The clear theoretical affinity of flow experience for the 'serious' forms of leisure reveals a theoretical linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow. Though such a linkage would seem to make intuitive sense, given what is known of the two frameworks, it has remained unexplored in either field. Such is the perceived significance of this linkage for flow-related leisure research that it is taken to frame this entire research project, from the selection of the research sample to the subsequent integration of emergent theory. Put another way, this research intends to take the flow of leisure seriously.

2.13 Taking the 'Flow' of Leisure 'Seriously'

> Nothing contributes more to the understanding of a phenomenon than a knowledge of its genesis

<div style="text-align: right;">Neulinger (1981: p. 185)</div>

From a phenomenological perspective the words of Neulinger resonate closely with the fundamental problematic that belies Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework. The work of Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues has contributed much by way of characterising the psychological qualities and conditions of flow experience, and yet it remains unclear as to how an individual arrives at such a harmonious state of mind and what follows it. If flow were a novel, it could be said that Csikszentmihalyi has begun in the middle, telling of the nature of experiencing flow with little reference as to how the story begins or indeed how it finishes. The present research is based upon the premise that the true nature of experiencing flow, like the reading of a novel, can only be understood in light of knowing how it was begun and what occurs at its ending.

In reality, it could be suggested that flow research has become estranged from the phenomenon it claims to be representing. The positive psychological orientation of the contemporary flow framework is value-driven and prescriptive in nature, far removed from the original activity-focused, descriptive framework initially developed by Csikszentmihalyi. Packaged within positive psychology, flow has generated an immensely successful therapeutic self-help movement permeating the fields of business (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), sports performance (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Orlick, 2000), and health and well-being (e.g. Kimiecik, 2002) among others. On this evidence, it would appear that Csikszentmihalyi has failed to heed his own

advice, and shifted the emphasis from the experience of flow to what can be gained or accomplished by its usage (2.4).

The evidence considered in this chapter suggests there to be so much more to the act of experiencing flow than what the established conceptual and theoretical expressions imply. An in-depth review of the flow literature, past and present, has unearthed evidence pointing to the presence and import of pre- and post-flow experience. This evidence has been considered together, for the first time, in this chapter and, in doing so, has revealed that, despite such inferences, very little is still known about the experiential nature and significance of pre- and post-flow. Perhaps parallels can be drawn between flow and the mulit-phasic nature of leisure experience? By stepping beyond the inherent conceptual and theoretical limitations of the flow literature, this chapter has shown that leisure is not an isolated phenomenon but is itself experienced as multiple, emergent, and interconnected states of mind. This dynamic view of leisure experience is certainly in keeping with the notion of pre- and post-flow proposed.

Unfortunately, despite the shadows of pre- and post-flow falling implicitly either side of flow within the literature, contemporary proponents of optimal theory (e.g. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) choose instead to run with the existing framework, channelling their efforts into the furtherance of flow application as opposed to seeking answers to more fundamental questions, such as gaining an understanding of the experiential nature and significance of pre- and post-flow experience. It is the aim of this research thus:

To bring clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow and with it a more complete and holistic understanding of flow experience[3].

There is clearly a need for the present research to move away from the prescriptive content of the contemporary flow framework and get back to flow as a phenomenon; to the actual experiencing of flow 'as lived' by individuals. To aid in this shift in focus this research returns to those activities from which the original flow concept was developed, that is, to leisure activities. Only now, it has been discovered, unlike at the time Csikszentmihalyi was first developing the flow concept, leisure researchers have available to them an established and evolving typology of leisure in Stebbins' 'Serious Leisure Perspective' (Stebbins, 2007a) that embodies those more serious leisure activities in which flow is most likely to be found.

As previously mentioned, the proposed conflation between the serious leisure framework and flow theory exposes a theoretical linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow that is yet to be considered together empirically in leisure research. In doing so, this research explores the nexus between flow and serious leisure for the first time. It is, after all, through serious leisure that we are able to gain access to those kinds of leisure activities in which flow is most likely to be found. And, while some may question the place of an idiosyncratic, predominantly psychological, concept within a pragmatic leisure framework, such a theoretical linkage ought to be taken seriously as there are significant implications for research that develops an understanding of how flow is played out in serious leisure.

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[3] As outlined in Elkington (2006). See Appendix A: p. 391

2.13.1 Perceived implications of exploring pre- and post-Flow

From a flow perspective, situating emergent pre- and post-flow theory within an evolving leisure perspective signifies a conceptual and theoretical innovation for the study of flow that brings fresh vigour to a theoretical framework that is all too often extended within itself. By combining the flow and serious leisure frameworks, this research makes an attempt to widen and enrich the theoretical and conceptual lens through which Csikszentmihalyi's flow is viewed, breaking from the confines of the familiar to extend the search beyond the usual content knowledge of flow and reveal new theoretical horizons for flow research.

A further implication holds relevance when the flow literature discusses the conditions of flow; the pervasive prerequisite elements present in certain circumstances and environments that have proven to be conducive to flow experiences. However, there remains much ambiguity surrounding at what point an individual enters into flow. From the beginning Csikszentmihalyi has indicated the crucial importance of the dynamic between opportunity (challenges) and ability (skill) for the flow experience to transpire (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). By far the most overwhelming proportion of optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and rule bound, however, the point of entry has somehow eluded scholarly attention. Despite the exact point of entry into a flow state being an inherently subjective affair, reliant as it is upon the harmony of internal order with preferential environmental conditions, an understanding of the experiential nature and significance of pre-flow experience would allow more assertive prediction of when individuals are more likely to enter into a flow state. In addition to this, it is anticipated investigation into what occurs within those instances of experience immediately prior to the onset of flow and those immediately following

will provide insights into the dynamic process of the development of competence (skills) and how that competency is conveyed into ensuing flow experiences. Such a knowledge would further expound the processes of 'Differentiation' and 'Integration' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), the two broad-ranging psychological processes that in combination shape our (inner and social) character.

Conflating the flow framework and serious leisure perspective in this manner may go some way towards overcoming the conceptual and theoretical frailties of flow as a leisure-related theory by way of contextualising flow-related leisure experience and providing significant and exciting opportunities for knowledge transfer between leisure theory and the flow framework. For instance, previous flow research has not empirically examined how real-life challenges influence the perception of challenge and skill. Tying flow experience to serious leisure may provide the first analysis of flow in different social contexts and, as a consequence, enable the placement of flow within the broader context of real-life. From a serious leisure perspective, associations made between these two frameworks have until now remained theoretic, conceptually linking flow and serious leisure. An exploratory study into pre- and post-flow within the context of serious leisure provides the first empirical insight into a central motivational component of the serious leisure experience and with it a fresh direction for research surrounding Stebbins' (2007a) Serious Leisure Perspective.

Having established a research focus in the form of pre- and post-flow experience and identified an appropriate contextual framework in Stebbins' serious leisure, attention now turns to the issue of research design and how the researcher approached exploring the intricacies of flow-related leisure experience.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for any investigation.
What is given in our perception of a thing is its appearance, yet this is not
an empty vision. It serves as the essential beginning of a science that seeks
valid definitions that are open to anyone to verify.

Husserl (1970: p. 129)

3.1 Introduction

Little attempt has been made, before now, to undertake empirical explorations of what goes before and after experiencing flow. The originality of the present research problem meant there was no readily available approach designed to explore the intricacies of pre- and post-flow experience, thus an original approach was required. But where to begin? The most suitable starting point, according to Husserl (above), would be the phenomenon being studied. He continues to claim that putting the phenomenon first is the 'essential beginning' of a particular science. The science of which Husserl speaks is 'phenomenology', an approach to research that would grow to become the driving force in the development of the methodology used in my research. In general terms, this chapter is a reflective retelling of the researcher's experiences and the associated challenges of engaging with phenomenological research for the first time. Initially, the chapter reconsiders the researcher's early thinking with regard to the research approach and how it was that phenomenology came to be the principal approach for this research. This is followed by a detailed look into the epistemological significance of approaching research from a contemporary phenomenological perspective and a general introduction to the strengths and limitations of using phenomenological methods. The originality of the research

problem necessitated the evolvement of an original research design. The second half of this chapter is devoted to a chronological and reflective retelling of how this research design came to be manifest, discussing the necessary development of tailored data gathering and data analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with a methodological overview and statement of validation concerning the newly conceived research design.

3.2 The Methodological Landscape of Capturing Flow

3.2.1 A short Pre-history

My doctoral research journey officially began in February 2005, though the first suggestion of there being a need to study pre- and post-flow experience had, in fact, emerged a year earlier during my Masters thesis (Elkington, 2004). My first task was to establish that the investigation of pre- and post-flow experience was a viable research topic, one that had the potential to make a clear and original contribution to knowledge. The culmination of this preliminary phase of my research saw the publication of the article entitled 'Exploring the nature of pre and post flow in serious leisure' (Elkington, 2006; *see* Appendix A). This early article captures well the development of pre- and post-flow as a research topic, *'mapping out a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the research problem presented within a theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 1989), an intertwining of theoretical thinking and conceptual posturing'* (Elkington, 2006: pp. 145-146).

Having established pre- and post-flow as the research topic, the next logical step was to set about developing an appropriate research design. It had been my initial intention to blend the strict subjective focus of phenomenology and the main methodological tenets of grounded theory inquiry (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Straus

and Corbin, 1997). Because this research extends beyond the development of merely a descriptive account of pre- and post-flow experience, I turned to the systematic analytical procedures of grounded theory with the intention of generating a theoretical schema of pre- and post-flow and how such experience adjoins to a state of flow. Here the focus would initially be on unravelling the elements of pre- and post-flow experience. From a study of these elements and their interrelationships it would be possible to develop a theoretical framework that would enable the researcher to understand the nature and meaning of the experience for a particular group (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, almost a year into the project, I had, as would be hoped, developed a more comprehensive grasp of the underpinning theory and research practicalities of both phenomenology and grounded theory. It had become increasingly evident in this time that conjoining grounded theory and phenomenology in a single study was problematic, since each was representative of a particular stage of research; the objective of the latter being the derivation of exploratory descriptive accounts of a phenomenon that is, by nature, precedent to the former which seeks a theoretical explanatory understanding. Unsure as to how to proceed, it was here that I returned to early flow research (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), discovering that clues as to how my research ought to move forward lay in the epistemological roots of Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory itself.

3.2.2 The Epistemological Roots of Flow

In many respects, Csikszentmihalyi's flow was a concept ahead of its time. Whereas natural science tended to 'taxonomise natural phenomena and causally or probabilistically explain the behaviour of things' (van Manen, 1998: p. 4), flow was conceived in the realm of humanistic psychology, a branch of psychology which advocates an openness to understanding the lived structure of human phenomena

(such as optimal experience) as it presents itself in subjective awareness (van Manen, 1998). Although the flow framework has always been developed and differentiated within the realm of psychology, it owes much of its intellectual heritage to phenomenology and the writings of Husserl and Heidegger (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). From the beginning, Csikszentmihalyi has criticised traditional psychological explanations of human action for not presuming to stand for the reality explained, claiming 'they are first models which help to simplify the behaviour of the reality under study; they do not claim to represent the wholeness of that reality in the abstract form' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 9). The study of human behaviour was, according to Csikszentmihalyi, 'coloured by a mechanistic orientation which fails to do justice to the phenomenon it seeks to explain' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p.9). Studies at the time when flow was first conceived were more interested in 'the social and psychological function of intrinsically rewarding activities rather than in the enjoyable experience itself' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 7).

Having already acknowledged flow's phenomenological roots, I soon discovered that a greater understanding of flow had, in fact, been achieved by starting with the experiences themselves. Furthermore, it had been Csikszentmihalyi's prime intention to develop a 'systematic phenomenology' of intrinsically rewarding experience, 'a way of describing precisely what goes on in the stream of consciousness' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. xxi). He adds in a separate publication that 'studying the stream of consciousness passing through the mind is the province of phenomenological philosophy' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: p. 22). Controversies remain in contemporary psychology concerning the appropriate method for observing consciousness and the intricacies of inner experience (Kendler, 2005). Such conflict 'reflects, in part, methodological differences between natural science and human

science interpretations of psychology', suggests Kendler (2005: p. 318). In studying a human phenomenon, such as flow, the traditional scientific view is considered too restrictive because it essentially asks only 'why' something happens, not 'what' it is like or 'what' is the nature of a certain phenomenon (Nesti, 2004). Humanistic psychology and phenomenology both employ a human science approach to psychology that seeks out explanations of a person's subjective existence (Kendler, 2005), adopting interpretative, qualitative methodology. In work spanning over three decades, Csikszentmihalyi has developed a detailed science of internal experience that makes use of the tools of the social sciences (primarily psychology and sociology). In the 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi had been faced with the task of understanding a lesser-known facet of human experience. Favouring predominantly qualitative, open-ended, methods he and his colleagues developed rich accounts of flow experience that have eventually led to the well established features of flow outlined in Chapter Two (2.3.2 and 2.3.3). It seemed appropriate then, given the exploratory accent of this research, to once again draw upon flow's affinity for phenomenology and seek out, with the fresh focus of this research, all-new descriptions of flow experience.

Having made the decision to reunite flow research with its phenomenological roots, it was important that the epistemological significance of approaching flow from the perspective of phenomenology was clearly understood, as it was this knowledge that would ultimately shape the final research design.

3.3 Phenomenological approaches to psychological issues

Qualitative research is an umbrella term denoting research models that focus on the meaning of the phenomena researched (Polkinghorne, 1989). According to Polkinghorne, 'in the broad context of research strategies, to be *qualitative* is

identified with a commitment to the natural logic of language as the preferred medium for understanding human affairs' (Polkinghorne, 1989: p.45, emphasis in original). 'Phenomenological research' is a subset of the more general term qualitative research that focuses on the 'lived meaning' of experiences of research participants, using more naturalistic methodology. As Patton (1990: p.41) states, the goal of naturalistic research is to 'understand naturally occurring phenomena in their naturally occurring states'. The practice of phenomenology lies primarily in the description of how people experience and come to make sense of their personal and social worlds (Spinelli, 1992). Phenomenological research differs from other types of qualitative work because of its concern with the person's experience of a specific thing or event (Polkinghorne, 1989).

What is known today as phenomenology was initially intended as 'a radical alternative to traditional psychology' (Karlsson, 1993: p. 13) by its founder Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who regarded the discipline of psychology as 'flawed in its conceptual schemes by the tendency of psychologists to turn away from concrete experience and to develop prematurely abstract and unexamined concepts' (Asworth, 2006: p.12). As Karlsson (1993: pp. 11-12) notes below, Husserl had been critical that:

> In traditional academic psychology the phenomena under investigation are often quite irrelevant. In achieving rationale assumptions of objectivity, the subjectively experiencing elements found in original communications are conventionally replaced by universal language, standardised definitions and numerical values - lost is the interaction between people sharing an experience which has the potential to reveal constitutive meaning. What remains is a shorthand equivalent delimited to a set of narrowly confined conditions that may never reflect the reality of human experience.

For Husserl, continues Karlsson, 'empirical psychology was not grounded in a way that was appropriate to the subject-matter (i.e. psyche, consciousness, human actions or behaviour) of psychology' (Karlsson, 1993: p. 12). It was Husserl's imperative 'to return to the things themselves' – to the study of phenomena at the experiential level (Valle *et al.* 1989), and in doing so, he moved to develop an alternative 'phenomenological' psychology. In its broadest sense, phenomenological psychology is distinguishable by its central concern with the issue of personal, subjective experience and the structures of consciousness involved. The comprehensive task of phenomenological psychology is 'the systematic examination of the types and forms of 'lived' experience, and the reduction of their structures to a richly descriptive account of their prime intentions' (Husserl, 1970: p. 30). Description, in this sense, engenders an approach that aims at answering the questions 'what' something is rather than debating its reasons for being. The essence of what something is, is after all, epistemologically prior to the question of why (Karlsson, 1993).

It is by engaging in the descriptive analysis of a phenomenon, tracing over its constructive meaning, which enables the researcher to come to know 'what' is being experienced (van Manen, 1998). In return for such gains, Braud and Anderson admit 'researchers pay the price of reduced certainty about the actual referents and sources of experiences and events and become uncertain about the contributions or importance of potential perceived relationships or connections among the experience and events' (Braud and Anderson, 1998: pp. 41-42). Researchers of a positivist disposition would question, thus, that 'unless contrasts or comparisons are introduced or considered, how can we know whether or not we are really describing what we think we are describing?' (Braud, 1998: p. 42). But such questions and concerns

reveal the importing of particular ontological and epistemological approaches, assumptions, biases, and values into the phenomenological realm. And, while these concerns stem naturally and answerably from the right-most reaches of the research continuum (see Figure 5), they are quite simply not in the interests of phenomenological inquiry.

Figure 5: The Research Continuum: conventional disciplined inquiry methods (cited in Braud and Anderson, 1998: p. 38)

Continuum

Qualitative			Quantitative
Idiographic			Nomothetic
(Explore/ Understand)	(Explain)	(Predict)	(Control)

Qualitative Methods | Quantitative Methods

Phenomenological	Theoretical	Correlational	Experimental
Heuristic	Historical	Causal [comparative]	Action Research
Narrative	Grounded Theory	Field Studies	
Life Stories			
Case Studies			
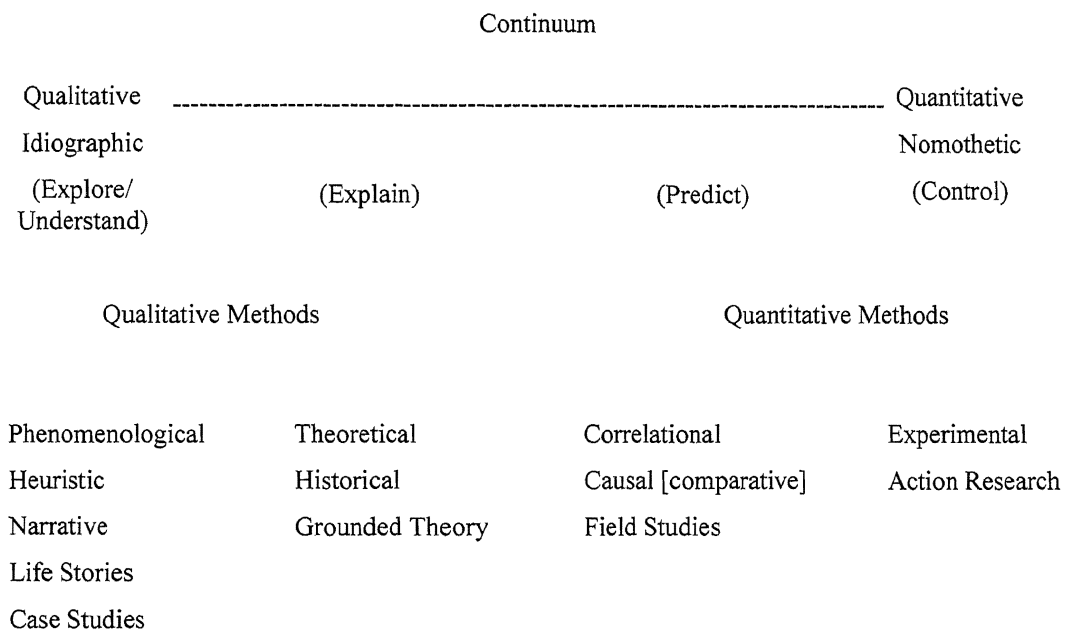
Figure 5 is particularly useful because it clearly sets out the qualitative-quantitative research continuum and the various associated methods available to researchers depending upon where on the continuum their research falls. Both approaches and research objectives are also arranged along the continuum from the more qualitative to the more quantitative and from the more idiographic to the more nomothetic. The four clusters of research methods correspond neatly with the research objectives of exploring/understanding, explain, prediction and control.

In general, phenomenological psychological research aims to 'clarify situations lived through by persons in everyday life' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: p. 26). Rather than reducing a phenomenon to a convenient set of variables in an attempt to control the context in which the phenomenon will be studied, 'phenomenology aims to remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: p. 26). To study a particular phenomenon from a phenomenological psychological perspective is to seek out situations in which individuals have first-hand experiences that they can describe as they actually took place (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is the intention of phenomenological psychology to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within a particular context. From these rich contextual examples of the phenomenon as lived by individuals, 'phenomenological analysis attempts to discern the psychological essences of the phenomenon. In other words, phenomenology seeks the psychological meanings that constitute the phenomenon within the context of peoples' lives' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: pp. 26-27).

To adopt a phenomenological psychological approach is to espouse a particular way of doing research which is now discussed in greater detail.

3.3.1 To Explore and Understand

At its most fundamental level, phenomenological psychology can be seen as the search for knowledge through the exploration and discovery of essences and meanings (Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Such an orientation is particularly useful when concerned with issues of complexity, process, and/or novelty (Smith and Osborn, 2006). As will become clear throughout subsequent sections of this chapter, this research is concerned with all three at one level or another.

Knowledge typically emerges in three forms; most familiar to us are its theoretical and statistical forms. Less well-known, however, is the personal meaning form of knowledge (Glancy, 1993). And yet, it is personal meaning that allows insight into the private 'inner-life' of people and forms the staple of a qualitative research approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 1985). According to Cresswell (1998: pp. 52-53), in addition to its inherent exploratory orientation, phenomenological psychology is deemed *qualitative* in the sense that:

- The data used are qualitative in terms of text involving the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, for example, personal experience, retrospectively written protocols and transcribed interviews, that describe routine and meaning in individual lives;

- The researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words, retrieves and analyses them, focusing on the meanings of experiences for participants and describes a process that is both expressive and persuasive;

- The analysis of the data is of a qualitative, interpretative kind attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them;

- The results yielded from this kind of research are presented by way of a qualitative structure, typically a complex narrative that takes the reader into the dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all its complexity.

The qualitative study of artefacts of human interaction in everyday life, such as thoughts and mental images, conversations, written documents and other personal

works, enables the researcher to gain knowledge that is exclusive to the personal meaning form of knowledge (Denzin, 1989).

Such an approach falls at the extreme left of Figure 5 and is concerned exclusively with what Polkinghorne (1988: p. 4) describes as the 'realm of meaning'. It is important to note here that the realm of meaning is not a thing or substance but an activity, and, as an activity, 'is described by verb forms rather than nouns'. The realm of meaning 'is best captured through the qualitative nuances of its expression in ordinary language' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 10). Conversely, the cluster of experimental-oriented methods at the extreme right of Figure 5 are rooted in positivist ideology. Of all the methods, these provide the greatest feelings of confidence and yield the least ambiguous findings for researchers. For this payoff, however, Braud (1998) claim these methods sacrifice the depth of understanding of those methods at the extreme left of the continuum and in so doing lose valuable knowledge of the contexts, complexities, and richness of what is being studied.

The rise of phenomenological psychology as a viable mode of investigation is indicative of the movement of contemporary human and social sciences into what Guba and Lincoln (1985) term the 'post-positivist era', 'a shift in epistemological focus that is as much a reaction to the shortcomings of positivist ideology as it is a new proactive faculty for research' (Guba and Lincoln, 1985: p. 27). In essence, the exploration encapsulated within phenomenological psychology is intensive micro-research, and, as such, is avoided by many due to its incompatibility with more favourable closed-ended instrumentation (Cresswell, 1998). In response to such "traditionalist" views, it can be argued that there can be no confirmation in the absence of *a priori* exploration (Stebbins, 2001c), and that researchers cannot explore

the vaguities or complexities of personal experience with fixed-response questionnaires and similar methods. Instead, they must endeavour to be as open-minded as possible and strive to observe a phenomenon as it is revealed by those involved using any method that would appear to bear fruit in order to aid their understanding of it (Charmaz, 2006b). A further criticism of exploratory-oriented research is the notion that it is a preliminary monotonous act that precedes more rigorous scientific investigation (Johnson, 1975). However, Giorgi claims that 'phenomenology is not merely propaedeutic to science' (Giorgi, 1983: p. 141). Rather, it is because phenomenology is descriptive and because the descriptive phase of scientific work invariably falls at the beginning of the research process, 'when a phenomenological effort is spoken for, it is sometimes limited to a pre-scientific or propaedeutic phase' (Giorgi, 1983: p. 141). According to McLeod (1970), this is a positive step as:

> "Propaedeutic" means "preliminary", and the argument that phenomenology is propaedeutic to scientific psychology means simply and literally that a careful and rigorous descriptive analysis of experience should precede any attempt to develop a psychological system... the reason that phenomenology goes no farther than this is that phenomenology is a useful propaedeutic to a psychology but is not itself a psychology.

Giorgi (1983 and 1997) argues, however, that phenomenology is not limited merely to a preliminary phase of research on two fronts: firstly, phenomenological thought does, in fact, offer a way of trying to 'explain' findings, although it would be best described as 'understanding'. Secondly, what is true of such a preliminary phase is true throughout all of the phases of research, namely, 'that careful descriptions and their analyses of what is actually taking place can be helpful in all phases of the research

process' (Giorgi, 1983: p. 141), from planning and design to the interpretation and communication of findings.

3.3.2 An 'Inside' Perspective

Adherence to a phenomenological approach involves a strict focusing on subjective experiences of a phenomenon; the phenomenon in the case of this research is flow. Ensuing phenomenological analysis of such experience is done on the basis of experiencing itself, tracing out the meaning-structure within that experience. The phenomenological researcher is to be as faithful (or intimate) as possible to the experience being studied (Moustakas, 1994). It is from such exclusivity that phenomenology is said to partake of an 'inside' perspective, wherein explanatory inclination and the description of experience using concepts and frames of reference outside the experiencing itself is avoided (Moustakas, 1994). The challenge then, for the phenomenological inquirer, is the study of perspectives on the world. In phenomenological research, attempts are made to describe in detail the content and structure of consciousness, so as to grasp the experiential diversity of what it means to experience a phenomenon and come to know its essential meaning for those involved (Kvale, 1996).

The 'locus of phenomenological research' (Polkinghorne, 1989: p. 45) lies in the exploration of *all* human experience, from its subjective origins to its behavioural manifestations. Potential topics for a phenomenological study include, therefore, 'any meaningful human experience that can be articulated in everyday language such that a reasonable number of individuals would recognise and acknowledge the experience being described' (Valle and Mohs, 1998: p. 98). Such experiences could include feelings of heightened anxiety or boredom, of loneliness, of learning, of friendship,

and, of course, the deep sense of enjoyment to be found in flow. The diverse range of experiences in this mould constitutes, in a real sense, "the fabric of existence 'as experienced'" (Valle and Mohs, 1998: p. 98). Conceived in this way, I discovered that contemporary phenomenological psychology with its focused research methods can be seen as an existential-phenomenological psychology (Valle and Mohs, 1998), and therefore set about understanding what it meant to 'do' research from this methodological perspective.

3.3.3 Existential-phenomenological Psychology

Existential-phenomenological psychology is the result of blending two interrelated perspectives, existentialism and phenomenology (Valle and Mohs, 1998; Valle *et al.* 1989). Although existentialism and phenomenology constitute complementary approaches, the two have quite different intellectual histories[4]. In brief, whereas phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences, the major focus of existential philosophy is 'the concrete existence of the individual person and to elucidate the fundamental themes with which human beings struggle' (Valle *et al.* 1989: p. 9). One of the first to bring together existential concerns and phenomenological methodology was Martin Heidegger (1887-1976).

In Husserlian phenomenology, Heidegger saw an appropriate methodological approach with which to examine the content of existential philosophy, wherein, phenomenology became the ideal complement to existentialism, with an existential-phenomenology being the natural result. Here phenomenology means something

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[4] The intellectual histories of Existentialism and Phenomenology are far beyond the scope of this chapter/thesis. For comprehensive discussion of the Existentialist and Phenomenological movements, see Spinelli (1992) and Karlsson (1993).

different than the term as it is typically used in psychology, as a concern with the subject matter of 'subjectivity': 'it refers not to a subject matter (a what) but to a method of research (a how)' (Heidegger, 1962: p. 50). When applied more specifically to interests concerning human psychological phenomena what was existential-phenomenology became existential-phenomenological psychology, and, as such, has become 'that psychological discipline that seeks to explicate the essence, structure, or form of both human experience and human behaviour as revealed through essentially descriptive techniques' (Valle *et al.* 1989b: p. 6). But more importantly for the present research, given that flow invariably occurs in an action-context, is that the existential-phenomenological psychological approach emphasises the subjective 'lived experience' in real (not contrived) situations (Pollio *et al.* 1997). The focus is on investigating how persons participate in and bring meaning to these situations experienced in their lives (Nesti, 2004).

In the words of one of its leading contemporary proponents, existential-phenomenological psychology 'is primarily aimed at articulating psychology in such a way that human beings can be approached and studied as persons rather than things or passive receivers of stimuli' (Nesti, 2004: p. 20). It is only in the existential branch to phenomenology that the causal way of being, so inherent within empirical psychology, is seen as only one of many ways an individual is able to experience themselves and the world. Valle and Mohs (1998: p. 97) elaborate:

Our being presents itself to awareness as a *being-in-the-world* in which the human individual and his or her surrounding environment are regarded as inextricably intertwined. The person and the world are said to co-constitute one another. One has no meaning when regarded independent of the other.

From this perspective the world remains distinct from the individual (in kind), what differs is the individual in all his or her experiential breadth and depth is viewed, on the one hand, as being partly active, making personal choices within a particular situation, always acting in their world in a purposeful way, and on the other hand, partly passive because the world is always acting upon them (Valle and Mohs, 1998). Put another way, the world continuously presents situations in which the person must act. It is from here that existential-phenomenological philosophy introduces such concepts as prereflective and reflective awareness, the life-world, place, and intentionality.

The prereflective level of awareness is fundamental to phenomenological inquiry and crucial to understanding the nature of phenomenological methodology. Valle and Mohs (1998: p. 98) add:

> Reflective, conceptual experience is regarded as literally "reflection" of a pre-conceptual and therefore pre-languaged, foundational, knowing that exists "as lived" before or prior to any cognitive manifestation of this purely felt-sense.

This prereflective knowing is ever-present as the grounding of any meaningful human experience, existing as a prereflective structure (Spinelli, 1992). This invariant structure or essence emerges at the level of reflective awareness as meaning. Van Manen (1998: p. 10) adds, 'a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through experience. Thus, phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through'.

Husserl (1999) established that human experience in general is not a matter of lawful response to the variables that are assumed to be in operation, rather, experience is of a system of interrelated meanings, a gestalt, bound up in what is termed the *lebenswelt* or 'life-world'. The life-world, taken to mean *the-world-as-lived*, refers at once to 'the tacit context, tenor, and pace of daily life to which normally people give no reflective attention' (Seamon, 2000: p. 161). Indeed, regardless of whether an experience be deemed ordinary or extraordinary, the life-world in which the experience takes place is not typically an object of conscious or 'reflective' awareness, thus remaining out of sight (Seamon, 2000). How then, do we become aware of phenomena occurring in our respective life-worlds? One particularly significant dimension of the life-world, in this respect, is the human experience of 'place' in relation to the world. In philosophical discourse, Casey (1994; 1997) has argued for place as a central ontological structure founding human experience. He writes:

> Place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists... [P]lace serves as the condition of all existing things... To be is to be in place. (Casey, 1994: pp. 15-16).

From here, place and phenomena are rendered inextricable, being that it is always with reference to place, and the meaning attached to phenomena experienced therein, that we derive knowledge of our life-world and through it ourselves. Place stands as an existential point of reference for meaningful experience. Meaning, for the phenomenologist, stands as the expression in conscious, reflective awareness of the underlying prereflective structure of the experience of interest (Valle and Mohs, 1998). On this basis, the purpose of any empirical phenomenological research study

can be seen as the articulation of the invariant, underlying 'lived' structure of any meaningful experience at a conscious, reflective, conceptual level of awareness (Spinelli, 1992). As Merleau-Ponty (1994: p. ix) writes:

> The phenomenologist returns to the world which precedes scientific description, the world of which science always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific characteristic is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography to the countryside.

In short, the prereflective experience to which phenomenological psychologists wish to return is not the same as that of traditional empiricists, as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2005: p. 37) explain, it is 'the lived experience, not passive sensuous impressions, but perceptions which live as a rule already furnished with interpretation in the shape of objectives, values, and meaning', an interpretation Husserl had termed 'intentionality'.

3.3.4 Intentionality and Consciousness

Phenomenological inquiry places great emphasis on the meaning bestowing activities of consciousness, where human beings are seen as determining the meaning of our world, not as passive receivers of stimuli but as 'intentional bestowers' of personal meaning (Spinelli, 1992). Consciousness is permitted a privileged status since it is essentially unavoidable, described as 'the medium of access to whatever is given to awareness, since nothing can be spoken about or referred to without implicitly inducing consciousness' (Giorgi, 1997: p.236). 'Intentionality' is viewed as the essential feature of consciousness, more precisely, it is that consciousness always takes on an object, and that object always transcends the act in which it appears

(Giorgi, 1997). In an existential-phenomenological psychological approach it is important to note that:

> Intentionality is not an intellectual process connecting a thinking subject with a world outside its ken; rather intentionality is meant to emphasise that human experience is continually directed toward a world that it never possesses in its entirety but toward which it is always directed (Pollio *et al.* 1997: p. 7)

Put simply, this perspective emphasises that what is perceived is always something interpreted whereby 'we attach meaning to something and in turn, we ourselves have meanings ascribed to us' (Nesti, 2004: p. xi).

3.3.5 Why existential-phenomenological psychology?

In the context of this research, the appeal of an existential-phenomenological psychological approach was two-fold: Firstly, as an approach, it is in keeping with the exploratory underpinnings of this research; secondly, in both cases the intention is to return to a consideration of the experiences themselves; that is, focus must be on the phenomena of pre- and post-flow and how these are experienced and appear to individuals. It is from this perspective that researchers are able to gain a richness and completeness of description, a view from the inside, an understanding of the contexts in which experiences and events occur, and an appreciation of the complex, dynamic, often hidden ways in which events and experience coalesce and reveal themselves in the lives of particular individuals (Braud, 1998). In the process of trying to understand and make meaning of the experiential situation, it is the internal and existential whole that is ultimately of interest (Nesti, 2004).

In using the term existential-phenomenological psychology, the researcher is at once referring to a way of knowing that, with its strict emphasis on internal (subjective) states, seeks to describe the underlying, essential qualities of human experience, the world in which such experience happens, and is directed exclusively toward the question 'what'. Since it appear, from the earlier review (2.8), that researchers have not sufficiently dealt with the question 'what' in regards to pre- and post-flow experience, phenomenology would seem to be a most appropriate method, being closer and more amenable to the interests of this research than the combined grounded theory-phenomenology approach considered earlier (3.2.2). Phenomenology helps researchers to bring to light that which presents itself as flow in experience. It is the kind of thinking which guides us back from theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experience (van Manen, 1982), the lived experience of the individual in flow. It offers a view of human experience which is essential if a greater understanding of holistic flow experience is to be achieved, enabling the collection of richly descriptive information that could lead to a clearer understanding of what pre- and post-flow is and how it is 'lived out' by those who experience them. Studying flow-related leisure experience from this perspective also adds fresh emphasis to a growing body of research using phenomenology in leisure inquiry. This holds true particularly for understanding flow-related leisure as a dynamic, subjective and contextual experience.

3.3.6 Phenomenology in Leisure Research

In the various strands and disciplines in the contemporary social and human sciences, a number of variants of phenomenology have grown to become the basis of approaches to qualitative research in leisure studies. Most noteworthy is Watkins' work on Phenomenography (Watkins, 2000; Watkins and Bond, 2007).

Phenomenography was initially developed as a research specialisation for mapping out the qualitatively different ways that people experience the meaning of aspects of their personal worlds. Initially advocated as an alternative approach to explain learning (Marton, 1996), more recent developments have seen the approach extended to incorporate a theoretical account of leisure experience (Watkins, 2000; Watkins and Bond, 2007). Phenomenography claims to adopt a non-dualistic perspective regarding the nature of reality (Watkins, 2000). In the context of leisure experience, 'this perspective is achieved by accepting the ontological assumption that meanings exist through the way individuals experience situations in which the phenomenon of leisure experience is present' (Watkins and Bond, 2007: p. 291). Parry and Johnson (2007) have noted that a recent shift within Leisure Studies has occurred toward exploring other variants of phenomenological inquiry. For example, Samdahl (2002) has examined leisure and domestic abuse through the autobiographical accounts of victims. Lashua and Fox (2006) conducted an autoethnography of listening to rap lyrics created by Aboriginal young people. Stewart and Floyd (2004) explored the relevance of visual approaches to leisure scholarship recognising the value of vision to the ways people make of leisure. In trying to understand the meaning of leisure experience contemporary investigations are beginning to acknowledge what Howe (1999: p. 49) has termed 'the subjective, intra- and inter-individualistic, and value-laden nature of leisure'. However, even with this recent growth, the phenomenological research of leisure remains a minority enterprise, wherein, until now, existential-phenomenological psychology has remained untapped as a viable approach to studying the leisure experience.

3.4 Introduction to the Phenomenological Method

In undertaking a phenomenological project for the first time, I soon discovered that the notion of method is not advanced as such. Existential-phenomenological psychology is presented, most commonly, as an 'orientation' taken towards the examination of central psychological issues via the use of an exclusive methodology known as the 'phenomenological method'. The primary purpose of the method, as guided by existential-phenomenological psychology, is to generate clear, precise, and systematic descriptions of the meaning-structure that constitutes the activity of consciousness in order to articulate the prereflective level of 'lived' experience (Valle *et al.* 1989; Spinelli, 1992). In her article about the challenges of engaging with phenomenological research, Caelli claims the two greatest challenges found by the researcher wishing to follow the phenomenological path are overcoming 'the lack of articulated methods for achieving phenomenological research together with the even greater challenge of understanding the philosophical underpinnings of such research' (Caelli, 2001: p. 276). Up until this point, the main focus of this chapter has been about attending to the latter of these challenges. From here, suggests Caelli, it is the task of the researcher:

> To navigate the abundant and conflicting literature in phenomenology and articulate an appropriate process or method for achieving the aims of a particular project. Notwithstanding this requirement, there exist few sources that offer concrete directions, in spite of the extraordinary voluminous writings about phenomenology that exist' (Caelli, 2001: p. 275).

I grew to empathise with the observations of Caelli for the inexperienced phenomenological researcher is placed in a particularly difficult position, required to

make judgments about the phenomenological literature for which they have had little training. Instead, the researcher must search for cues from within the extensive phenomenological research literature about how they might proceed (Crotty, 1996). This is no easy task for a researcher engaging in an unfamiliar mode of inquiry as it 'requires that they fully comprehend the intricacies of phenomenology before they can reasonably be expected to do so' (Caelli, 2001: p. 275). There are few sources of information that address the utilitarian aspects of how to conduct a phenomenological study, revealing an apparent reticence about how such research may be implemented. Part of the problem, according to Spiegelberg (1982), one of the authorities on the phenomenological movement, is that 'there are as many styles as there are phenomenologists' (ibid: p. 2). Rather it is that substantial utilisation and subsequent modification of the phenomenological method within contemporary phenomenology has culminated in wide-ranging and differentiated interpretation, making it extremely difficult and laborious to articulate a thorough and accurate idea of how to do phenomenological research.

I soon learned that when it comes to the issue of methodologies there is an appropriate reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to prescribe techniques and procedures, as it is generally accepted that to impose method upon a phenomenon would be to do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon (Groenwold, 2004). Instead, the phenomenon dictates the method as 'one needs to guard against the temptation to let method rule the question, rather than the research question determine what kind of method is most appropriate for its imminent direction' (van Manen, 1998: p. 66). Still, some initial direction was needed. It was by way of a comprehensive review of the phenomenological research literature I discovered several key texts (i.e. Cresswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith,

2006; Spinelli, 1992; van Manen, 1998) to be particularly useful in determining an overall feel for the practicalities of the phenomenological method and how best to implement such an approach. It turns out that for all its apparent ubiquity and whatever its primary focus, the phenomenological method is carried out in much the same way, with each interpretation customarily containing three distinguishable, though interrelated steps expressed perhaps most eloquently and accessibly within Spinelli's (1992: pp. 17-24) three rules as outlined below.

The first of these steps has become known as the rule of *epoché*. The premise of this rule urges the researcher to set aside initial biases and prejudices, to suspend predictions and predispositions, in short, to 'bracket' any preconceived ideas about a phenomena so as to understand it through the voices of those involved (Cresswell, 1998). The rule of epoché, suggests Moustakas (1994: p. 85), provides 'an original vantage point, a clearing of the mind, space and time, a holding in abeyance of whatever colours the experience or directs us'. From this vantage point the phenomenological researcher is challenged to create new ideas, feelings, new awarenesses and understandings to impose an 'openness' toward immediate experience 'so that our subsequent interpretations of it may prove to be more accurate' (Spinelli, 1992: p. 12).

The second step of the phenomenological method is known as the rule of *description*. Having 'opened up to the possibilities contained in immediate experience' (Spinelli, 1992: p. 17) through the preceding rule of epoché, the rule of description urges the researcher to remain faithful to the immediate and concrete impressions of the experience. The ensuing analysis of this experience proceeds by

privileging description over theoretical explanation or conjecture. Spinelli emphasises the import of such a descriptive preference, suggesting that:

> Rather than step back from our immediate experience so that we may instantly explain it, question it or deny it on the basis of preconceived theories or hypotheses which stand separate from our experience, the following of the rule of description allows us to carry out a concretely based descriptive examination of the subjective variables which make up our experience (Spinelli, 1992: p.18).

The third and final step in the phenomenological method is the rule of *horizonalisation* (Spinelli, 1992). Built upon an endeavour (established within the rule of description) to describe an immediate experience, this rule encourages the phenomenological researcher to refrain from forcing any initial hierarchies of significance or importance upon the items of description. In its place, each item is initially treated as having equal value or significance. Spinelli (1992: p. 18) adds that it is by 'simply reporting in a descriptive manner what is consciously being experienced while avoiding any hierarchical assumptions with regard to the items of description, we are better able to examine an experience with far less prejudice and with a much greater degree of accuracy'.

Expressed most generally then, the practice of contemporary interpretation of the phenomenological method engenders an openness or receptivity toward immediate experience, attempting to bracket foreknowledge, in favour of precise description of the phenomenon being studied. Very often, due to the inherent exploratory nature of the phenomenological inquiry, this involves co-mingling methods allowing the research design to emerge rather than be constructed in

advance. What emerges is a function of the recursive interaction between the researcher and phenomenon, and as such is largely unpredictable in advance (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The research process used in this study, emerged in much the same way, continuously evolving over the course of the eighteen months I spent visiting and revisiting the field, culminating in the research process outlined in Figure 6. What follows is a detailed chronological re-telling of how this original research process came to be manifest. For the sake of discussing the various methodological aspects of this research process, a distinction is made in this chapter between the act of 'gathering' experiential material and 'analysing' this material. However, as with all aspects of an emergent, evolving research design, these two acts are not really separable and should be viewed as part of the same process (van Manen, 1998).

Phase One:
Self as Focus

Establishing Research Topic and Focus

Bracketing and Bias Exploration

Phase Two:
Context as Focus

Primary Observation And Selection of Participants

Phase Three:
Participant as Focus

Conduct Focus Groups

Phase Four:
Text as Focus

Transcribe Focus Groups

Reconstructing the told from the telling: the narrative for further analysis

Read for Meaning Units

Read for Sense of Whole

Descriptive Thematic Meaning

Analysis Conducted Using Continuous Construct Validation

Clarify Linguistic-meaning of meaning-units with participants

Develop Thematic Structure

Phase Five:
Participant as Focus

Develop Narratives of Pre & Post Flow Experience

Report Narratives of Experience to Participants

Analysis Conducted Using Continuous Respondent Validation

Alterations/Corrections made to Narratives of Experience

General Consensus: Development of Final Narratives of Experience

Phase Six:
Reader as Focus

Presentation and Dissemination of Narratives of Experience in Final Report

Figure 6: A Schematic of the Research Process used in the Present Research

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3.5 Phase One - Self as focus:

The focus in the initial stage of the research process (February 2005 – April 2006) was on the investigator as the topic of human experience of interest was decided and the research focus established.

3.5.1 The Research Topic

The rationale for this study's research topic will not be repeated here since there has already been comprehensive conceptual and theoretical discussion in Chapter Two, along with a brief pre-history earlier in this chapter (3.2.1). Suffice to say that this research seeks neither to dismiss nor to diminish the contributions of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework. Rather, it attempts to reconsider and reassess its assumptions both to draw attention to its ambiguities and to incorporate significant findings, in relation to pre- and post-flow experience, obtained through phenomenological inquiry.

3.5.2 Establishing Research Focus

In Chapter Two, a review of literature and the evidence of pre- and post-flow contained therein had shown that there was clearly a need for this research to move away from the prescriptive content of the contemporary flow framework and get back to flow as a phenomenon, to the actual experiencing of flow 'as lived' by individuals. To facilitate this shift, it was decided that this research should return to those activities from which the original flow concept was developed, that is, to leisure activities. Only now, it was discovered, unlike at the time Csikszentmihalyi was first developing the flow concept, leisure researchers have available to them an established and evolving typology of leisure in Stebbins' 'Serious Leisure Perspective' (Stebbins, 2007a) embodying the more 'serious' leisure activities in which, both

Csikszentmihlayi (1997) and Stebbins (2001a) claim, flow is most likely to be found by practitioners.

Focused through the inductive lens of Stebbins' established serious leisure theoretical framework (Stebbins, 1992a; 2001a), this research explores one activity characteristic of each of Stebbins' amateur, hobbyist and volunteer-based serious leisure categories that have been shown to generate flow for participants, namely:

- Amateur dramatics (Stebbins, 1979; 1992a)
- Hobbyist table tennis (Stebbins, 1998)
- Volunteer community sports coaching (Nichols, 2004)

It should be noted that a more in-depth account of each of the chosen serious leisure activities is given in Chapter Four. The rationale for using these three activities as opposed to other viable serious leisure activities is three-fold: Firstly, amateur acting, sports-related activities, and educational endeavours such as sports coaching are recognised as flow-producing activities. For example, in a study of flow and theatre acting, Martin and Cutler (2002) investigated the experiences of 40 trainee thespians. The study reported that when in flow, participants viewed theatre as very challenging, demanding highly skilled performances. Participants also reported being strongly motivated in theatre because the experience of acting was both highly stimulating and exciting. Research into flow and leisure usage (Bidwell *et al.* 1997) found the requirements for flow are most likely to be present in games and sport-related hobbyist activities. Csikszentmihalyi (1975b; 1997a) has also enquired into the characteristics of the process of altruistic achievement and concluded that human beings portray the capacity to experience deep satisfaction from such activities. He proffers that a subjective state arises in the context of such (voluntary) activity that is

distinctively positive, instilling a sense of mastery and goal-attainment, influencing self-esteem and self-worth in a favourable direction.

A second reason for choosing amateur theatre, hobbyist table tennis, and voluntary sports coaching was the need to establish a degree of group homogeneity for effective generalisations to be made across the three sample activities (Stebbins, 2001c). This was made possible through the identification of a base or 'common ground' between each group. In the case of this research such common ground was achieved through using groups that can be characterised by the 'co-ordination of effort'.

Finally, with the exception of a single, low-impact exploratory account of flow and theatre acting (Martin and Cutler, 2002), each individual activity is yet to attract 'direct' scholarly interest as empirically-recognised sources of flow. Additionally, despite Stebbins' categorisation as a participant hobbyist endeavour (Stebbins, 1998), table tennis has also been empirically missed by social scientists as a viable serious leisure activity. Thus, in addition to its central aim of articulating a clearer understand of pre- and post-flow in flow-related leisure experience, this research can also be seen to be adding empirically to both the flow framework and serious leisure perspective, further extending the applicational scope of each.

3.5.3 Bracketing and Bias Exploration

As was previously mentioned (3.4), phenomenological research invariably begins with the methodological move of *bracketing*. Focusing on how individuals participate in and bring meaning to the (leisure) situations experienced in their lives, the aim of existential phenomenology is to return to a consideration of the things

themselves (Nesti, 2004). Focus is on the descriptions and meanings that a person provides in relation to an experiential situation 'as lived' rather than to give an abstract explanatory account. Such an approach, suggests Nesti (2004: p. 21), 'emphasises that the starting point for all phenomenological inquiry must be the subject's pre-reflective lived experience of the event and not with some idea of how the thing ought to be experienced or perceived'. Presented as a subtractive process of stripping away any expectations and conceptual biases that may serve to distort the interpretative gaze of the researcher (Pollio *et al.* 1997), the phenomenological act of bracketing is meant to allow a more direct focus on the 'what' of an experience (Nesti, 2004). Cohen (1997: p. 11) states that the aim is 'to describe as far as possible the intentional [prereflective] experience as uncontaminated by foreknowledge, bias and explanation'.

Whilst it is agreed that the phenomenological researcher must strive to complete the task of bracketing (Merleau-Ponty, 2006), it is important to note that total bracketing is always impossible to achieve, since 'the researcher is not in a position to make fully explicit all that they believe about anything' (Nesti, 2004: p. 42). This is unsurprising, suggests Mariampolski (1991), since research will always originate from some problem or set of issues, from what he professes to be 'foreshadowed problems'; preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endorsement of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies (Mariampolski, 1991). Researchers will invariably approach a research project with such foreshadowed problems in mind, that is, researchers convey a certain 'pre-understanding' (Gummesson, 2000) into a research venture, formed primarily on the

basis of the experience of others communicated through a review of prevailing research.

In its contemporary usage, the act of bracketing does not function as a complete absence of presuppositions, personal biases, and preconceived ideas, but as a consciousness of them (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006). It is, after all, useless to pretend that presuppositions do not exist, instead, suggests van Manen (1998: p. 47):

It is better to make explicit our understandings beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even turn its knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.

This makes the research process particularly challenging and open to criticism from proponents of more 'objective' research traditions since there would still seem to be ample opportunity for bracketing to fail; for instance, some presuppositions may simply be overlooked or misinterpreted by the researcher. There are, however, procedures offered to overcome such limitations. The first of these falls at the start of the research process. Because of the potential impact of the researcher, it is necessary that the researcher explore biases and assumptions before the data gathering begins (Fouche, 1984; Idhe, 1986). This procedure required that I explicitly consider my reasons for conducting the research project and any past experiences that could potentially influence my interpretation of events throughout the research process (Pollio *et al.* 1997). Such interest can be acknowledged in the form of a reflective statement or report describing the history and development of the researcher's own understanding of and concerns with regard to the phenomenon of interest (Pollio *et al.*

1997). In the case of my own research, the process of compiling the comprehensive review of literature in Chapter Two functioned in much the same way. It not only provided me with the opportunity to record and critically consider my own understanding of pre- and post-flow experience, it also became a continuous point of reference as I progressed through the research process. With my research interests explicitly laid out in Chapter Two, what about my own experiences? As will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, my past experience as a sports coach in the local area had enabled me to make initial contact with the volunteer sports coaching group that would eventually participate in my research. For the purposes of bracketing and bias exploration it was imperative that I make a conscious effort each time I came into contact with the volunteer sports coaching group (both during data collection and data analysis) not to allow my own previous experiences of sports coaching to encroach upon the research process. The intention here, suggest Pollio *et al.* (1997: p. 48), 'is not for the researcher to become objective, only to have become more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitise them to any potential demands they may impose on their co-participants either during data collection or in its subsequent interpretation'. However, as Luft warns, bracketing 'is not a device that, once performed, is valid at all times' (Luft, 2004: p. 199); rather, bracketing should be a continuous process practised repeatedly throughout a phenomenological project (Dale, 1996; Luft, 2004). Oriented thus, additional bracketing procedures were integrated into subsequent phases of data gathering and interpretation and will be discussed in greater depth in due course (3.8.3).

Once I had completed the initial steps of bracketing and bias exploration, the focus of the study shifted to the leisure groups to be studied.

3.6 Phase Two - Context as focus:

3.6.1 Primary Observation and Selection of Participants: (28th February – 12th April 2006)

It has already been established that people experience flow within an action-context, that is, the experience of flow is, at once, activity-based and contextually bound (2.3.1). Framed as it is by Stebbins' serious leisure framework, this research is focused exclusively upon the contexts of amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and voluntary sports coaching. The first task, then, was not only to devise some way of me gaining access to each of these contexts and the participants involved therein, but because my knowledge of each serious leisure setting was restricted to a handful of related research studies, there was also the need to attain a degree of *a priori* understanding of the amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and voluntary sports coaching contexts to foreground ensuing data gathering and interpretation. The researcher therefore turned to observation, more specifically, primary (Marshall and Rossman, 1989) or descriptive (Bodgewic, 1992) observation.

3.6.2 Why Observe? The value of observatory data

Observation has been characterised as 'the fundamental base of all research methods' in the contemporary social and human sciences (Adler and Adler, 1994: p. 389) and as the 'mainstay' of post-modern qualitative research (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987: p. 257). Even studies that rely mainly on more structured data collection techniques such as interviews, suggests Angrosino (2005: p. 729), 'employ observational methods... lending meaning to the words of the persons being

interviewed'. This notwithstanding, there remains a deep-lying scepticism surrounding observational methods. Accused by some of being a precursor to 'real' science, observational inquiry is often criticised for its subjective nature and that it lacks the objective rigour associated with more traditional modes of research. Moore and Savage (2002) expand on this claiming that the practical difficulty in constructing a predetermined design for observation-based research simply leaves too many imponderables.

The rationale for including a primary observatory element at this stage of the research process, however, aligns with Patton's (1990: pp. 124-126) 'values of observation'. Patton has noted that direct, personal contact with and observations of a target setting have a number of significant advantages. Firstly, direct observation of the social dynamics and activities of a target setting enables the researcher to develop a fuller understanding of that setting through in-depth descriptions of the setting observed; the activities that take place therein; the people who participate in these activities; and the meanings of the setting, the activities, and their participation to those people. Secondly, by experiencing a context firsthand, by being on-site, the researcher is in a better position to experience the setting unto itself allowing an inductive, discovery-oriented approach to be undertaken; thirdly, by adopting such an approach, the researcher is more inclined to see the hidden routines and important nuances that may escape the conscious awareness of participants. And, in so doing, the researcher may learn about information that participants are unwilling to discuss in an interview and would otherwise not become available (Malterud, 2001). Finally, getting close to a setting through the firsthand experience primary observation provides permits the researcher access to personal knowledge and experience as resources to aid in understanding and interpreting the setting and inform subsequent

stages of the research process (i.e. sample selection strategies and/or data interpretation) (Mulhall, 2002). Primary field observation is also useful when investigating certain kinds of activities, for instance sports performances of various kinds, artistic endeavours (e.g. theatre acting) and related activities that often engross participants in ways that would be disrupted by the intrusion of an interview or related interventional methods (Bogdewic, 1992).

Johnson (1992) has warned of how the incomplete nature of human observation exposes a susceptibility to selective perception that casts doubt on the validity and reliability of observation as a method of scientific inquiry. Patton (1990), however, makes two crucial points concerning the place of observation in social science research. Firstly, he criticises the 'folk wisdom' about observation being nothing more than selective perception. This is only true, he suggests, in the ordinary course of daily living. Secondly, the observer is able to enhance the accuracy, validity, and reliability of observation through careful preparation; 'many people think that they are natural observers and therefore have very little to learn' (Patton, 1990: p. 123). It became apparent early on in my research of observational method that, in reality, preparing for observation is no less rigorous a process than the preparation necessary to become a competent phenomenological researcher. 'In the field of observation', suggests Patton, 'chance favours the prepared mind' (Ibid: p. 123). He continues, 'a scientific observer/researcher cannot be expected to engage in scientific observation on the spur of the moment – athletes, artists, musicians, dancers, engineers, and scientists require training and mental preparation'.

In this mould, my preparation evolved to consist of a number of dimensions, the foremost of which was to gain *a priori* understanding of what it meant to 'do field

observation'. My research had turned up a number of useful publications (most notably Mulhall, 2002 and Patton, 1990) that had allowed me to develop an overall feel for how I ought to proceed. Above all else, the general requirement was that I 'observe directly', or put another way, in the words of Spindler and Spindler (1992: p. 64), 'the researcher must be there when action takes place and to change that action as little as possible by his or her presence'. Oriented thus, the next task was to identify and negotiate access to the leisure settings that would be the focus of my research.

3.6.3 Initial contact and entry into setting

Regardless of the tradition of inquiry, gaining access to the site or individuals to be studied represents the most important step in the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Entry into a setting, suggest Hammersely and Atkinson (1995), typically begins by identifying and making contact with a 'gatekeeper'. The gatekeeper is an individual who is a member of or has contacts with the target group(s) and is the initial point of contact for the researcher leading them to other potential informers (Hammersely and Atkinson, 1995). Neuman (2000: p. 352) qualifies a gatekeeper as 'someone with the formal/informal authority to control access to a site/group – a person from whom permission must be obtained'. In part, my decision to approach the three particular groups that would eventually go on to make up the research sample had been based on an element of convenience regarding accessibility to the 'gatekeepers' of certain groups. Firstly, a colleague, who had until recently been a member of one of the longest-established amateur dramatic groups in the local area, had volunteered to introduce me to the secretary of the group; secondly, through previous work with the local sports council I had established links with numerous sports clubs, one of these being the organisers of a well-known table tennis section at a local health and fitness centre. And finally, due to my previous work with

the local sports council as a community sports coach, I already had links with the council's own voluntary sports coach co-ordinator.

For 'strangers' or 'outsiders' studying a group or setting for the first time, approaching gatekeepers slowly is prudent advice, since access is not simply a matter of physical presence or absence (Cresswell, 1998). Gaining access through the gatekeeper and establishing a rapport with the group are critical steps in the early stages of the research process (Patton, 1990). With this in mind, I arranged to meet with each gatekeeper 'on-site' to discuss the nature and requirements of my research. Mulhall (2002: p. 310) observes that negotiating access involves 'a subtle but rarely acknowledged process of presenting oneself in the correct way. Entrance may be denied if consciously or unconsciously the researcher does not meet the cultural expectations of the gatekeeper'. Waddington (1994) discusses how gaining access involves a process of managing identity by projecting an image and convincing gatekeepers that you are non-threatening. I took care to assure each gatekeeper that my intervention would be kept to a minimum and that the intention was only to learn about the nature of individuals' leisure experiences within the respective settings. Obtaining permission to enter into the table tennis and voluntary sports coaching groups proved relatively straight-forward as past work with the local sports council meant I was already known to several of the members from each. This notwithstanding, because the majority of the sports coaches worked with young children, to negate any potential concerns over child protection, it was agreed that I would accompany the 'head-coach' on his rounds to each site, only interacting with the coaches before and after each session. Though not ideal to the extent that my involvement with the individual coaches was limited, having myself been a sports coach for several years, I appreciated the heavily legislated environment in which the

coaches now worked and was grateful for the opportunity afforded me, itself a sign of trust on the part of the group.

Entry into the amateur acting group, however, proved less straight forward. In my initial meeting with the group's secretary, there was, perhaps understandably, a hesitance to grant me access until I had also met with the senior members of the group. Returning twice more to the amateur acting group, I met with other key members, typically the more experienced individuals in the group, each time discussing the nature and intentions of my research. After some initial hesitancy, many members showed a genuine interest in my research, eventually inviting me to attend mid-week rehearsals for a forthcoming production so that I could meet the rest of the group.

Having safely negotiated entry into each leisure setting, my focus turned to making initial contact with participants. Although, in the majority of cases, the gatekeepers (and in the case of the amateur acting group, many of the senior members) had already relayed the nature of my research to the group, a succinct way of introducing who I was and a clear explanation of my intentions was still needed. The best rule to follow at this stage, suggests Bogdewic (1992: p. 51), is to tell them the truth; 'it does not have to go into great detail, in fact too much detail can alarm people; an honest, jargon-free, down-to-earth explanation will suffice'. I endeavoured to be as honest and open as possible with all participants, telling of how I was interested in learning about their leisure experiences, and answering any questions they might have. However, despite my best efforts to explain what I was doing, there were some participants who had difficulty grasping the premise of my research. Related responses from participants ranged from misunderstanding by a number of

the table tennis players, who seemed to think I might be management from the sports centre with which the club is associated, through to the incredulity of some of the sports coaches as to why it was I was interested in studying them: "Why? Do you want to come and coach my lot?" one joked. Subsequently, I spent much of my early time in each of the settings, simply talking to participants until I felt confident all were aware of who I was and what I was doing.

Beyond these initial introductions, I approached the early exchanges in the field with caution as at this stage there was no way of knowing how to behave or what roles to take on. Equally, I was unfamiliar with the various routines or rituals of each setting. The primary goal of this early phase in the field was to develop trusting and cooperative relationships with the members. Such relationships are necessary, suggests Jorgensen (1989), because through them the researcher is able to gain access to important aspects of daily existence, a particularly salient point given the intentions of this research. The nature of a researcher's relationship with the setting being observed, adds Jorgensen (1989), is directly related to the decisions made as to the type of observation to be adopted.

3.6.4 The variations in observatory methods

The degree of observer involvement in the core activity of each setting stands as the key source of differentiating between observational strategies. However, Patton (1990: p. 127) warns that this 'is not a simple decision/choice between participation or non-participation'. In fact, the level of observer participation can vary from complete involvement in the setting as a full participant to complete separation from the setting as spectator with a great deal

of variation in between (Bogdewic, 1992). In deciding on the degree of observer involvement, Patton (1990: p. 127) cautions:

> Researchers who adopt such qualitative research strategies must avoid the fallacy of thinking that the *ideal* is full and complete participation – *going native*. The ideal is to negotiate and adopt that degree of participation which will yield the most meaningful data about a given setting, the characteristics of the participants, and the nature of participant interaction. (Emphasis in original)

My initial intention was to be nothing more than an interested onlooker. Partly due to a lack of appropriate expertise in the target settings and partly due to the fact that the current research required the observation of three distinctly separate contexts almost simultaneously, to be tolerated as an unobtrusive (passive) rather than a participant (active) observer was deemed satisfactory. Over time, however, and quite unintentionally, I found myself becoming more and more involved in each of the settings. For example, it was not unusual for me to help members of the table tennis group put up and/or take down the tables and other equipment and I was even asked on occasion to 'knock-up' with the players if numbers were low. Such a transition is typical when observing, claims Patton (1990), with the majority of field observation usually ending up falling somewhere between participant and non-participant. My early reticence toward becoming too involved with the groups was attributable to concerns over observer influence, or to use its scientific label 'reactivity', a major concern with regard to the validity and reliability of observational data for the simple fact that participants may behave indifferently when aware that they are being observed (Patton, 1990; Bogdewic, 1992). However, my shifting levels of involvement within the leisure settings implied a growing sense of acceptance, or

what Mulhall (2002: p. 310) terms 'cultural acceptability', from members. My participation, from this perspective, was seen as an early indication that I was beginning to establish a mutual trust and understanding with members.

3.6.5 What to observe?

The preceding discussion has shown how observation-oriented field research may vary in the extent to which the observer participates in the setting and the extent to which the purpose of the research is made explicit to those involved. The major factor impacting upon each of these is the purpose or focus of the observation itself (Patton, 1990). Typically, the purpose of primary field methods, like observation, is to firstly unveil the complexities and patterns of a social setting and, secondly, to generate and verify theoretical truths and empirical generalisations (Jorgensen, 1989). The purpose of the observational component used in this research, however, was more modest by comparison, focusing exclusively on the former to generate useful information for action, to inform process or more precisely, to develop a working setting-knowledge to foreground subsequent stages of data gathering and interpretation.

In attempting to describe the social environment, and the activities and behaviours contained therein, the observer is said to be concerned with the 'proxemics' (Lee, 2003) of the setting, that is, how participants organise and use space for the purpose of social interaction; what takes place in that space; who is involved; what are the participants doing; and the variations in how participants are engaged in the space created. Because the proxemics of each of the serious leisure settings differed in structure and complexity, both my role and intensity of participation varied from site to site, spanning a wide range of activities. For example,

as well as attending mid-week rehearsals I was also invited to help the amateur acting group with the 'set-build' for the forthcoming production. The set-build typically takes place a week prior to the production's opening night and involves two groups of people: those performing and those not performing in the production. Many members of the second group I had not yet met, as the rehearsal sessions I had previously attended had typically involved only those performing. Thus, my involvement in the set-build not only gave me a unique opportunity to experience first-hand a different proxemic to rehearsals; that of 'behind the scenes' or 'back-stage', allowing, as a consequence, for a better overall setting-knowledge. But in addition, my contribution to the set-build had gone some way towards strengthening my relationship with the group itself, something that would eventually lead to me being asked to help out back-stage at the group's dress-rehearsal for the forthcoming production.

I also attended the training sessions and 'match-nights' of the table tennis group, witnessing both the competitive and non-competitive sides of the table tennis setting, helping out with equipment and even, as previously mentioned, 'knocking-up' with members when asked. Due to the concerns surrounding child protection raised earlier in this section, my time with the volunteer sports coaching group was restricted to the role of passive observer (Patton, 1990), taking in a variety of sports-based sessions including 9-11 year-old boys youth hockey, 11-15 year-old mixed tennis, and 15-17 year-old boys youth cricket. So as not to let my inability to interact with coaches on-site interfere with me building a trusting relationship with the group, I endeavoured to help out where I could, completing kit checks and moving equipment to and from storage.

In the end, each of the three sample groups were observed on three separate occasions over a period of 3-4 weeks with the duration of each session varying anywhere between one and two hours (see Table 2). It was thought multiple visits to each setting would facilitate construction of a more valid and reliable understanding of the physical and social environment and provided greater opportunity to establish a rapport with each of the groups than would a single, isolated visit.

Table 2: Observation Timetable 28th February 2006 – 12th April 2006

Sample Group	*Date/time of 1st Observation*	*Date/time of 2nd Observation*	*Date/time of 3rd Observation*
Amateur Dramatics	28th February 7-9pm (rehearsal)	14th March 7-9pm (rehearsal/set build)	21st March 7-9pm (performance)
Table Tennis	13th March 8-10pm (training)	20th March 8-10pm (match-night)	3rd April 8-10pm (training)
Sports Coaches	29th March 11am-1pm (youth hockey)	5th April 11am-1pm (mixed tennis)	12th April 11am-12noon (youth cricket)

Descriptions of the varying proxemics of the three leisure groups; how participants organised and interacted with the social space; who was involved and what participants did in this space; and the many ways in which participants engaged in the space created, were noted more or less contemporaneously in the form of field notes so as not to dilute richness and detail of description (Hammersely and Atkinson, 1995). On occasion my observations would be supplemented by informal (*in situ*) conversations with members of a group, recorded either as direct written quotes or near as possible recall. Such occasional researcher involvement is important, suggests

Patton (1990), so that 'the researcher does not make assumptions about the meaning of what they observe without including perspectives of participants about their own perspectives' (p. 145). In addition to this, such conversations provided important insights into the 'native' (Patton, 1990; Bogdewic, 1992) or 'folk' (Denzin, 1989) language of the setting under study. It is accepted in social and human science research that to understand a particular social setting is to understand the language of those involved in that setting for language is the medium by which people bring meaning and order to the world 'as-lived' (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). Patton (1990: p. 147) adds, 'the things for which people have words tell others what is important to those involved'. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), it is not unusual for participants/groups to develop their own words to describe particular aspects of experience within a social setting.

Part of the task of the observational phase of this research was to gain familiarity with the literal, connotative, and symbolic meanings of the native language used within each of the leisure settings. For example, during my time with the amateur actors I came to learn that the terms "books free" and "books down" referred to the same period in time, when an actor was able to run though all of his/her lines without the aid of a script for the first time. From my involvement with the table tennis section I was able to learn that "rubber" and "blade" were the 'native' terms given to a player's bat and its grip-covering and that the phrase "knocking-up" had dual-meaning, referring both to the phase of physical preparation prior to a competitive match and the playing of a casual game wherein neither player keeps score. My personal history as a sports coach meant I was familiar with much of the folk language used by the voluntary coaches, though even here I came across new terms whose meaning I did not know. For instance, coaches often used the terms "us

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reccies" and "reccie coaches" as an abbreviated way of mockingly referring to the (supposedly) 'recreational' nature of their involvement with coaching, terms that to my knowledge are indigenous to this group.

Gaining a knowledge of the different folk language of the leisure groups was significant as it aided in streamlining communication between participant and researcher which proved crucial both early on in establishing a rapport with each group and later in the gathering and subsequent interpretation of experiential accounts of leisure-related flow. From this perspective, the inclusion of a primary observatory element was integral to this research process. Not only did it enable me to develop a working setting-knowledge and rapport to foreground subsequent stages of data gathering and interpretation, it is such setting-knowledge and rapport that provided a platform from which I was then able to confidently approach prospective participants to partake in subsequent data gathering and interpretation stages of the research.

The emphasis of the research process now shifts from the context(s) to the participant(s) and the selection of a research sample.

3.6.6 Sample Selection

Directed, as it is, towards collecting richly descriptive subjective information means phenomenological research is typically conducted on small sample groups (Cresswell, 1998), the main aim being that the study should say something of substance about the perceptions and understandings of experiences of a particular group rather than prematurely making more generalised claims (Smith and Osborn, 2006). This is described as an idiographic mode of inquiry, and is preferred to the nomothetic approach which predominates in traditional psychology (Smith *et al.,*

1995). In a nomothetic study analysis is at the level of populations. From here the researcher can make only probabilistic claims about individual experience (Smith and Osborn, 2006). In idiographic study, on the other hand, because it has been derived from the examination of individual cases, it is possible to make specific statements about those individuals.

The issue of sample size is perhaps less prevalent in the discourses of phenomenological inquiry than traditional modes of research. Thomas and Pollio (2002), among others (i.e. Ashworth, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989), suggest that an appropriate sample size for a phenomenological study can range anywhere from a single case to thirty participants. However, it must be remembered that the purpose of selecting subjects in phenomenological research is to generate a full range of variation in a set of descriptions (Polkinghorne, 1989). The number of participants used, then, is not nearly as important as the variety and quality of the descriptions provided by the participants selected (Cresswell, 1998). Such numbers, suggests Charmaz (2006b), are merely a 'yardstick' determined, in part, by the type of data required and subsequent methods of data collection chosen. Given that the interests of my research spanned three quite separate leisure settings, selecting a sample of between eight and ten individuals from each making a total of 30 participants was judged to be both empirically satisfactory and methodologically manageable, from a phenomenological perspective, according to previous studies (i.e. Ashworth, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Thomas and Pollio, 2002).

Polkinghorne (1988: p. 48) notes that 'the logic of the selection of subjects in phenomenological research differs from the logic of traditional sampling theory'. He continues, 'whereas the statistical demands of making inferences from a sample to a

population, typically, means the random sampling of subjects from that population. The concerns of the phenomenological researcher are focused exclusively on the nature of the experience itself'. A phenomenological study characteristically looks to find a fairly homogenous sample, the basic logic here being that if the researcher is to interview, for example, six participants, it is not helpful to think in terms of random or representative sampling since it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell, 1998). Instead, a criterion sampling strategy works well, suggests Cresswell (1998). The homogeneity of the sample selected for the present study was strengthened further because it utilised the inherent theoretical triangulation of the serious leisure framework. That is, exploring one activity characteristic of Stebbins' (1992a) amateur, hobbyist and volunteer-based serious leisure categories and committing to a criterion sampling strategy ensured the selection of an array of individuals who have had a variety of flow-related leisure experiences.

3.6.7 A Criterion Sampling Strategy

Criterion sampling involves the selection of individuals because they possess certain desirable characteristics relative to the purposes of the investigation (Giorgi, 1997). Primarily, suggests Polkinghorne (1988: p. 47), it is important to ensure that 'subjects are chosen who are able to function as informants by providing rich descriptions of the experience being investigated'. From here, then, the first criterion must be that each of the subjects has had the experience that is the topic of the research. For my research, that meant selecting subjects who had experienced flow in their chosen leisure activity. This was to prove particularly difficult since everyday language does not include a specific or exclusive term, such as the term flow, that refers to this experience (Bloch, 2000). Initially, I had intended to select subjects on

the grounds of inferences made from *in situ* conversations into the nature of individual experience during primary observation. However, the impromptu nature of these conversations was to quickly render such an approach ineffectual. Instead, I took to initiating conversations about the nature of individual leisure experiences, asking variations on the question "what is it about your leisure experience that makes it most enjoyable?" It was from these 'topical' conversations that the researcher was able to gain insight into the nature of individual leisure experiences, many of which retained flow-like qualities.

These conversations also provided grounds on which to inform a second criterion: whether the individual had the capacity to provide full and sensitive descriptions of the experience of interest. Considered in terms of the current research methodology, this capacity required the individual to have certain characteristics. Firstly, subjects needed to have the ability to express themselves verbally with relevant ease. Secondly, they needed to be able to articulate how an experience felt to them. Thirdly, it was important that subjects were enthusiastic about and had an interest in their leisure experience. Fourthly, they had to be willing to talk openly about their experience in a group situation (Pollio *et al.*, 1997: pp. 30-33). Those individuals from each of the three groups observed judged to meet favourably with these criteria were invited to attend the next phase of the research process. Each participant was not only reminded of the nature of the study but was encouraged to become a research participant. An active attempt was made to recognise each research participant as a co-researcher since they are undoubtedly the authority regarding their own (leisure) experience (Moustakas, 1994).

As already outlined above, my aim was to gather a sample of between eight and ten individuals from each leisure group, though ten was preferable so as to provide a degree of flexibility should for any reason an individual be unable to attend or have to drop out. However, recruiting for this subsequent stage in the research process proved to be difficult due, in main part, to several individuals from the table tennis group who were initially unwilling to continue their involvement after learning that this would involve them attending focus group sessions. Responses were varied: "I'm just not comfortable talking in big groups" claimed one player; "I don't believe in focus groups, I've had some bad experiences in the past" mentioned another. Such reticence may be attributed to the formal, evaluative connotations focus group research often convey for some individuals (Krueger, 2000). Altogether, three members of the table tennis group from an initial ten approached voiced concerns about being involved in focus group-based sessions, with another member refusing outright. Assuring the uncertain members that the proposed format for these sessions was that of an 'informal' group discussion seemed to overcome their initial reluctance with all eventually agreeing to take part, however, I returned once more to the table tennis group, approaching three more individuals before finally reaching my target sample of ten members. Conversely, there was no such resistance from either of the amateur dramatic or sports coaching groups as individuals were well-accustomed to 'talking things through' in group/team meetings with the first ten individuals approached from each group accepting the invitation to take part.

3.7 Phase Three - Participant as Focus:

3.7.1 Group Discussions (28th March – 19th May 2006)

With the focus of the study shifting to the research participant, the real work of phenomenological research begins (Pollio *et al.* 1997). Richly descriptive information must be gathered from research participants that it is hoped will provide evidence concerning the various dimensions of meaning that converge to form pre- and post-flow experience. Bracketing presuppositions and gaining access to individuals who have experienced the phenomenon to be encountered are both prerequisite to this stage of the research process. From here, the exploration of the phenomenon must proceed, and the relevant descriptions emerge (Ashworth, 1996). Though this is not a straight-forward process as 'plainly, phenomenological research does not find, laid out for it, phenomena simply revealed, unproblematically describable', rather 'an effort of critical empathy and strenuous interpretation is needed, which is dependent on authentic communication with research participants' (Ashworth, 1996: p. 13).

From a methodological point of view, the phenomenological investigation of flow experience is rendered problematic on two fronts. First, experientially, flow is an elusive phenomenon manifest only under certain psychological conditions (Jackson, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi professes that the elusiveness of the flow state is created by the infrequency and difficulty of predicting the flow event (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). Second, descriptively, everyday language does not include a specific and exclusive term, such as flow, that refers to this experience (Bloch, 2000). Flow experiences are often identified with the activities to which they are related, but are not necessarily restricted to these activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 44). The methodological

landscape is complicated further by the novel focus of this research in that it extended beyond the conventional focus of flow research in an attempt to bring clarity to the conceptual and theoretical uncertainty that surrounds what goes before and after a flow state. Taken together, the foregoing delimits the choice of potential methods since the chosen mode of data gathering needed to be appropriately designed so as to overcome the above methodological problems whilst generating richly descriptive accounts of pre- and post-flow experience from research participants.

Conventional flow research has devised two main approaches for the empirical research of flow: those dealing in immediate subjective experience (i.e. experience sampling methods) and those that encourage reflection upon subjective experience (i.e. semi-structured interviews and the flow questionnaire).

3.7.2 Interviews

In the beginning, the flow concept emerged out of qualitative interviews exploring the nature of deeply enjoyable experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The semi-structured interview format 'provides a holistic, emic account of the flow experience in real life contexts' and was and still is 'a critical tool in initially identifying and delineating dimensions and dynamics of the flow experience' (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 93). For example, Jackson asked elite athletes to describe a flow experience, distinguishing the characteristics of the flow state (Jackson, 1992) and factors that help and hinder flow, factors that disrupt it, and degree of control over it (Jackson, 1995). Perry's (1999) work on flow and creative writing focused writers on the most recent occasion when they had lost track of time while writing, asking them to describe the conditions that had allowed the experience and how they deal with blocks that keep them out of flow.

3.7.3 Questionnaires

Because flow experiences occur in a great variety of contexts (Csikszentmihalyi, 1985), one time paper and pencil measures have been developed to measure dimensions of flow experience and the variance in its occurrence across activity contexts and individuals. The Flow Questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi and Graef, 1980; Larson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1983) encourages reflection upon subjective experience allowing for self-diagnosis and personal expression, as opposed to matching scores with pre-determined ratios. The method typically presents respondents with three passages (see below) that describe the flow state, originally collected from a rock climber, a composer of music, and a dancer. After reading each statement respondents were then asked to identify firstly whether they have had the experience described, secondly, how often, and finally, in what activity contexts (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The three flow passages were the following:

"... My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems..."

"... My concentration is like breathing. I never think of it. I am really oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring, or the house could burn down or something like that. When I start, I really do shut out the whole world. Once I stop, I can let it back in again..."

"I am so involved in what I am doing, I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing."

<div align="right">

The Flow Questionnaire
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1982; Delle Fave & Massimini, 1988)

</div>

Responses are recorded on a flow scale which elicits an estimate of the frequency with which an individual experiences each dimension of flow experience. The

instrument has been used as a repeated measure (Delle Fave and Massimini, 1988) to assess differences across activity contexts in the extent to which the flow dimensions are experienced. Jackson and Marsh (1996) have also developed these paper and pencil measures to examine the flow state in specific contexts, including elite sport.

3.7.4 The Experience Sampling Method (ESM)

Initial development of the 'Experiential Sampling Method' (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987) stemmed from dissatisfaction with the large body of interview and questionnaire-based research that demonstrated the inability of people to provide accurate and reliable retrospective accounts of their daily behaviour and experience. The ESM attempts to overcome the short-comings of earlier measures through assessing subjects in real time and contexts, studying the subjective experience of interaction in natural environments (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987). From a conceptual viewpoint, the ESM 'exposes regularities in the stream of consciousness' (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1987: p. 527) (including such states as heightened happiness, or self-awareness and extreme concentration). Dealing as it does in immediate subjective experience the ESM does not rely on respondent recall, nor is flow self-diagnosed, instead it is pre-defined in terms of a perceived balance between challenge and skill. Applications of the ESM typically involve randomly prompting subjects to complete an Experiential Sampling Form (ESF), measuring the level of psychological involvement (e.g. level of concentration, personal skill and challenge, perception of the passage of time) within a particular activity (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997).

The ESM generates an understanding of the quality of experience at specific moments in time; a snap shot of the content and quality of an individual's overall

experiences. In addition to utilising self-reports to validate the flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi compared groups of self-reports from individuals in different settings. This notwithstanding, Jackson and Ecklund (2002) warn that while self-report measures are important, it is necessary to have such measures that do not involve disruption/interruption of an activity. Such constant interruption would inevitably create a patchy and rather inarticulate account of subjective experience which may not prove to be an accurate reflection of the 'holistic' experience. A further weakness of the ESM, when applied to the daily setting, is that it is inherently difficult to sample subjects involved in highly challenging, adventurous activities (Jones *et al.* 2003) and even more so in what Csikszentmihalyi (1992) refers to as the elusive flow state.

In the context of my research and the investigation of pre- and post-flow experience, whilst the latter 'between groups' experimental designs (the Flow Questionnaire and ESM measures) have distinguished differences between classes of events such as the general circumstances that are most likely to produce flow (i.e. Craef, *et al.* 1983; Mannell *et al.* 1988; Samdahl, 1988; see also 2.2.3), they remain incapable of delimiting the processes that constitute these events. Ultimately, according to Marr (2001), the between groups methodology utilised by Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues to explore flow reflects the fact that since flow is defined as a 'steady' or 'transitionless' state predicted by certain recognisable experiential indicators (2.3.2 and 2.3.3), it can only be defined by the methodology which in effect confirms that presumption. Such an approach, continues Marr (2001), thus acts to sustain a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' of sorts, and, as such, any results produced by these procedures can neither confirm nor disconfirm the multi-phasic explanation of flow explored in this research.

At first glance, then, of the three approaches outlined above, it was the interview that appeared to be most amenable to the purposes of my research; not only does it continue to be the approach of choice in studies directed toward rich, integrated descriptions of flow, but it is also the favoured method of phenomenological inquiry. That said, the phenomenological interview differs from that of the semi-structured or survey interview typical in flow research. Survey interviewing is considered a stimulus-response interaction wherein the interviewer's question is the stimulus and the subject's answer is the response (Valle and Halling, 1989). In contrast, the phenomenological interview is invariably conceived of as a discourse or conversation (Mischler, 1986; Pollio *et al*. 1997). Characteristically, phenomenological interviews are unstructured involving an interpersonal engagement or dialogue in which individuals are encouraged to share with a researcher nuanced descriptions of a particular human experience (van Manen, 1998).

My research differs, however, from conventional phenomenological studies in that its central focus, the broader process of experiencing flow, is not something that is immediately familiar to individuals, meaning that in order to investigate it the researcher must either somehow teach research participants the concept or alternatively use scores of related psychological constructs such is the way with the experience sampling method (ESM). The latter is unsatisfactory, suggests Rettie (1999: p. 104) 'because if flow is accepted to be distinct, holistic experience, it cannot be operationalised indirectly in terms of other related states, in the same way that one cannot define happiness in terms of smiling'. A more direct approach would be to teach research participants the concept of flow at the beginning of the data gathering process. For instance, in a study investigating the flow experiences of Web users, Chen *et al*. (1999) augmented the flow questionnaire with open-ended questions to

categorise flow experience. In an attempt to 'generate some basic description of the flow phenomenon' (Chen *et al.* 1999: p. 584), they used the Flow Questionnaire quotations in a survey of 304 respondents, using the open-ended questions to encourage rich personal accounts of flow. This more descriptive approach allows research participants to describe their flow experiences in their own terms and provides the key to understanding the processes by which an individual reaches a harmonious state in his/her consciousness (Chen *et al.* 1999). Bloch (2000) used a similar descriptive approach in her investigation into the phenomenology of flow in daily life. In the study Bloch interviewed a sample of so-called 'ordinary people' selected to fulfil a pre-set criterion regarding distribution by sex (equal number of men and women), age, (all in their thirties), and estimated degree of autonomy in their work roles (i.e. secretarial training or academic education). In order to introduce the flow phenomenon, participants were shown the three flow quotations extracted from the flow questionnaire (3.7.3) and encouraged to discuss any associations brought to mind by this material. The purpose of this procedure was to draw out detailed descriptions of specific flow episodes that were faithful to participants' 'lived' experience (Bloch, 2000).

In a separate study investigating the usefulness of flow for understanding consumer behaviour in computer-mediated environments, Rettie (2001) made a number of favourable developments concerning the structure and emphasis of the flow questionnaire in an attempt to capture the flow experiences of internet users. Rettie (2001) criticises the 'self-completion' format of the questionnaire suggesting the method assumes respondents can understand the flow concept and related constructs, and does not allow respondents to clarify concepts with the researcher and/or each other. Rettie (2001) reformulated the flow questionnaire using focus

groups in the place of the original paper-pencil format. Groups of respondents were shown a concept board containing each of the three flow descriptions characteristic of the Flow Questionnaire and asked whether they had had similar experiences during their online activities. The research explored respondents' awareness and experience of flow, the factors that promote or inhibit it, and the nature of the experience itself. The interactivity of the focus group format resolves the foregoing criticisms of the original flow questionnaire, the principle justification being that it capitalises on the interaction within a group, facilitating the identification and collaborative interrogation of internal experience to elicit rich experiential data (Rettie, 2001).

Rettie (2001) suggests focus groups are an effective way of understanding the nature of the flow experience as they allow the researcher to capture subjective comments and perspectives within an interactive social environment through personal expression and spontaneous discovery of emergent ideas. Developing this emphasis on interaction, Kitzinger (2000: p. 299) adds 'the idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one-to-one interview'.

However, whilst such conversational methods seem to be the natural path in order to attain the richly descriptive accounts of experience sought in phenomenological inquiry, Webb and Kevern (2001: p. 800) argue that group-oriented modes of data-gathering are 'incompatible with the tenets of phenomenological research'. They insist that 'a phenomenological approach requires that an individual describes their experiences in a relatively unbiased and uncontaminated way and therefore a group method of data collection involving

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interaction between several participants is not compatible with phenomenological research' (Webb and Kevern, 2001: p. 800). However, though the demands of conventional phenomenological inquiry would appear to yield a determinate method in the phenomenological interview as the procedure for attaining rigorous and significant descriptions of human experience, an existential-phenomenological framework posits that all knowledge, including self-knowledge is constructed in social discourse and that individual experience can only be understood contextually (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 2006). In fact, to proceed otherwise, such as seeking a more 'truthful' version by conversing with individuals separate from a particular social context runs the risk of producing de-contextualised and thus 'untruthful' accounts of experience (Pollio et al. 1997).

From an existential-phenomenological psychology perspective, suggest Pollio et al. (1997: p. 31) 'the "phenomenological real" is to be found nowhere else but in the ongoing, ever-changing context of the social encounter' as 'such data reflects the participants' perspectives on their own experiences as they emerge in the context of the dialogue with involved others'. Pollio and his colleagues go on to assert that 'to the objection that such reflections are not the "real" phenomenon, it might be said... just where else is the real to be found if not in the context in which it was originated?' (Pollio et al. 1997, p. 31). Webb and Kevern (2001) also fail to acknowledge in their critique other recognised group-oriented approaches to gathering descriptions from individuals that are perhaps better equipped to interrogate the phenomenological real, the most notable being Spiegelberg's (1982) 'cooperative' or 'group' phenomenology. Spiegelberg's group data-gathering procedure brought individuals together in small groups ranging from six to ten people. The researcher would lead the group in the early stages, moving the process from initial individual descriptions by each

individual member to a final general structural description reflecting the group as a whole.

In developing the current data-gathering procedure, my own research draws upon the methodological innovations of Chen *et al.* (1999), Bloch (2000) and Rettie (2001) constructing a variant of the flow questionnaire procedure that makes use of open-ended group discussion (Wapner *et al.* 1999) as a method of eliciting richly descriptive contextualised accounts of pre- and post-flow experience from research participants. The contention here is that group discussion, with its emphasis on capturing diverse descriptions of individual experiences through multiple voices and perspectives and its attention to the context of the researched phenomenon, is ideally suited to help the researcher counter the neglect of context, allowing the detailed examination of flow experience in the leisure settings in which it occurs. But more than this, because obtaining descriptions of flow can be problematic (Bloch, 2000), an issue that is amplified by the fact that pre- and post-flow experience have remained, until now, un-defined and un-languaged in flow research, there is a very real need for the collective linguistic interpretation of experience that a group discussion mode of data collection necessitates (Spiegelberg, 1982).

3.7.5 Group Discussions

In the beginning, my foremost concern was of creating an environment conducive to authentic group discussion by minimising negative environmental-effect (Mischler, 1995). Environmental-effect is an active variable in shaping the character of interaction in the qualitative interview situation and must be given the requisite care and attention if it is not to impact negatively upon proceedings (Murray, 2000). All group discussions were, therefore, conducted in a space designated by participants

in the secure and familiar surroundings of the 'native venue' of each research sample group. These 'discussion spaces' were each arranged in a manner intended to optimise group interactivity. An example of the discussion space arrangement used for the table tennis group is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Table Tennis Discussion Space

It is important to note at this point that rather than conducting a single group discussion for each of the research groups it was decided that each group would be broken down into two smaller discussion groups. At a minimum, suggest Hughes and Dumont (1993), two groups are needed for each subset of the research population to ensure that the data obtained does not simply reflect the idiosyncrasies of a particular group. A smaller group format (between four and six individuals) also means participants each have more time to share their experiences and perspectives allowing, in theory, for richer descriptions of the phenomenon sought and in-depth exploration of key issues (Hughes and Dumont, 1993).

For the convenience of all parties involved, the sessions were arranged to take place at a time when participants would normally be at the venue, for example, rehearsals (amateur dramatics), training nights (table tennis), and staff meetings (voluntary coaches). Sessions were organised to run consecutively over a two to three hour period. The only exception was the second group discussion session with the voluntary sports coaches, which had to be rearranged due to staff training that had been overlooked at the time the sessions were originally arranged. Participants were asked to sign-up for a session time that best suited them with no more than five individuals allowed in each group so as to align with Hughes and Dumonts' previous instruction. Unfortunately, though not completely unexpected, three individuals (one amateur actor and two table tennis players) who had originally signed up to take part in the group discussions were unable to attend the dates set due to unforeseen familial and work-related obligations. However, apart from leaving an uneven number of participants in the amateur dramatic group, such absences did not upset the balance of the groups. Thus, each of the three sample groups consisted of between eight and ten participants allotted evenly (where possible) across two separate group discussion sessions (see Table 3).

Table 3: Group Discussion Timetable

	Date and Time		Number of Participants	
Sample Group	Group Discussion 1	Group Discussion 2	Group Discussion 1	Group Discussion 2
Amateur Dramatics	28th March 7-8pm	28th March 8-9pm	5	4
Table Tennis	24th April 6-6.55pm	24th April 7-7.55pm	4	4
Volunteer Sports Coaches	18th April 11am-12noon	19th May 11am-12noon	5	5

3.7.6 Data-gathering Procedure:

In order to encourage conversation and to create as comfortable an atmosphere as possible for group discussion, research participants were asked what they found most enjoyable about their involvement in amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and voluntary sports coaching. From here, and again following on from the innovative success of Chen *et al.* (1999), Bloch (2000), and Rettie (2001), in order to introduce the flow phenomenon, each group was first shown a 'concept board' containing the three quotations found in Csikszentmihalyi's original operationlisation of the flow questionnaire (shown below) for brief perusal and thereafter put aside.

"... My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems..."

"... My concentration is like breathing. I never think of it. I am really oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring, or the house could burn down or something like that. When I start, I really do shut out the whole world. Once I stop, I can let it back in again..."

"I am so involved in what I am doing, I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing".

The Flow Questionnaire
(Csikszentmihalyi, 1982; Delle Fave and Massimini, 1988)

group was asked whether or not they had had similar experiences (in any xt), and then whether the same experience had ever occurred during the 'target ty' (i.e. amateur dramatics, table tennis, voluntary coaching). This was followed dialogue concerning associations brought to mind by this material. The word r' was not used at any point in the discussions; instead groups were asked about ilar experiences to those described on the concept board". This allowed for the riences of research participants to be freely expressed and discussed in terms opriate and significant to a particular group, and, in so doing, provided direct ss to the language and concepts participants used to structure their experiences ghes and Dumont, 1993).

As participants described and discussed their experiences of flow, I asked sequent questions based on the content of what had been said to help participants ocusing on the experiences they were describing (Polkinghorne, 1989). However, ilst each of the groups would eventually provide an array of rich descriptions of w-related leisure experience, it was the voluntary sports coaches who struggled ·ly on to relate to the flow statements presented. A number of the coaches found it rd to focus on their own experiences, initially responding with the claim that they d never before encountered that kind of experience: "It's not about me, it's about ə individual or group I'm working with" claimed one coach; "all I am concentrating ι is the group I am coaching – I don't come into it" mentioned another. These ımments were themselves interesting as they revealed something about the nature of .e voluntary sports coaching experience, in that unlike theatre acting or playing table ·nnis, where participants are able to focus on their own performances, the coach's ttention is more often than not shared between themselves and the individual or

group being coached. However, once other coaches in the group had offered and discussed examples of their own similar experiences, the same individuals appeared to grasp the premise of what was being asked of them, eventually offering their own contributions and perspectives.

The remaining groups claimed in part to recognise the type of experience at issue, with some participants responded by expressing some doubts, asking the researcher or other group members (which was more often the case), whether their conception of their experience responded to that described in the concept board. Here, the strengths of a group discussion format are clearly laid out, for 'groups are not intimidating for participants, shared experiences "spark off" others and can be especially useful for topics where people are not in touch with or able to articulate their motivations, feelings and opinions' or where 'researchers wish to understand something that is not a matter of conscious importance in everyday life' (Morgan, 1988, p. 58). Such strengths are particularly salient given flow's aforementioned elusive nature and the fact that each activity capable of producing flow does so in ways unique to it exposing the possibility of individual and/or activity specific differences in how flow is experienced by participants (Jackson, 1992).

When it became clear that group members had no further comments concerning their own or others' descriptions, the focus of the discussion turned toward what happens before and after such an experience. Initially, I asked variations on "what happens before such an experience", "how does this experience begin?", or "how is this experience reached?". And then, "what happens after such an experience?". In each case, I attempted to allow dialogue to emerge wherein participants' descriptions and comments dictated the nature and direction of

conversation. The validity of this emergent dialogue turns, in large part, on the skill of

the researcher to facilitate genuine, in-depth group discussion (Thomas and Pollio,

2001). I had gained past experience moderating research-related group interviews

through the data collection and evaluation phases of my Masters research, though the

open-ended nature of the current procedure meant my intervention was purposefully

kept at a minimum so as not to disrupt the natural 'flow' (pun intended) of dialogue

within the groups. The intention here was to emphasise participants' perspectives on

and the collaborative exploration of the nuances and complexities of flow experience

whilst reducing any perceived hierarchical barriers between the researcher and

research participants so as to encourage genuine dialogue between group members.

It is important to note, that whilst phenomenological researchers are urged to

bracket presuppositions concerning participants' experience which arise from science

or other sources external to their life-world, in order to facilitate the authentic social

interaction which will reveal rich descriptions of the phenomenon of interest, certain

assumptions are not at any stage bracketed (Ashworth, 1996). The first of these

assumptions includes the belief that the research participant is a competent human

being whose experiences of their life-world are open to empathetic understanding.

The second assumption is that reciprocity of 'mental' perspectives is possible. The

assumption of reciprocity of perspectives 'is an essential prerequisite of interaction

and of the description of the life-world based on it' (Ashworth, 1996: p. 13) allowing

for intersubjective validation of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Such validation occurs

through a process described by Husserl (1999: p. 163) as 'intersubjective

communication':

In reciprocal understanding, my experiences and experiential acquisitions enter into contact with those of others, similar to the contact between individual series of experiences within my experiential life... a verification is brought about or at least is certain in advance as possibly attainable by everyone.

In intersubjective communication individuals test out their understandings of each other and their knowledge of a phenomenon. In the back and forth of social interaction a continuing alteration of validity occurs as individuals articulate and describe their experiences. The challenge is to discover what is really true of the phenomenon through interpersonal knowledge and experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Group conversation was only interrupted when I sought to make certain of the meaning of particular comments or when a shift in focus was required (Thomas and Polio, 2001). Phenomenological protocol calls for the researcher to avoid using the probe "why" because such questions 'shift the dialogue away from describing an experience to a more abstract theoretical discussion' (Pollio *et al.* 1997: p. 30). Instead, the researcher asked questions such as "what was that like for you?" or prompted participants to "tell me more" or "go on" to ensure participants described their experiences/comments in as much detail as possible. All questions emerged from the dialogue as it unfolded; conversation thus proceeded in a different manner for each of the group discussions. As is the nature of natural dialogue, the unfolding conversation was non-linear; it was not uncommon for descriptions and issues discussed in earlier stages of the session to reappear at a later point as research participants sought to emphasise the significance of certain aspects of their experience. An assumption is that causal or personally relevant issues will emerge repeatedly throughout the dialogue (Kvale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1989).

For the most part, research participants responded positively to the freedom of discussion encouraged by the researcher producing amicable, free-flowing, and insightful conversation. However, on occasion such freedom of discussion lead to a group side-tracking from the topic of interest or certain group members dominating the conversation. A case in point is the amateur dramatic group wherein management of the inherent egoic nature of the cohort often proved problematic. The issue was not so much ensuring each member made a contribution to the discussion as keeping the group on message. There was a tendency for certain members in each of the discussion groups to embark on elaborate descriptions of 'that time when I completely forgot my lines' or 'the time when I had the audience in stitches', making for some particularly verbose and un-focused passages of discussion. This is illustrative of why it is important that the researcher does not totally abandon themselves to an open-ended mode of communication; 'this is because although the researcher should approach each participant as a co-researcher and therefore as an equal, they must from time to time intervene and provide some structure to the process' (Nesti, 2004: p. 42).

Group discussions ranged between 60 to 90 minutes (see Table 3) in duration, depending on how the group responded to the task. Following the advice of Thomas and Pollio (2001: p. 26), the researcher ended each group discussion by making certain that participants had nothing further to add to the discussion by asking "is there anything else anyone would like to say?".

This method of data-gathering, resting as it does upon the provision of a stimulus, may prompt the objection that participants were influenced in a particular direction in regard to their descriptions and conversations. The purpose of the current procedure, however, was not to obtain so-called 'pure data', but rather to explore

collaboratively with participants in a manner that would yield detailed descriptions of flow experiences that were as faithful as possible to each leisure setting. The quotations on the concept board provided a point of departure that was linked in scope (they were all recognised descriptors of flow), and provided the researcher with a standardised way of beginning each group discussion. Once underway, more detailed descriptions tended to quickly become structured by the group, rather than by the manner in which the topic had been introduced. The emphasis on interaction is key to this method, giving the procedure high face validity, as what research participants said could be confirmed or refined or contradicted within the group (Krueger, 2000).

All group discussions were audio-taped and transcribed in full. On average each group discussion converted into between 18 and 25 pages of dialogue. Taken together, this process resulted in over 100 pages of text, from where the focus of the project turned to the 'transcript as text' and the process of data analysis.

3.8 Phase Four - Text as Focus:

3.8.1 Reconstructing the Told from the telling: A narrative for further analysis (June 2006 – February 2007)

During the transcription process there came a realisation that was to have a significant affect, not just upon the ensuing process of data analysis, but would, in large part, shape how research findings were to be presented and interpreted in subsequent chapters (Chapters Five to Eight). It had become clear very early on in the transcription process that research participants, due to the open-ended manner in which the group discussions had proceeded, did not tell of their experiences in a temporal order. To reiterate, a concept board had been used to introduce research

participants to the flow experience and stimulate initial dialogue amongst the groups. It was not until after this initial dialogue that the groups were asked to discuss what happens before and after flow. Equally, with the inevitable give and take of social interaction, participants often digressed from a unitary telling of a particular aspect of experience or made general comments without providing any real temporal markers. Taken together, this made for a rather disjointed and incoherent set of accounts and particularly difficult to get any real sense of the 'process' of experiencing flow. It was at this point that I discovered that because each group discussion had followed a similar structure, it was possible to separate each transcript into three broad discussion themes; 1) descriptions of flow experience; 2) descriptions of experience before flow, and; 3) descriptions of experience after flow. From here, I set about reassembling each account into a chronologically ordered series of events – descriptions of pre-flow experience, descriptions of flow experience, and finally, descriptions of post-flow experience, reconstructing 'the told from the telling(s)' which then became 'the narrative for further analysis' (Mischler, 1995: p. 95).

This process yielded six narrative accounts (one for each group discussion session conducted) which were subsequently analysed in accordance with phenomenological principles.

3.8.2 Phenomenological Data Analysis

According to Polkinghorne (1989: p. 50), data analysis is 'the core stage of research efforts in phenomenological inquiry'; its purpose in the context of the present study was to derive from the collection of narrative accounts, attained through the data-gathering, a description of the essential features of pre and post flow experience. There is a general consensus in the phenomenological research literature (see

Ashworth, 1996; Charmaz, 2006a; Cresswell, 1994; Giorgi, 1986; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al. 1997; Polkinghorne, 1989; Spinelli, 1992; van Manen, 1998) that a phenomenological data analysis procedure contains four essential steps: Expressed most generally, they are: (1) reading the entire transcript in order to get a general sense of the whole account; (2) once a sense of the whole has been grasped, the researcher returns to the beginning and re-reads the text with the aim of discriminating the constitutive 'meaning-units' of the phenomenon being researched; (3) when 'meaning-units' have been delineated, the researcher re-visits each one in turn expressing the psychological insight contained in each. This is particularly significant for those 'meaning-units' that are revelatory of the target phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989); (4) the final step involves the researcher synthesising all of the 'transformed meaning-units' into a single 'consistent statement' regarding the experience(s) being described. Each of these steps along with other key components characteristic of the current analysis process is now discussed in further detail.

Step 1: Read for sense of whole. Although this seems an obvious first step to make, it is important to make explicit that 'the phenomenological perspective is an holistic one, and so one does need to know the global sense of the description before proceeding further (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: p. 33). This step involved me reading each account as many times as was necessary to get a sound grasp of the whole. It was at this stage that I realised the true significance of reconstructing earlier transcripts into orderly narratives. Doing so enabled me to read over the narrative accounts in a more-or-less temporal order, generating a better feel for the nature of the text. The general sense gained through this initial reading of the narrative accounts is neither queried nor made explicit in any way. This step functions, primarily, to foreground the next step, the discrimination of 'meaning-units'.

Step 2: Discrimination of Meaning-Units. From a pragmatic viewpoint the researcher cannot analyse a whole narrative simultaneously; it must be broken down into manageable units (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006). Returning to the beginning, the researcher re-reads the narrative account, this time dividing the text into units that 'seem to express a self-contained meaning from a psychological perspective' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 53). Since flow is a psychological phenomenon, it seemed logical that the units be made with psychological criteria in mind. A division is made directly on to the text whenever the researcher, upon re-reading the narrative, becomes aware of a transition in meaning, for instance, a change in subject matter or a change in activities being described (Giorgi, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988). In the case of the present analysis, though transitions in meaning did occur within individual descriptions, these typically coincided with a shift in speaker. This procedure led to the exclusion of a number of descriptions that did not fulfil the demands of the analysis (Bloch, 2000). Some descriptions were excluded because they were too 'thin', lacking any real phenomenological detail, others were excluded because the descriptions given were too abstract in character, not having reference to or being grounded in a particular, concrete process of experience. My unfamiliarity with the practicalities of a phenomenological mode of data analysis meant that on occasion I excluded too little, keeping or overlooking passages of text that would later be cut from the transcript. My naivety meant that the whole data analysis process was extremely time consuming as I checked and re-checked each of the transcripts to ensure that only descriptions of what appeared to be the key meaning-structures remained.

Although the researcher reads from the perspective of their discipline (in this case leisure psychology), care must be taken that each text be treated 'as a naïve and

nontheoretical presentation of the subject's experiences and to seek those divisions that are, in fact, of the subject's own experience' (Polkinghorne, 1988: pp. 53-54). Each division made is referred to as a 'meaning-unit' and are constituents of the experience being described 'not elements, in that they retain their identity as contextual parts of the experience' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 54). It should be noted here that the making of meaning units is 'a practical step that will help the achievement of the subsequent step' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: p. 33); at no point during this step is the subject's own language changed in any way.

From the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology, a number of interpretative procedures intersperse the analysis process to allow the researcher to remain at the level of lived experience and to facilitate more accurate interpretation of data gathered. The first of these procedures is that of bracketing.

Bracketing: Analyst Triangulation. An overview of bracketing was provided in the earlier discussion of 'bracketing and bias exploration' (3.5.3). The procedure of bracketing is somewhat unique to the phenomenological method. At this stage of the research process it involves a process of analyst triangulation (Thompson *et al.* 1989; Cresswell, 1994). Typically, this process involves the researcher and other individuals familiar with the tenets of phenomenological research, though it is not imperative that these individuals be experts in phenomenological methods (Pollio *et al.* 1997). In the case of this research, the process of analyst triangulation was manifest in dialogue between myself and my supervisory team – a natural part of the general doctoral process. These conversations are a useful way of collecting and gathering the interpretive insights of others to a research text (van Manen, 1998). The aim of the process, according to van Manen (1998: p. 101), 'is to try and formulate the

underlying themes or meanings that inhere in the text or that still inhere in the phenomenon, thus allowing the researcher to see the limits of his/her present vision and to transcend these limits'. Put another way, it facilitates 'bracketing' of the researcher's assumptions by offering a broader perspective as well as noting any pattern or patterns that the researcher may have overlooked (Dale, 1996). This process closely resembles that of 'construct validation' advocated by naturalistic researchers (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1985) wherein the interpretive process used by the researcher is evaluated so as to assess the trustworthiness of the study based on the researcher's interpretations. In the context of my own research, this interpretative procedure was particularly effective because it helped me avoid focusing on one particular aspect of the transcript while failing to see others.

Step 3: Transformation of Meaning Units. Having delineated the meaning units in step 2, the researcher attempts to express, as simply as possible and in his/her own words, the meaning that dominates each unit. This should be a concise description of the meaning unit and stands as the first of two transformations of the data from the subject's words to the researcher's words (Pokinghorne, 1988). The researcher tries to state in an explicit way the implicit psychological aspects of the meaning unit, allowing the analysis procedure to 'reveal meanings that are lived but not necessarily clearly articulated or in full awareness' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006, p. 34). As captured in Figure 8, which shows an excerpt of analysed transcript of a table tennis groups discussing what occurs for them before flow, this first-level transformation of meaning-units was recorded by hand directly on to the transcripts During this process I read and re-read all of the meaning-units derived from each

group discussion several times, on each occasion refining my own descriptions of them[5].

review of Personal Agenda

QG: it takes time to get my concentration at a level that I know is *takes time to read* right. Sometimes I will stop and use deep breathes to help me *their place .* concentrate on an up-coming game. — *Awareness of the desired level of concentration*

SS: it does take time. Sometimes it will take you till the second or *takes time to become* third game to actually get going. But then you're there and you're *concentrating — to* concentrating on nothing but the table, the ball, your opponent. — *reach their place .*

A Management Forward .

KW: it doesn't happen all the time, sometimes you just don't reach *no guarantees —* that level of concentration, for whatever reason, and you come away *there is need of* having just gone through the motions. — *An experience which* *needs to be managed.*

KW: as I knock up I try and set out some sort of strategy of how I'm *Approach is* going to approach the game. What strategy I form is very much *determined by* dependent on how I'm feeling. (asked to expand) If I've been *feelings — a* knocking up and I don't feel right or I'm just not hitting the ball as I *matter of experience* would like, I will tend to concentrate on just hitting the ball for the *matter of experience* first few points, then go from there. If I'm feeling good in the knock- *— main purpose of* up then I may decide to go for a more attacking strategy from the start. *their enjoyment .*

JR: sometimes if things aren't going to plan then you have to assess it *Evaluation of the* as you go along. — *Review requirements — no fixed situation* *— Structured*

QG: for me there are two steps, firstly, I ready my mind, secondly, I *fixed mental +* ready my body. (asked to expand) I will prepare mentally by going *then physical* through my shots, almost going over the game in my head before I even hit a ball. Then, I will start knocking up, and physically go *Preparation* through those shots. *Combined behaviour — Rehearsal Programmes* *— Pre flow ?*

Figure 8: Excerpt of analysed transcript showing first-level transformation of meaning-units

These transformations are necessary, suggests Giorgi (1985: pp. 17-18), 'because the descriptions by the naïve subjects express in a cryptic way multiple realities, and we want to elucidate the psychological aspects in a depth appropriate for the understanding of the events'. To this end, and before proceeding further, I had to be sure that the descriptive interpretations of the 'meaning-units' were an accurate reflection of the research participants' flow experiences.

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[5] All research participants were allocated false initials when transcribing group discussions in order to maintain anonymity as well as to streamline the transcription and initial analysis process. Each research participant was later assigned a pseudonym (e.g. Actor, Player, or Coach) to maintain anonymity in latter stages of the research.

Clarifying the Linguistic Meaning of Meaning-units. Returning to each leisure setting, I asked participants to read over certain portions of their own descriptions, about whose meaning I was unsure, and encouraged them to clarify their meaning, if further clarification was necessary, in subsequent individual interviews. Caelli (2001) suggests that the word 'unsure', rather than 'interpret' ought to be used in such conversations 'to convey openness about further interpretation or clarification and to avoid imposing the researcher's meanings on them' (p. 278). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) warn that any feedback received from such measures cannot be taken as conclusive validation or refutation of the researcher's interpretations. Rather they claim that such a validation process should simply be treated as 'yet another source of data and insight' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: p. 230). On many occasions this feedback led to a greater degree of clarity regarding a meaning-unit, but in the majority of cases participants found the researcher's interpretation to be accurate.

A second transformation of the data aims to describe what took place in ways that are psychologically sensitive, 'articulating and rendering visible the psychological meanings that play a role in the experience' (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006: p. 35). The researcher works with the meaning units (step 2) and their first (descriptive) transformations considering each unit in light of the present research problem and draws out 'those aspects that are related to the topic under investigation and re-describes these aspects in the language from the perspective of psychological science' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 54). Such transformations take place through a process of reflection and imaginative variation. The task here is to seek possible meanings through the utilisation of imagination. Grasping a full understanding of a phenomenon, suggests van Manen (1998: p. 78), 'is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning'. Making meaning of a task or lived experience, he

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continues, 'is more accurately a process of insightful invention and discovery' (Ibid:

p. 78). The thrust of this process, suggests Moustakas (1994: p. 45), 'is away from

facts and measurable entities and towards meanings and essences; in this instant,

intuition is not empirical but purely imaginative in character'. In this phase of the

analysis process the aim is to develop structural descriptions of an experience. The

researcher imagines possible structures of time, space, causality, and relationships to

self and others so as to reveal the underlying and causal factors that account for what

is being experienced (Moustakas, 1994). As with first-level transformations, second-

level transformation of meaning-units was recorded by hand directly on to transcripts,

as is exemplified in Figure 9 for the same transcript excerpt presented in Figure 8.

QG: it takes time to get my concentration at a level that I know is right. Sometimes I will stop and use deep breathes to help me concentrate on an up-coming game.

SS: it does take time. Sometimes it will take you till the second or third game to actually get going. But then you're there and you're concentrating on nothing but the table, the ball, your opponent.

KW: it doesn't happen all the time, sometimes you just don't reach that level of concentration, for whatever reason, and you come away having just gone through the motions.

KW: as I knock up I try and set out some sort of strategy of how I'm going to approach the game. What strategy I form is very much dependent on how I'm feeling. (asked to expand) If I've been knocking up and I don't feel right or I'm just not hitting the ball as I would like, I will tend to concentrate on just hitting the ball for the first few points, then go from there. If I'm feeling good in the knock-up then I may decide to go for a more attacking strategy from the start.

JR: sometimes if things aren't going to plan then you have to assess it as you go along.

QG: for me there are two steps, firstly, I ready my mind, secondly, I ready my body. (asked to expand) I will prepare mentally by going through my shots, almost going over the game in my head before I even hit a ball. Then, I will start knocking up, and physically go through those shots.

Figure 9: Excerpt of analysed transcript showing second-level transformation of meaning-units

For van Manen (1982), these secondary transformations signify a movement from simple description to early theorising, what he terms as 'phenomenological' theorising. In a deep sense, this early theorising is an attempt to achieve phenomenological understanding of experience which goes beyond language and description (van Manen, 1977; 1982). This theorising finds by means of psychological language, 'the means to speak to the unspeakable and to unveil the structure that makes it possible' (van Manen, 1982: p. 299), to make what was previously un-languaged languaged.

Step 4: Synthesis of Meaning Units. The final step of the analysis is for the researcher to synthesise and integrate the fundamental textual and structural insights contained in the transformed meaning units (step 3) into a consistent description of the psychological structure of the overall experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). In this synthesis all transformed meaning units are taken into account, the general criterion being 'that all of the meanings of the transformed meaning units are at least implicitly contained in the general description' (Giorgi, 1985: p. 19). The construction of this general description omits the particulars of the specific (leisure) situations reported by research participants in their primary descriptions of pre- and post-flow experience. Instead, this descriptive statement brings together those aspects of the experience that are 'transsituational' or 'descriptive of the experience' in general (Polkinghorne, 1988). It is the task of the researcher to glean from earlier textual and structural transformations 'an accurate essential description of their contents and the particular structural relationships that coheres the elements into a unified experience' producing a descriptive statement that 'transcends the specific experiences on which they are based' (Polkinghorne, 1989: p. 50-51).

This last step proved particularly difficult for two reasons: first, as opposed to more traditional research perspectives, wherein convictions are predetermined, the phenomenological researcher is free to express findings in multiple ways (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2006); secondly, add to this the fact that the process of choosing how to express research findings is left, in a very real sense, to 'chance interpretation because the process is not explicated in detail in the literature' (Caelli, 2001: p. 277).

As with all research perspectives, how the findings are presented is, to a large extent, dependent upon the nature and overarching intentions of the research project. It became evident that with the aim of the present study being to capture a descriptive understanding of the holistic process of experiencing flow, what was actually being analysed was the 'narrative meaning' (Polkinghorne, 1988) ascribed to flow experience by research participants. A recognised constituent of the realm of meaning, narrative meaning is created by noting that 'something is part of some whole and that something is the cause of something else' (Polkinghorne (1988: p. 4). In his book 'Narrative knowing and the human sciences', Polkinghorne (1988: p. 6) posits that 'narrative meaning is focused on those rudimentary aspects of experience that concern human actions or events that affect human beings'. He adds 'the meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode. The episode needs to include both some end point as well as the contributions that the events and actions made in bringing about of delaying the achievement of that end point' (Polkinghorne, 1988: p. 6).

Van Manen (1998), one of the authorities on narrative forms of phenomenological research, claims that such meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered and can only be communicated textually, by way of an organised narrative.

Though little has been written about the constructive endeavour of deriving narrative from phenomenological data, Caelli (2001) discovered that deriving narratives from transcripts for the purposes of data representation is, in fact, an accepted way of proceeding in phenomenological research. In the context of the present research, the appeal was related to narrative inquiry's open-ended, experiential, and quest-like qualities (Conle, 2000). What follows is an explicit retelling of the process undertaken in the development of narratives of pre- and post-flow experience.

3.8.3 Participant as Focus

Developing Narratives of experience. Narratives, notes van Manen (1998: p. 78), 'are carefully crafted textual accounts of experiences in which the essential meanings of an experience are embedded'. The generation of such texts, suggests Willis (2004: p. 9) usually involves 'a prolonged reflective writing and re-writing process in which the researcher tries to construct a composite anecdote based on several various experiences of a phenomenon, in which the essential meanings of the phenomenon are made evident'. For the present study, this process began with the researcher re-reading the previously transformed meaning units (steps 2 and 3) from all six narrative accounts so as to identify and understand the common essential components. This is a necessary step to make, suggests Giorgi (1985: pp. 17-18), 'because the descriptions by the naïve subjects express in a cryptic way multiple realities, and we want to elucidate the psychological aspects in a depth appropriate for the understanding of the events'.

From here, my task was to piece together, using the participants' own words, verbatim as far as possible, a single representative narrative across all three groups for

both pre-flow and post-flow experience. In doing so, particular attention was given to the criteria of 'connected succession' (Conle, 2000). In the act of constructing narratives of experience, connected succession or temporal ordering involves establishing an 'order of correspondence between a sequence of real events and their ordering in the narrative account' expressed through attributions of meaning to sequence (Mischler, 1995: p. 90). Because these narrative accounts must have a point, reference is made to beginnings, middles and endings, terms which imply more than points in time, referring also to 'the meaningful and recognisable boundaries of a passage that give a stretch of talk or text a unity and coherence' (Mischler, 1995: p. 91). Though I was continuously driven by a sense of the whole, what counted most of all were the constitutive-meanings that actions and events have for individuals in relation to the whole (Conle, 2000). The transformed meaning units from all six narrative accounts deemed to best represent the common essential components or structures of both pre- and post-flow experience were transferred on to separate concept boards (see Figure 10) so as to allow me to see all of the meaning units together and get a better sense of the whole experience being described. These concept boards formed the basis on which early drafts of the narratives of pre- and post-flow experience were constructed.
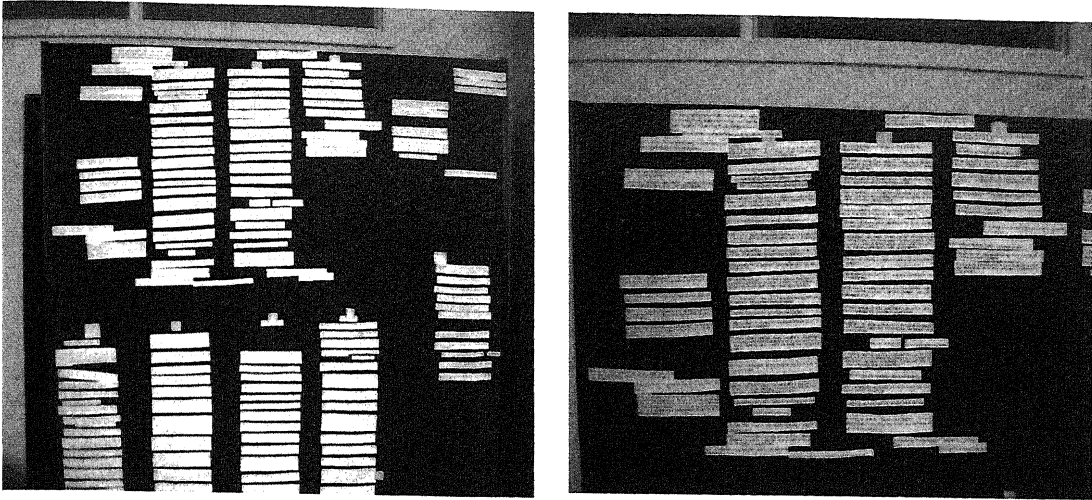
Figure 10: Concept boards showing early Pre-flow (left) and Post-flow (right) narrative construction

This excursion into narrative writing can be seen as an attempt at a departure from purely propositional 'phenomenological' writing toward the more expressive writing process of hermeneutic text-making (Willis, 2004). Here phenomenological data analysis makes use of a second interpretative procedure known as 'the hermeneutic procedure' (van Manen, 1998) that has taken its place within contemporary phenomenological research as a fruitful approach to the work of turning phenomenological data into living texts (Willis, 2004). The 'hermeneutic circle' (see Gummesson, 2000) overcomes the conventional linear character of reading a piece of text by having the researcher understand earlier portions of the passage in relation to latter portions and, conversely, to understand latter portions in the context of preceeding ones (Pollio *et al.* 1997). My own hermeneutic procedure spanned the entire length of the data analysis journey, from the initial read through of the narratives of further analysis, to the piecing together of first draft narratives of pre- and post-flow experience, and continued into the final phase of analysis wherein these first draft narratives were returned to each research group for comments. This final phase of the data analysis procedure is now discussed in further detail.

Reporting Narratives of Experience to Participants. To ensure that such narratives are as experience-near as possible, the researcher must espouse the stance of the research participants 'to take up a position in the world of their meanings and to strive to articulate faithfully and precisely the realities portrayed' (van Manen, 1998: p. 46). According to Caelli (2001), the most accurate and reliable way of staying at the level of the lived experience, as described by research participants, is for the researcher to involve participants in the drafting of narratives, continually seeking feedback as to whether descriptions provide an accurate account of their experience.

I thus liaised with the gatekeepers from each leisure group setting-up and inviting willing and available individuals who had taken part in the earlier group discussions to attend an informal follow-up session on-site to discuss research findings; this lead to four members from each group who had taken part in the original group discussions committing to this, the final stage of the research process. In these sessions individuals were briefed about the objectives of the exercise and then presented with a first draft of the pre- and post-flow narratives of experience. Upon presenting each narrative, participants were asked whether the description represented an accurate reflection of their experiences. Subsequent conversations often resulted in greater clarity about a passage, though this was mainly the case during earlier stages as each of the narratives started to take form. Anything added or deleted as a consequence of this feedback was recorded and incorporated into a revised draft which was then returned to participants from each of the research groups for further comments. Evidence of this procedure along with comments made by research participants are captured and discussed in Chapter Six. Proceeding in this way, the researcher returned to the same four participants of each of the leisure

settings on three separate occasions, over a period of six weeks, each time presenting a revised narrative for consideration.

Due mainly to my relative inexperience with narrative modes inquiry and the fact that I was attempting to construct a single narrative representative of the pre- and post-flow experiences of amateur actors, hobbyist table tennis players and volunteer sports coaches, I was often accused of taking certain portions of a draft narrative out of context. On such occasions research participants were asked to clarify the meaning of the portion of narrative at issue, with their feedback used to formulate a revised narrative which was subsequently re-presented to participants for further comment. Though it proved particularly laborious, this process was repeated until such time when it was clear that there seemed to be a general consensus across all three sample groups that each narrative was an accurate description of their pre- and post-flow experience. The number of total visits varied from four for both the volunteer sports coaching and table tennis groups to five for the amateur acting group, due to rearranged discussions between two of the participating actors' who had been absent from rehearsals. It is important to note here that without this final step, the validity of the study would have been questionable, leaving ample opportunity for researcher bias (Ashworth, 1993).

3.9 Issues of Validity in Phenomenological Research

Whilst approaching research from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology affords opportunities to expand the scope of psychological inquiry to regions not amenable to other types of inquiry, it also raises particular challenges with regard to the notion of validity. The phenomenological orientation of this research process means the issue of validity is approached from a

more general perspective than is typical of mainstream social science research (Polkinghorne, 1989). In phenomenological research 'validity is placed in the realm of human practice, where absolute certainty is not a requirement' (Pollio *et al.* 1997: p. 53). In an attempt to establish the validity of the current research process, I drew upon a comprehensive guide to the issue of validity in phenomenological research provided by Pollio and his colleagues. According to Pollio *et al.* (1997: p. 53), when approaching research from this perspective:

> Validity is not determined by the degree of correspondence between description and reality but by whether convincing evidence has been marshalled in favour of the aptness of the description... An evaluator would not ask, "how can I be certain these themes describe the phenomenon as it really is for the participant?" Rather, the questions would now become, "is there convincing evidence for believing that the description affords insight into the experiential world of the participant?"

For the purposes of phenomenological interpretation, the criterion of validity becomes whether the reader, when adopting the same view as the researcher, would be able to see textual evidence supporting the interpretation and whether the goal of providing a first-person understanding was attained (Polkinghorne, 1989). Evidential support can be evaluated in terms of two validatory concerns represented in Figure 11:

Methodological Concerns ⟷ Experiential Concerns

(Rigorous)   (Appropriate)   (Plausible)   (Illuminating)

Figure 11: Phenomenological Validity (cited in Pollio *et al.* 1997: p. 55)

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The methodological concerns focus on the procedural structure of the research, while the experiential concerns focus more specifically on the meaning and significance of the interpretative results (Pollio *et al.* 1997). To help ensure the researcher provides appropriate description that allows the reader to see the same things, rigorous and appropriate methods that produce plausible and illuminating insights into the experiences of the participants must be used. Pollio *et al.* note that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two in that 'the more rigorous and appropriate the methodology, the more plausible and illuminating the results. Conversely, if the study generates highly plausible and illuminating results, the more disposed the reader will be to judge the method as appropriate, and perhaps rigorous' (Pollio *et al.* 1997: p. 55). They go on to warn 'well-executed qualitative procedures that do not generate meaningful results are technique without soul... only when both criteria are met does phenomenological description attain the rigour and insight that it aspires to attain and that are likely to convince researchers of its significance' (Pollio *et al.* 1997: pp. 55-56).

The emergent research process discussed in this chapter has been shown to meet favourably with these conditions. In fact, upon reflection, it could be said that the entire research process had been an exercise in maintaining authenticity of description. Endeavouring to construct experience-near narratives of pre- and post-flow, the researcher adopted a cooperative and collaborative stance, in which participants were treated largely as equals, actively engaging in a process of mutual telling and retelling and reliving of flow-related leisure experience. Being collaboratively involved in both the data gathering and analysis phases of this research process gave participants the opportunity to voice honestly and truthfully their perceptions of pre- and post-flow experience. Providing such opportunity for

truth of description enabled the construction of the most experience-sensitive portrayal of pre- and post-flow possible.

Interpreting data in the participants' own language, rather than the researcher's language, is a methodological criterion in phenomenological research that must be adhered to whenever possible (Pollio *et al.* 1997). Language is the principal means subjects have with which to interact symbolically with each other and for the researcher to understand the meanings shared by these individuals whose experiences are being studied (Denzin, 1989). For van Manen (1998: p. 47), 'only language this coherent can adequately achieve the aim of interpretative and expressive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail; only language this perceiving can adequately tell the reader what the researcher and participants believe to be true'. The use of various checking procedures, such as research interviews (analyst triangulation) and returning to participants for feedback during data interpretation (respondent validation) provided additional means for the verification of the interpretation of data. Add to this the use of narrative meaning which, though initially considered as a medium of data representation, turned out to have analytical significance, enabling the researcher to trace out, for the first time, the temporal and sequential meaning of events that coalesce to form pre- and post-flow experience. Privileging narrative meaning appears to have overcome earlier concerns, voiced by Braud (1998), of uncertainty when using phenomenological methods about the actual sources of experiences and events and about the contribution or importance of potential relationships or connections among the experience and events. This knowledge was to prove essential in accurately describing and understanding the psychological processes by which individuals 'live-out' such experience, which was, after all, the main objective of the present research process.

3.10 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has told of how the originality of the research topic necessitated the evolvement of an equally original research design. Proceeding from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology, through the contextual lens of Stebbins' serious leisure framework (1992a and 1998), a collaborative, participant-centred research process emerged; a research process that has enabled the researcher to capture nuanced descriptions of flow experience that are stringent in meaning and interpretation. In addition, the chapter has documented the analytical use of narrative meaning in the derivation of descriptions of the specific situations and action sequences that constitute pre- and post-flow experience.

This chapter has highlighted a very real need for more open and clear discussion of how to approach flow research and has demonstrated some of the possible rewards of 'getting back to the experiences themselves', to the actual experiencing of flow, as lived by individuals. However, as with all methodologies, especially those newly-emerged, there are a number of notable drawbacks to using phenomenological methods. Firstly, when combined in the present research process, all of the factors described seemed to make the already lengthy and laborious process of phenomenological research even more time consuming. This is a matter for concern as it may limit the researcher with respect to the number of individuals able to participate in a single study, though this is perhaps to be expected given the exploratory and emergent nature of the research approach. Secondly, the open-ended format of researcher-participant and participant-participant interactions did, on occasion, encourage some groups/individuals to talk endlessly about a particular subject at the expense of addressing other areas of experience and the views of others

in the group. The open-ended nature of dialogue had with research participants throughout the research process is a potential drawback in that, such is the nature of natural conversation, different researchers undertaking the same research process may collect conflicting data.

Even with these limitations, the research process outlined in this chapter has been shown to be a genuine alternative for researchers interested in the intricacies of flow experience. For participants who do not feel comfortable talking about themselves in a more structured interview-type format, the informal group discussions implemented in this research are an effective way of creating more true-to-life social interaction where individuals may feel more at ease speaking about their own experiences. There is also an interpersonal parity between researcher and participant where the researcher is cast more as a student open and willing to learn about the topic being explored.

It is certainly not the author's assertion that this be the only way in which to approach the present topic since portions of the emergent research process (i.e. the use of a narrative mode of inquiry) represent uncharted territory for flow-related research, and, as such, are open to discussion and dispute. However, in this chapter I have endeavoured to present a convincing and creditable account of the process undertaken in the hope that researchers will see the merits of such participant-centred methodology and be compelled to explore its possibilities for future flow research.

Having provided a detailed account of the research process undertaken, focus is turned in Chapter Four to the study context, and more specifically to understanding

how amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching qualify as

sources of serious leisure for research participants.

Chapter Four: The Study Context

4.1 Introduction

Amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching have highly different origins as leisure activities, as well as offering participants contrasting leisure experiences. It is necessary then that each be considered separately as a source of serious leisure so as to grasp their individual nature. The histories of the three sample leisure groups, along with descriptions of each as a form of serious leisure are presented in this chapter. In order to help substantiate these descriptive accounts against the defining features of serious leisure activity, the chapter draws upon the comments of research participants gathered during primary observation (3.6) and group discussion sessions (3.7.5).

As outlined in Chapter Two (2.11.1), a serious leisure activity is defined by six distinctive qualities, found among amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers alike. One such quality is the need for a degree of *perseverance*. A second quality of serious leisure, as identified by Stebbins, is the 'tendency for amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers to have *careers* in their endeavours' (Stebbins, 2001a: p. 6). The construction and maintenance of careers often rest on a third quality of serious leisure: the requirement of *significant personal effort* based on specifically acquired knowledge, training, skills, or occasionally all three (Stebbins, 2001a). Stebbins's research also turned up eight *durable benefits* commonly found by amateurs in their chosen pursuits, namely: self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and long lasting physical products of the activity. A fifth quality that further defines the serious leisure concept is the *unique ethos* and *social world* that

evolves around each serious leisure activity. Stebbins based the sixth and final quality of serious leisure on evidence that participants in serious leisure activities *identify* strongly with their chosen pursuit - an identity that grows through substantial emotional, moral, and often physical investment.

The histories and descriptions presented in this chapter are short, intended only to provide a working knowledge of each activity-context to foreground the central focus of this research, that is, the documentation of pre- and post-flow experience, to be presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

4.2 St. Christopher's Players (Amateur Theatre)[6]

History

St. Christopher's Players amateur theatre group was founded in 1946 by members of a local church of the same name. The group is well-known in the town for performing comedies and farces, staging over 130 of them in their 60 year existence. Having moved to several venues over the years the group has come back to rehearse at the original church hall and perform regularly (twice annually – May and November) at the local amateur theatre. In the beginning, a handful of individuals would put on a single show a year for other members of the St. Christopher's church, rehearsing once a week at the church hall. From these humble beginnings, the group has evolved, with the number of registered members rising to more than twenty in 2006, and though many of the group maintain associations with the church, the group now functions as an established independent theatre group. Within the group there is an eclectic mix of ability and experience with a number of members having been trained professionally whilst the majority originally joined as complete novices and

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[6] The actual names of each of the participating groups (e.g. St. Christopher's Players) are used with the permission of group members.

continue to develop their skills. Over the years, the group has attracted a small following of faithful theatre goers, including family and friends and a number of amateur theatre enthusiasts, who regularly turn out to watch performances, making for what is a truly exclusive social world.

4.3 Amateur Acting as Serious Leisure

When initial contact was made with the group, a play was being rehearsed for a run of performances due to start in just over six weeks time. Typically, the group would hold between twenty and twenty-five rehearsals of two hours or more in length (including a technical and dress rehearsal) prior to a run of three performances given over a period of as many days. My own involvement in this process began just past the half-way point with eight rehearsals remaining before opening night. Through my interactions with group members it had become apparent that each of the actors was serious about their leisure. The seriousness of actors was evident in their orientation to their activities, in their talk about them, and perhaps most profoundly, their commitment in the search for the perfect performance. Previous research on classical amateur musicians (Stebbins, 1968, 1977), as well as amateur theatre (Stebbins, 1979), has shown the essence of amateurism to be situated in the social and attitudinal organisation of its practitioners. In accordance, to Stebbins's earlier categorisation (2.11.2), the majority of the group were essentially pure amateurs; they have never been professional nor do they have plans for pursuing that status in the future. Three members of the group had trained and spent a number of years in the professional ranks during their acting careers; they are post-professional today.

According to Stebbins (1992a), amateurs undertake activities where there is a professional counterpart, however, rather than simply being an unpaid, less-able

version of professionals, Stebbins suggests that amateurs and professionals are part of a complex interdependent network, the professional – amateur – public (P-A-P) network, wherein the relationships between professional and amateur are closer than that between the amateur and public (Green and Jones, 2005). Amateurs serve publics as professionals do, and, at times, even the same ones. For amateurs there is nearly always a public of some kind, though in the case of amateur acting this public tends to be quite small, consisting mainly of friends, neighbours, relatives and, occasionally other actors who may be part of the same local amateur circuit.

St. Christopher's players are a well-established and locally recognised amateur theatre group. At the time of this study the group was in its 61st season. In this time an ***intricate and complex social world*** has evolved around the group comprising many elements, including: specialised norms in the form of written and unwritten codes-of-conduct, values and beliefs regarding leisure lifestyles, as well as accepted performance standards and related shared expectations, forging, as a consequence, a ***unique social ethos.*** The following discussion excerpt captures well the nature of the group's social world:

> [Actor #2a[7]] We've been through a lot together as a group, and because of that we all know what's expected of us each time we put on a run of performances. We're in it together, we all want what's best for the group.
>
> [Actor #3a] Yeah, as a group I think we've seen it all. We've helped one another through everything from deaths of family and friends to divorces, we're more like a family than a theatre group really. But those experiences, those shared experiences have made us into who we are today [...] as a group and as individuals.

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[7] In this and later chapters, so as to ensure anonymity of the comments made in observation and group discussion sessions, research participants will be referred to as either Actor, Player, or Coach. These pseudonyms will also be accompanied by a number and letter (e.g. Actor #2a) to indicate the group session attended by the individual. For comments made during primary observation the pseudonyms will be accompanied by the letter (O), e.g. Actor(O).

[Actor #1a] Those shared experiences mean we all respect the tensions and hardships that come with being in amateur theatre, at times it's not easy admittedly, and that's when we rally together and support each other.

[Actor #2a] Yeah, I mean, we all muck in, even more so when there's a performance looming [...] I do enjoy building the set, it somehow makes the whole thing more real.

[Actor #3a] I've done the lot, from stage managing, to selling tickets, from building sets, to promoting our next show. I just love being involved, helping the group out in any way I can.

Since there is no paid staff, players become involved in the construction of the sets to be used for performances, making costumes, organised advertising for up-coming performances, and sell tickets, even in and around a taxing schedule of rehearsals and performances. Each of the actors were clearly devotees to their chosen avocation, committing a *significant amount of time and effort* to rehearsing and performing, with each playing at least three out of four performances over the last two seasons. Two actors tell of the considerable personal effort required to negotiate such a demanding schedule:

[Actor #5a] It can get pretty intense when you're closing in on opening night and we go from one, maybe two rehearsals a week to three, even four. It takes up so much of your time [...] all you can think about is the play, your lines, and what its going to feel like up on that stage. So you keep working at it, at your performance [...] I find I get to rehearsals earlier and earlier the closer we get to a performance because I just want to put everything into it. There are times when it's not much fun mind, those days when you're coming straight from a full day's work or something else you've got going on. On those occasions you just have to push on through because you know, in the end, you're going to enjoy yourself

[Actor #7b] I do enjoy the process of rehearsing and then putting on a performance. There's something deeply fulfilling to completing that process, but there's also periods in time when you really do just have to grin and bear it. I mean, I've experienced times when I'm just not getting the role I'm playing and because I know my performances aren't what they could be I lose confidence in my ability to act the part. It's taken me many years to realise that this is part and parcel of what we do and doesn't

necessarily reflect my competence as an actress; though it's still unpleasant.

Though occasionally, as these comments demonstrate, whether it due to a gruelling rehearsal schedule, or periods of low-self-confidence there may be ***need for group members to persevere***. Generally, however, the amateur actor, since they enjoy what they do, must persevere only when opposition to it is encountered at home or at work. Committed adult amateurs often struggle with the intractable problem of meshing their family and work life with that of their leisure, a phenomenon that Stebbins (1979) has termed 'positive role conflict'; the desire to be with family or at work, as well as at the theatre. This can take many forms, though the most common amongst the group was that associated with solving conflicts in the scheduling and meeting of family and occupational obligations, on the one hand, and those of their theatre involvement on the other, as is captured in the comments of one actor during a conversation had during a break in rehearsals:

> [Actor #3a] Things can get pretty intense leading up to a run of performances, which inevitably has an impact on other parts of your life. Purely because all you are thinking about, all you can think about, is opening night or that night's performance. But it's also a matter of time. I'll probably spend ten hours a week at rehearsals in the weeks leading up to that first performance. I can tell it gets to my wife sometimes, as she doesn't act and finds it hard to empathise with the level of commitment needed.

Coping with fatigue brought about by attempts to satisfy their various, often conflicting role obligations, was also a cause for tension as this actress describes:

> [Actor # 1a] Trying to balance being a working mum and amateur actress is hard work. There is always something or someone demanding your time and attention which wears you down till I'm just in bits at the end of a run. That's why I'll only do one show a year, anything more would simply be too much and would really put a strain on my family.

A number of the group had developed strategies for meeting or preventing negative reactions to their theatre commitments from a spouse or employer:

> [Actor #3a] I have, over the years, developed a kind of unwritten understanding with my wife. She allows me my indulgences when it comes to acting and has supported me in every show I have performed in. But I also make an effort to be supportive with her running. She is a member of a running club and runs most weekends. The running season spans from January to May time so I try and coordinate my acting so that I am performing in November and not May.

> [Actor #6b] I'm lucky inasmuch as I teach drama part-time at a local high school. This allows me to be flexible to a certain degree in when I perform. Me being an active member of a theatre group also goes down quite well with the school.

But many of the group were in a less flexible position. For instance, one actress compromises her theatrical interests by distancing herself from the group during those periods of the year when she knows her husband's and her own work commitments will intensify:

> [Actor #5a] My husband and I teach and so get very busy every year around May time, what with marking and parents evening, all the joys of being a teacher. I tend to commit to the November performances as to do both would be a real strain on our relationship.

Inevitably, there are occasions when these various obligations are simply never met, met late, or in a less-than-optimum way. For example, an actor recalls one occasion when his acting commitments very nearly lost him his job:

> [Actor #4a] I was playing the lead in this comedy, a few years ago now [...] it was quite a large part where I was never off stage for long so I had a ton of dialogue to remember. I remember I became obsessed with the part and started to rehearse my lines in the morning before work, in the car on the way in to work, during my lunch break – any opportunity I got really. In the end it got to the point where my head was so much on the performance that my boss took me to one side and said I needed to focus or else [...] The performances went really well, so not too bothered about it now.

The tensions and disappointments inherent in amateur acting, suggests Stebbins (1992a: p. 98), are what 'help make it worthwhile, if for no other reason than that the rewards and thrills he gets there gain in significance through the contrast'. *The accrual of rewards* of amateur acting fall into two classes: those that primarily benefit the player and those that primarily benefit his/her social life (Stebbins, 1992). Perhaps unsurprisingly, of the individual benefits to be had, self-expression, the intrinsic satisfaction of expressing one's ability well, was the most frequently mentioned, as is most eloquently depicted in the words of one actor:

> [Actor #6b] When I'm on stage and I'm performing well, it's like I'm released, like I'm allowed to be myself, at least myself as how I see me, if that makes any sense?

The sensation of finding one's 'true' or 'authentic' self is common to experiences regarded as leisure (Samdahl, 1988; Kleiber, 1999), where there is a clear association between leisure and being self or, in the words of Waterman (1993), 'personally expressive'. Many players believed their acting presented a unique opportunity to develop their talents (self-actualisation) and experience the personal fulfilment to be found in meeting the challenges inherent in the roles they play:

> [Actor #9b] I try and take roles that are different. Some people tend to stick to certain types of characters because that is what they know. But I make an active effort to be different characters when acting, I think that variety helps challenge me and also further develop my skills as an actor. I don't get that kind of opportunity anywhere else in life, just when I'm acting

When involved in a run of performances, however, players are not only concerned with the personal benefits contained therein, but also the successful coordination of the many different parts that come together when putting on a run of performances (group accomplishment); the skill with which they are enacted; the

appropriateness and authenticity of the scenery, lighting, and costumes; and the public's reaction to the performance. For example, one actor tells of how a sense of accomplishment is engendered when there is recognition that an actor has communicated the intended message to the audience:

[Actor #3a] That feeling, when the audience are responding to your dialogue, reacting to your character, that, I think is the best feeling in the world. That immediate gratification of your performance. What more do you need?

The continuous search for these personal and social rewards often involves *career-like progression* through stages of (personal and group) achievement relating to *the acquisition and development of related knowledge and skill* (Stebbins, 1992a; Kleiber, 1999). Amateur actors, like their professional counterparts, possess extensive knowledge of the specialised techniques and theory performed on a foundation of acting skills such as eye contact, voice projection and stage presence. And yet, to qualify as experts or practitioners, suggests Stebbins (1998: p. 29), 'they must use their knowledge and technique often enough to prevent them from degenerating'. He continues, 'even the idea of amateur presupposes consistently active use of knowledge and core skills of a particular field' (p. 29). As a consequence of their continued involvement, players are often able to establish and sustain important *identities* within the group, and seemed to value their status as actor for this reason:

[Actor # 2a] To be part of this group, and to do what we do, means everything to me. It has shaped, and will continue to shape me as a person and as an actor.

[Actor #4a] There is a deep togetherness about our group that is very hard to find elsewhere. I think one of the main reasons why we've been around so long is that every individual has his or her role to play and are in it

together for the same means [...] to be part of the group and to enjoy our acting.

Also evident in these comments is that this sense of identification provides the individual with a sense of belongingness or membership to the wider social group, a place within that environment, and the subsequent opportunity to use membership of that group to enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, thus building what Thornton (1995) has described as 'sub-cultural capital'; the 'currency' with which an individual measures their knowledge of, and creditability and identification with a particular sub-culture (Green and Jones, 2005). Parts of this process, suggests Gibson *et al.* (2002), will involve the collection of sub-cultural capital either through intangible capital such as personal knowledge and understanding of the group, or through tangible capital, such as lasting products in the form of a successful performance or run of performances.

In summary, whereas the individuals involved in the St. Christopher's Players amateur theatre group are not professionals, they are also neither dabblers nor novices. Dabblers are casual leisure participants with basic levels of technique, knowledge, and active involvement in the field that distinguishes them from the public (Stebbins, 1979). The casual nature of their involvement with an activity means dabblers are generally unlikely to gain access to the world of amateur theatre. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that amateur actors engage in a part-time activity that is a full-time profession for other people. It is the absence of a professional counterpart that most clearly distinguishes the hobbyist from amateur serious leisurist, a distinction that is now examined in greater detail as focus turns to the hobbyist table tennis group.

4.4 Vauxhall Table Tennis Section

History

Vauxhall table tennis section was founded in the late 1980s as a recreational escape for workers at the local Vauxhall Motors plant. In these early years members would meet and play in the staff canteen using whatever equipment was available to construct makeshift tables and nets. By the time the Vauxhall Recreation Centre was built in 1994 the group had more than 30 regular members and was duly given section status and allocated weekly usage of the centre's sports hall facilities and equipment (including four regulation-size tables and nets). Today, with the recreation centre now open to the public, the section has over 70 registered members, including many of the original players, and since 2001 has been competing in a licensed local regional table tennis league.

4.5 Table Tennis as Serious Leisure

As mentioned previously, though Stebbins has already categorised table tennis as a form of sporting hobby (Stebbins, 1998: p. 62), it has attracted little scholarly attention, remaining a particularly fallow form of serious leisure. This is surprising, especially considering that table tennis is the world's largest participation sport, with over 40 million competitive players worldwide and countless millions playing recreationally (English Table Tennis Association, ETTA, 2006).

According to Stebbins (1998), the classification of a hobbyist pursuit depends upon the circumstances in which its participants undertake the core activity. For example, whilst one long distance runner might enjoy competitive racing, in which case he would be deemed a 'competitor', another long distance runner might run for the exercise it provides as well as for the intrinsic appeal, making her an

'activity participant'; the chief difference separating competitors from activity participants being the presence or absence of competition (Stebbins, 1998).

From my interactions with the members of the Vauxhall table tennis section, it had become clear that the section was composed of three interlinking groups. The first of these groups is representative of the more able players who compete as part of what is known as the 'A' or '1st' team. These individuals compete in a local regional league with many maintaining an official (regional) ranking. The second group is typically made up of those players on the fringes of the A team who compete as part of the section's 'B' or '2nd' team. These individuals do not compete in an established league, instead the team plays a series of arranged friendly fixtures against other local clubs, their main role being reserves for the A team. The third group consists of those players who either do not wish to be or are not selected for either of the two teams. These individuals tend to 'knock-up' (the local term given to simply practising with another club-mate) or play intra-club friendly matches against willing others, using whatever tables may be available. Due to the competitive nature of their involvement, the first two groups may be classed as 'competitors', according to Stebbins' earlier classification, whilst the last group typify the more informal involvement of 'activity participants'.

Whether it is due to poor personal form, supporting a losing team, or not making or being dropped from selection for either of the competitive teams, there is *the occasional need for participants to be patient and persevere*. Yet it is clear that positive feelings about the activity are, to some extent, derived from overcoming such disappointments. As two players describe:

[Player #1a] There are times when things just aren't going for you, you're not hitting the ball as you'd like or [...] you just can't seem to find your rhythm [...] it's in those times when you have to really dig deep and work at your game. Sometimes you have to go back to basics... just concentrate on hitting the ball right, you'll find your way back eventually [...] it may take time but when you do find your form and you're playing well it makes all the effort worthwhile.

[Player #5b] Yeah, you definitely have to take the rough with the smooth [...] but that's the same in any sport, that's challenge isn't it? To improve your game.

Evident also in these comments is the requirement of *significant personal effort* based on the acquisition and development of sport-specific skills and the challenge to improve which becomes a more central feature of participation as individuals become more experienced and knowledgeable about the sport.

Stebbins (1998 and 2005a) has noted that hobbyists gain a profound sense of continuity from their more or less steady development as skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable practitioners and from their deepening satisfaction that accompanies the kind of personal growth that is only acquired by virtue of increased involvement in an activity. As one player describes:

[Player #6b] I have definitely grown as a player in my time at the club [...] that drive to improve has always been there [...] it's what makes you come back for more [...] that need to better yourself [...] that's where the enjoyment is for me [...] when you feel yourself improving.

Such *career-like involvement* is highly personalised as each participant treads their own path through their individual leisure worlds. Over time, however, these leisure worlds become intertwined with those of others to form *a unique social ethos* embodied within a broader social world exclusive to the sport of table tennis that participants appear to *strongly identify with*. The comments of two players are indicative of the centrality this social component:

[Player #1a] Many of us have been part of the set-up from the beginning [...] we helped build it in a way [...] so there's a definite family feel. But this doesn't mean the newer members are sort of left on the outside, we'll share out what responsibility there is [...] to allow everybody the chance to contribute [...] nobody minds doing a little bit of work when it's for the good of the club.

[Player #3a] There is a great togetherness of about the club, more so than in previous years [...] we all enjoy the competitive side of things, that's why we're here. But we'll all socialise together too.

This social world is held together by a semiformal organisational structure consisting of a central body of six individual members, each of whom voluntarily take on one of the following roles in addition to their playing responsibilities:

- Club/Section Representative: Main responsibilities include representing the club at quarterly regional league meetings and liaising with the recreation centre.

- Club Secretary: Charged with the responsibility of recording minutes in team meetings as well as managing club memberships and producing the annual newsletter.

- 1st team/2nd team captains: Typically falling to one of the more experienced players, it is the captain's role to co-ordinate team affairs; from team selection to organising and running training sessions.

- 1st team/2nd team vice-captains: Supports the team captain in all-aspects of team affairs including team selection and will assume the captaincy in their absence.

The collective responsibility of this organisational body is to oversee the general running of proceedings, providing the necessary structural support (i.e. inter/intra-club

communication, a recognised code of practice, facility bookings, arrangement/re-arrangement of fixtures, recruitment), without which the club would not function effectively.

As with all forms of serious leisure, such a highly-involving activity as table tennis is not without its costs. For instance, members taking on the organisational roles outlined above must invest significant time and effort into the running of the club often creating tensions at home or at work, sometimes both. For members outside of the central organisational body, costs can include the disappointment of being consistently overlooked for selection to either of the teams or prolonged injury. But these costs are more than compensated for by the ***distinctive personal and social rewards*** the activity provides for its participants. As the comments of two players illustrate:

> [Player #5a] When you're playing well, there's no feeling like it [...] I always remember those moments when I'm totally on top of my game... it's such an intense feeling [...] you're not thinking about your last match, you're just totally on top of things.

> [Player #4a] I really enjoy the technical side of the game [...] I'm constantly trying to improve on my last match [...] like they say you're only as good as your last match [...] whether it was good or bad it doesn't matter, you will always have something to work on.

Table tennis appears to be a source of deeply enjoyable and personally enriching experiences that provide opportunities for the progressive development and expression of individual ability. Such findings are highly similar to those of Stebbins (1992a) who found that the majority of sport-related serious leisure participants rated self-enrichment and self-gratification top in terms of personal importance. Moreover, he found that in order to realise either of these rewards participants must first acquire

sufficient levels of relevant skill, knowledge, and experience, something that is implicit in the comments of the present group of table tennis players.

Where *the social rewards* of table tennis are concerned, two players discuss the joys of being involved with a successful team:

[Player #3b] When the team's performing well, when we all come together in at that one moment in time and everyone is feeling confident and playing well [...] there is a huge buzz around the place [...] and knowing that you've had a hand in that success is a great feeling... probably the best feeling you can have.

[Player #4a] That's definitely true [...] though you've been playing individually [...] it's like we're one body [...] everyone is playing for each other and supporting each other, it's like one big game and when you win, it's such an amazing feeling [...] I just want to bounce off of the walls.

A member of the central organising body describes the satisfaction derived from contributing to the running of the club:

[Player #1a] Yes it's a lot of work and effort, but I enjoy it, I think we all do [...] there's a great deal of satisfaction in knowing you've contributed something to the well-being of the club

Another player reveals that it was the social side of table tennis that had initially attracted him to the sport:

[Player #4a] I do enjoy the competitive side of the game but that's not why I started [...] I actually started as a way of meeting and socialising with people who shared a similar interest

According to Stebbins (2007a), these rewards, both personal and social, represent the driving force to find fulfilment in playing table tennis. Rather, it is that the drive to experience these rewards 'is at once the meaning of the activity for the participant and his/her motivation for engaging in it' (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 13).

In summary, the high-investment, deeply involving nature of table tennis has been shown to facilitate all six of Stebbins' qualities of serious leisure, and, in doing so, distinguishes its participants from mere dabblers and the pursuit of less intensive, casual or recreational forms of the sport (Stebbins, 2005a).

4.6 Volunteer Sports Coaches

History

The volunteers taking part in my research form the volunteer wing of Active Luton, a non-profit distributing organisation. Broadly put, the trust is responsible for the integration of governmental sporting initiatives, the provision of quality services that meet the sporting needs of the local community, and developing opportunities in sport and physical activity in local facilities, in schools, and the wider community. Active Luton also runs its own disability sports project called 'Access to Sport', working in partnership with key agencies in the voluntary and statutory sectors, together with funding bodies, to develop a programme of sporting activities specifically targeting children and young people with disabilities.

Though, formally regulated by a board of trustees, the day-to-day running of Active Luton is heavily reliant on its team of volunteers who provide support for the various initiatives and programmes around the community. The voluntary team itself is headed by a group of 'senior' volunteers who are responsible for the recruitment, training, and placement of coaches. The remainder of the team is composed of individuals with varying degrees of coaching experience, though the majority originate from or are still working within sport-related fields. For example, three of the present group currently are in full-time employment as PE teachers in

addition to their voluntary roles. Collectively the team delivers a wide range of sports to able-bodied and disabled children and young people between the ages of five and eighteen.

4.7 Volunteer sports coaching as serious leisure

Unlike amateur acting and hobbyist table tennis, volunteer sport coaching is yet to be formally classified within the serious leisure literature, somewhat surprising, considering the sporting sector makes the single largest contribution to total volunteering in the UK, with 26% of all volunteers citing sport as their main area of interest (Sports Volunteering in England, 2002). Furthermore, of the 1.2 million sports coaches currently active in the UK, four out of five, around 1 million, are unpaid volunteers (MORI, 2004).

Volunteering in sport has been defined as 'individual volunteers helping others in sport, in a formal organisation such as clubs or governing bodies, and receiving either no remuneration or only expenses' (Nichols, 2004: p. 198). Stebbins (1998) has noted that voluntary activities hand themselves to either formal (serious) or informal (casual helping) involvement, depending upon the demands made on the volunteer. Volunteer sports coaches working for an organisation such as a National Governing Body (NGB) or Sports Council, usually do so in a formal capacity, performing tasks assigned to them by their superiors, who are normally either management employees, or in the case of the present group, senior volunteers. Such formal voluntary involvement carries with it certain requirements of coaching specific sport (or sport-related skill) sessions in a particular place at a particular time. In spite of such commitments, having met all original obligations, the voluntary sports coach maintains a degree of choice enabling them to disengage with relative ease.

According to Stebbins' (1998: pp. 74-80) descriptive taxonomy, there are sixteen types of organisational volunteering, showing that career volunteers provide a great variety of services. Volunteer sports coaching, however, does not fit neatly into any one of these sixteen types, instead it would appear to draw upon two simultaneously, these being educational and recreational volunteering. Though the educational component of sports coaching is obvious, even here there is need to distinguish between two sub-types, for coaches may be involved in working with either able-bodied individuals, disabled individuals, or often a mixture of both. From a recreational volunteer perspective, volunteer sports coaches can also be found organising and/or running different community sporting events for a wide range of groups.

As with other types of serious leisure, career volunteers often *need to persevere* at what they do (Stebbins, 2004a). For individuals who want to continue experiencing the same satisfaction in an activity must, from time to time, overcome certain challenges. For instance, voluntary sports coaches must first become fully certified, something that requires significant training and can often span several months, even years. Additionally, when coaching, individuals must always search for fresh approaches with which to help those being coached. As this collection of comments illustrates:

> [Coach #2a] sometimes it's just something as simple as communication. Some of the children I coach never talk, the challenge is to build up a relationship with these children, making them feel comfortable enough to communicate with the helpers. Once you've built that trusting relationship they will communicate in their own way.

> [Coach #3a] when you're working with disabled people, you look for signs, I'm always looking for signs for how we can get through to them, understand them [...] it can take a while, but when you do get a reaction, there's no feeling like it.

[Coach #6b] it's the same whether you're coaching an individual or a group, you're always looking for new ways to deliver sessions, new ways to approach a sport [...] you can't get away with doing the same session twice, there always has to be something new, something exciting for the kids to get involved with. But by doing this it also keeps *you* interested [...] stops you from routinising your sessions.

[Coach #10b] I think that's when you have your best sessions, I know I have [...] when you have tried something new or different and the kids have really taken to it, really gotten involved [...] that's a great feeling.

[Coach #1a] But no one individual is the same. If you are not careful you might start to find you are coaching a disability rather than an individual child. You have to adapt your coaching methods to the needs of the individual.

[Coach #5a] Getting the kids to do something they haven't been able to do, even if it's moving one hand with a disabled child [...] or doing something with a child who has been told they can't do something [...] I'm like yes they can!

[Coach #8b] The rewards are greatest for me when you have done something for a child... something new and exciting [...] something that other people have perhaps neglected or avoided.

These comments also encapsulate the two principal motives behind volunteering: the first being volunteering as altruism, with individuals working for a cause that they clearly feel strongly about. The second is volunteering as self-interestedness, with individuals working to experience the variety of rewards available in career volunteering. This is a genuine 'intrinsically-rewarding' self-interest as opposed to being motivated by some anticipated external personal benefit (e.g. gaining work experience) (Stebbins, 2004a). According to Stebbins, leisure volunteering is distinctive because it is invariably propelled by its altruism; he continues to note 'what makes volunteering rewarding and therefore leisure-like is the unselfish regard for another person or people' (Stebbins, 1998: p. 71). However, Stebbins (1996) has proffered that, once established, the motive of altruism often drives the pursuit of such voluntary action to a lesser extent than does the motive of self-interestedness. Indeed, although there is an altruistic thread running through many of the comments above,

self-interest seems to be the stronger motivator in encouraging individuals to continue their involvement in sports coaching.

Such involvement, however, comes at a price. Working as a volunteer sports coach increasingly requires specialist skills, there is little time left after their paid work, and conflict with family commitments creates competing demands for their limited leisure time. But more than this, a UK-wide shortage of sports volunteers and consequently the loading of the required voluntary tasks on to fewer people, impacts heavily upon the sports coach's already loaded time and workload. Another reason for increased volunteer workload is the introduction of more stringent NGB procedures (Sports Volunteering in England, 2002). These include more complex registration and coach licensing arrangements, more detailed risk assessments, equity policies, and child protection or Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checking procedures.

What is clear is that voluntary sports coaches must *invest significant personal effort* into what they do, for they have need to be highly-skilled in and knowledgeable about a great variety of sporting activities appropriate to both able-bodied and disabled individuals. Crucially, it is through such persistence and personal effort that volunteers are able to realise personal goals and express themselves in an area of self-interest. As these comments show:

> [Coach #8b] Being a PE teacher I thought I had already done much of the necessary training, but in no way does that training prepare you for working with a child with a physical or mental disability [...] that's when the real training begins, it's almost like you have to un-learn what you thought to be right and start all over. It takes a great deal of time and effort to get to a place where you feel confident in your ability to coach disabled kids [...] but when you get things right the results are just fantastic, so rewarding.

[Coach #10b] It's an education I'll give you that [...] you have to know about each disability in detail so when you come to coach a child with a certain disability you have an idea of what they can and can't do [...] in a way that finding out is what is enjoyable, that learning about each child or group and working out how best to go about your sessions.

[Coach #4a] At first you do try and make everything new and exciting, I used to spend hours pre-session coming up with new ideas and stressing over how it would all work out. But over time [...] I've found that much of what I learn from coaching my disabled kids is transferable into my coaching of able-bodied sessions [...] I've had some of my best, most creative sessions using drills that I have developed for a disabled session.

On this evidence, such benefits appear to be substantial enough to engender *an avocational career* built upon their acquisition and on the often challenging process of applying them. Also evident, is the tendency of volunteer sports coaches to *'identify strongly with their chosen pursuit'* (Stebbins, 1997: p. 119). Sports coaches are generally most likely to be classed as highly identified, committed and participants in serious leisure rather than casual leisure, creating what Gillespie has termed a 'culture of commitment' for participants (Gillespie *et al.* 2002: p. 287). The volunteer sports coaching setting also facilitates Stebbins' sixth quality of serious leisure, that of the *'unique ethos* that grows up around each expression of it'* (Stebbins, 1998: p. 71), a central component of this ethos being 'the special social world' that develops from participants' prolonged interest. Stebbins believes that associated with each social world is 'a unique set of special norms, values, beliefs, styles, moral principles, performance standards, and similar shared responsibilities' (Stebbins, 1998: p. 71). The world of volunteer sports coaching is highly regulated, perhaps more so than other serious leisure pursuits, due mainly to the contemporary emphasis on child safety and inclusivity in sport. One coach tells of how such regulation impacts upon her:

[Coach #6a] There is a lot of apprehension surrounding sports coaching at the moment, especially disability sports coaching [...] It's not for everyone. There is a great deal of new legislation being implemented, lots of policies and procedures for child protection [...] it's something that you're constantly aware of.

Careers and self-interestedness in volunteering are inspired in large part by a person's experiences with *the special rewards* found in all types of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004a). Research has found that it is the social rewards that coaches get from volunteering that are dominant, including the satisfaction of 'giving something back', from helping a club or initiative do well, and from keeping a club or initiative going (MORI, 2004). Such social rewards are closely followed by more personal rewards, as coaches tap into the deeply fulfilling, self-actualising nature of career volunteering. As two coaches discuss:

[Coach #4a] I feel a definite sense of achievement, when a child successfully completes a skill for the first time that I've helped them with [...] there really is no feeling like it, it's just so rewarding, knowing that you've helped them achieve something new.

[Coach #2a] I find the rewards are far greater, I feel, in disability coaching. Sometimes you have been working on a skill for a long period of time, often months [...] when a child achieves something that you've been trying for months it really is quite emotional.

Clearly there is merit in distinguishing sports coaches as a voluntary form of serious leisure for they comprise a substantial proportion of all sports volunteers and represent a unique profile in terms of who they are and what they do. Though casual volunteering can be crucial to larger voluntary projects or activities and can itself be a source of satisfying leisure, the nature of this satisfaction differs significantly from that found in career volunteering requiring little skill, knowledge, or experience to pursue (Stebbins, 2004b). The satisfaction to be gained from career volunteering, evidenced above, comes from

the special rewards only available in the 'serious' forms of voluntary leisure, rewards that are simply inaccessible in casual volunteering.

4.8 Concluding Remarks

It has been the intention of this chapter to firstly provide a brief history of each of the research sample groups, and secondly a working knowledge of amateur theatre acting, hobbyist table tennis and voluntary sports coaching as sources of serious leisure. Significantly, in the cases of hobbyist table tennis and voluntary sports coaching, the chapter makes a contribution yet to be made in the serious leisure perspective. In addition, from an experiential perspective, it has become increasingly apparent that the main reasons for serious leisure practitioners devoting time and effort to amateur theatre, playing table tennis, and coaching sport are that the experiences are rewarding in themselves and that the activities provide little worlds of their own which are deeply enjoyable. Having established amateur acting hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching as sources of serious leisure, Chapter Five looks more closely at each of these activities as a source of flow.

Chapter Five: Capturing the Flow of Serious Leisure

5.1 Introduction

It was noted in Chapter Two (2.12.2) that until now associations made between flow and the serious leisure frameworks have remained theoretic, conceptually linking flow and serious leisure. The direct personal-level descriptions of flow experience in serious leisure activity, as captured in the early stages of the group discussions (3.7.5), and now presented in this chapter, thus provide a contribution not yet made by either framework. Dialogue in reaction to the three flow statements (below) presented at the beginning of each group discussion to stimulate conversation revealed that each activity is capable of producing flow and does so in terms unique to it, producing a wide variety of descriptive accounts of flow-related leisure experience from research participants.

> "... My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems..."

> "... My concentration is like breathing. I never think of it. I am really oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring, or the house could burn down or something like that. When I start, I really do shut out the whole world. Once I stop, I can let it back in again..."

> "I am so involved in what I am doing, I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing".

> (Flow Statements - Concept Board)

However, as is so often the way with descriptions of flow, it was possible to distinguish some common and familiar features of flow experience across all three of the serious leisure groups. In Chapter Two it was demonstrated that substantial

research has established the phenomenology of flow to have eight main components. First, the experience usually occurs when an individual is confronted with a task which they have a realistic chance of completing. Second, that individual must be able to concentrate on what it is that needs to be done in relation to the completion of that task. Third and fourth, the requisite concentration is made possible because the task undertaken contains clear goals and provides near immediate feedback. Fifth and sixth, the individual acts with a deep yet effortless involvement that eliminates from conscious awareness the concerns of daily life, allowing them to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, as a consequence of this involvement the concerns for self fade, though re-emerge as both stronger and more complex after the experience is over. And, finally, the subjective sense of time is altered. In the event that the activity is characterised by a combination of these components, it is experienced as worth doing for its own sake; the experience is said to become *autotelic* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993: pp. 178-179).

When research participants were asked to reflect on their own "similar experiences" to those depicted on the concept board, all mentioned at least one, and often several of the components outlined above. The purpose of this chapter is to examine and authenticate the common (and not so common) features of research participants' descriptions of flow so as to enable a better understanding of what it is about these serious leisure activities that makes them such a rich source of flow.

5.2 Opportunity for action

Csikszentmihalyi has maintained that the flow experience is more likely to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and rule-bound and that could not be done without the appropriate skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). The crucial

aspect being structure: a clear set of rules and procedures which foster agency, concentration, and autonomous action toward meeting challenges and pursuing goals (Larson, 2000). From research participants' descriptions of flow it was clear that the core activity of each leisure endeavour, the 'set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve an outcome or product' (Stebbins, 2007a: pp. 20-21), is structured in such a way that it provides a potentially limitless range of challenges, both in a horizontal sense with regards progression from easy to difficult or from novice to expert, and in a vertical sense, in that it allows participants to be involved in the activity on a variety of levels. For example, for the amateur actor, this level of involvement is not the same for all roles, as one amateur actor explains:

[Actor #1a] Your mindset in larger roles is more intensive. With smaller parts you are off and on and off again [...] you never reach that level of intensity you do with larger more demanding roles.

The level of involvement differs for the table tennis player depending on whether it is practice or a competitive match, in the words of one player:

[Player #4a] Practice compared to match play is a completely different mindset. In practice I'm quite relaxed, but in a match I kind of shut everything out and I'm tighter in my game [...] like I'm in touch with my game.

For the volunteer sports coach, variety is the spice of life as this collection of comments illustrates:

[Coach #6b] For me the motivation to keep on doing what I am doing is the challenge [...] no two sessions are the same [...] no five minutes is the same. Every minute is different and is something new and something that surprises you [...] that challenges you even more.

[Coach #4a] It's a very individual thing, what works with one child won't necessarily work with another.

[Coach #8b] They're individuals and you have to work on each individual [...] what makes them tick in a sense.

[Coach #3a] I love doing what I do. What I love most is when somebody says I can't do something with a child [...] say to swim, then I go and do it [...] that gives me so much satisfaction, it's a challenge to me. Working with kids in an activity where there is a start and an end product [...] being actively involved in that process and getting the kids engaged in that process is an amazing feeling.

As with all good flow activities, acting, playing table tennis, and coaching sports appear to offer their participants a wide range of opportunities for flow, requiring various levels of skill and commitment in order to enjoy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). And, since they are all based on freely accepted rules, as long as these rules are respected (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), each would appear to represent a restricted system of action that is open to the regular generation of flow.

5.3 Deep concentration on the task at hand

Structured in this way, the action characteristic of each core activity is experienced by participants as narrow, simplified and internally coherent and, as such, facilitates a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand. This total demand for concentration leaves no space in consciousness for task-irrelevant information, or for distracting thoughts or feelings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). Two actors describe this total focus in the following way:

[Actor #2a] Once I step back stage and on stage all I'm thinking about is the play [...] I don't think about anything that is going on at school being a teacher, I don't think about anything that's in my living room that might be a mess [...] or anything that I've got to do [...] its just all focused on my character and the play.

[Actor #1a] When you're on stage [...] you almost build a barrier, well the lights do it for you in a way [...] but it's almost like there's a forth wall there [...] like you're in a room [...] and you forget that there's an audience watching because you get so involved in what you're doing on stage.

A similar sensation is described by two volunteer sports coaches:

> [Coach #6b] There is a contradiction I think [...] I can relate to all of the statements, I have been so absorbed in what I'm doing that I do sort of forget myself, but at the same time I am concentrating on the session [...] on the kids.

> [Coach #1a] It's all about the moment, you know, that moment with that individual or that group [...] your concentration is just so focused. It's like you're cut off from the world [...] you're in your own little reality if you like and nothing else matters other than there and then

In stage acting and coaching sports the structure of the core activity provides participants with clearly defined rules that aid this centering-of-attention. Sometimes, however, rules alone are not enough to encourage an individual to become involved in an activity. The structures of game-like activities such as table tennis provide a motivational element that draws the individual in to play (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971), 'perhaps the simplest of these inducements', suggests Csikszentmihalyi (2000: p. 41), 'is competition'. Adding a competitive element to a game or activity usually ensures that the individual is totally focused on the task at hand (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). When there is a possibility of being beaten the individual tends to be compelled to attend to the activity more closely (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Two table tennis players expand on this competitive theme:

> [Player #6a] In this kind of experience [...] I'm concentrating so intently on what I'm doing that what's going on around me becomes almost irrelevant [...] it's like I have tunnel vision [...] all that matters is the table, my opponent and the ball.

> [Player #5b] The intensity of such an experience is something that stands out for me [...] my concentration, my emotions, energy levels, everything is just so intense but at the same time you're not thinking about that... at the time you are completely immersed in what you are doing [...] in the game and beating your opponent.

The intense, present-centred focus captured in participants' descriptions is illustrative of how the clearly structured demands of each core activity helps direct concentration on to what is happening in the present moment and away from life outside of flow.

5.4 Clear and immediate feedback

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1992), the reason it is possible to achieve such complete involvement in a flow experience is that it usually contains coherent, non-contradictory demands for action whilst providing clear and immediate feedback to a person's actions. For instance, the actor knows what it is they must do or say each time they step out on to the stage. A table tennis player always knows what must be done: return the ball to the opponent's side of the table. And, each time they hit the ball they know whether they have been successful or not. Sports coaches are all too aware of how well their sessions are going by the way participants, both able-bodied and disabled, take to what is being delivered. One coach describes the feeling of when a session is going well:

> [Coach #5a] I have experienced times when the session has been going so well, everyone involved is enjoying themselves that much that before you know it, it's the end of the session. The session has just flown because the kids had just taken to the work, to the session I planned, everything worked, I was bouncing ideas off the kids and they were responding [...] it's a great feeling, in what seemed like a few minutes an hour had passed [...] the whole experience just seemed to flow by. It was so active [...] nobody stopped [...] things just happened, I wasn't consciously going over the session in my head I just went along with it

The flow experience is invoked when action resonates with the environment and when feedback provides sufficient possibilities for an uninterrupted flow of action (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Though what constitutes as feedback varies considerably depending on the nature of the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Sutton, 2007), amateur actors and volunteer sports coaches seem to derive feedback from similar

sources. For both actors and sports coaches it is how an audience receives a performance that ultimately counts. For the sports coach it is how the individual or group being coached reacts to a particular session, whilst for the actor it is the response of a more conventional audience that gives the individual an indication of how well they are performing. In the words of one of the amateur actors:

> [Actor #5a] It is when you hear the applause and response from the audience you know [...] that's why I'm doing this [...] that's what makes it all worthwhile for me, knowing that I have reached a particular audience through my performance.

These comments are descriptive of how clear and immediate feedback, requiring neither analysis nor reflection, allows for the continuous involvement and action characteristic of flow. However, individuals need not rely on only external sources of feedback claim Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999), as by their nature flow-producing activities contain many possibilities for feedback. Because of the clearly defined challenges in sports, individuals know when they are doing well or poorly by evaluating their performance in relation to the task demands of the activity and their own performance goals (Jackson and Roberts, 1996). For instance, much feedback in sport is derived from the movements of the body (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). As a table tennis player explains:

> [Player #1a] When I'm playing well, when I'm really in touch with my game, everything feels smooth [...] every shot or movement I make is just so natural.

Known as kinaesthetic awareness (Sutton, 2007), this "feel for performance" is a key component of feedback in sport, providing the individual with internal information needed to maintain involvement and optimise performance (Jackson and

Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Evidently, the sources of performance feedback for actors, table tennis players, and sports coaches are wide-ranging and activity-centred. However, provided it is logically related to a goal in which there is a vested interest, Csikszentmihalyi (1992: p. 57) claims 'the kind of feedback is in and of itself unimportant... what makes this information valuable is the symbolic message' it contains for the individual. Rather, it is the personal meaning attached to the achievement of some goal that, in part, determines the degree to which an individual becomes involved in an activity. Research on task-involvement supports this suggesting that the importance an individual places on doing well in an activity (i.e. competence valuation) predicts the individual's involvement in that activity (Elliot and Thrash, 2001; Harackiewicz *et al.* 2002). The personal meaning an individual attributes to success or failure at an activity can affect his/her interpretation of performance feedback, which in turn has consequences for task involvement (Mueller and Dweck, 1998).

5.5 Feelings of competence and control

A distinctive quality of this state of interaction or ambience with the environment is the individual's lack of an analytical stance towards the action-context (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Because the various flow experiences described by research participants occur in situations wherein they are able to manage, at least theoretically, all demands for action, there is the sense that the outcome of the activity is under personal control. An actor describes this feeling of control:

[Actor #6b] Occasionally during rehearsals but mainly at the time of the performances I reach a place where I am completely content with myself and the task before me [...] I don't think about 'what ifs' [...] my focus is clear and my intentions true, it is a wonderful feeling to have.

In competitive activities like table tennis, it appears the feeling of control is derived not just from the ability to outperform the opponent, but also from the performance itself, as two of the table tennis players describe:

> [Player #7b] When you're in this place, it is like you can't do anything wrong [...] playing the most difficult shots seems effortless, you become more imaginative in and creative in your play because you feel as if you can make any shot [...] it's what makes you want to play the game.

> [Player #5b] It's a great break, channelling all your attention into one thing [...] it gives you a separation point from all the worries about everything else in life.

Inherent in what these individuals are describing is the notion of 'possibility' as opposed to 'actuality' of control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: p. 61). Rather, what individuals tend to enjoy is not the sense of 'being' in control as much as the sense of 'exercising' control in personally challenging situations. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1992: p. 61), 'it is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines'. He continues 'only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether they are in control'. Giving up or surrendering to the demands of the situation and suspending any concerns about doing so, is a powerful and emotive sensation as one actor reveals:

> [Actor #3a] What the statements don't describe is the sense of vulnerability when this feeling leaves you. But when it returns it is the best feeling in the world [...] like you're untouchable [...] when I'm in this place I move effortlessly, there's no conscious thought involved [...] I'm lost in the moment and anything is possible.

A voluntary sports coach describes what control in flow feels like for them:

> [Coach #10b] I have had experiences, when things are going well [...] it's like a breath of fresh air [...] everything you try works, I get a feeling that I'm kind of floating along, totally in control [...] like nothing else matters.

5.6 The present is what matters

When all a person's skills are needed to successfully manage with the challenges of a situation, that person's attention is so completely absorbed by the demands of the immediate activity that any awareness of the individual as being separate from the actions they are performing disappears. A short passage of discussion taken from one of the volunteer sports coaching groups best illustrates this:

[Coach #7b] When I'm coaching and the session is running well, I'm not separate from what I am doing [...] you feel part of the session [...] not a coach on the outside but a participant on the inside.

[Coach #8b] Yeah I've experienced on a number of occasions, where I sort of step away from everything else that is happening [...] I'm concentrating on the session and nothing else, I'm not separate from the activity [...] I'm very much part of it, yeah definitely.

[Coach #6b] In those kind of sessions, even if you are starting and stopping or moving kids round from one activity to another [...] you don't feel or remember starting and stopping, you just move along with the energy of the activity.

So involved are these individuals in what they are doing it could be said that they share a unity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) with that action-context, in that participation with an activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic. Indeed, the theme of doing things instinctively is one way in which research participants have alluded to the experiential nature of this dimension of flow. A group of table tennis players discuss what this sensation feels like for them:

[Player #4a] It's very much like you don't have to think about playing, the ball's there, you hit it for a winner [...] it's a natural thing.

[Player #2a] When the game goes well for me it's like that [...] you don't really know that you're concentrating so much you just sort of come out of it and then afterwards you sort of realise [...] it's all just so natural. When the game isn't going so well it's because your attention is on other things [...] like you're drifting.

[Player #3a] When you're in this place, it's like you can't so anything wrong, playing the most difficult shots seems to be effortless [...] you become more imaginative and creative in your play because you feel as if you can make any shot [...] it's what makes you want to play the game.

These comments are indicative of how the sense of control experienced in flow can free the individual from fear of failure, creating positive thoughts and a sense of confidence for the unfolding activity (Ghandi and Deshpande, 1994). In such experience awareness is no longer split between individual and environment. So involved are they in what they are doing individuals stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing, creating a unified state wherein actions are both effortless and spontaneous (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). The following collection of comments captures how participants' experience this shift in awareness:

[Coach #1a] It's like you can't do anything wrong, like you're in some dream [...] and it's addictive [...] you want that feeling again and again [...] It's like you're running on instincts.

[Player #6b] It may take a while, but once you're inside its exhilarating. It's as if your mind and body come together all at the same time [...] your bat is an extension of your arm and will do anything you tell it to [...] you don't think about what you're doing you just do it [...] there's no thought involved.

[Player #1a] It's in such moments when I feel most free in my play [...] sometimes when you're playing you feel as if for some reason you can't completely let go, something's holding you back [...] but there are those moments when you're released and you just don't care [...] it is here where I feel I can fully express myself as a player.

It was obvious from the way research participants spoke about this feature of their flow experiences that these were special and highly valued moments. Such total absorption in the task at hand is one of the surest signs of being in flow (Jackson, 1992), standing as it does in complete contrast to 'ordinary awareness,

where holding a single thought for more than a few moments is difficult'
(Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999: p. 64).

5.7 An altered sense of self

Because of the deep concentration on the activity at hand, the individual in
flow not only suspends concern for the potential implications of their actions, but
loses temporarily the awareness of self that often encroaches upon normal day-to-day
life (Zerubavel, 1991). A feeling that can be exhilarating as one actor describes:

> [Actor #3a] There is a huge buzz from being on stage [...] the kind of buzz
> I expect you get when you bungee jump or sky dive [...] that feeling comes
> when you are completely involved in something you love doing, when
> nothing matters more than that instant, that moment [...] there is no self-
> doubt, everything else just kind of rolls away to leave you alone with what
> you are doing.

In flow there is no room for the self-scrutiny that accompanies so much of life.
Because the serious leisure activities have clear goals, stable rules, and challenges
judged to match favourably with skill level, there is little opportunity for the self to
come under threat. But such feelings are fragile and prone to disruption should the
self find its way back into awareness. The following passage taken from discussion
between two table tennis players exemplifies flow's susceptibility to such self-
consciousness:

> [Player #4a] Statement two is similar to my experiences when playing. I
> look at it as having two very different states of mind [...] I am oblivious of
> everything going on around me, I feel so focused it's just me the bat and
> the ball [...] I feel I have a very positive state of mind and feel good inside
> but this can change in an instant [...] if I start hitting bad shots sometimes I
> feel myself become very negative about my performance. I become very
> frustrated with playing bad shots, missing a serve or hitting the net [...] I
> feel conscious of everything around me [...] the way I look when I lose a
> point, the expression on the oppositions face as they're beating me [...]
> people's opinion of me as I'm losing and the feeling of disappointment as I
> let my team down.

[Player #3a] I can get very distracted when playing, still, even after so long playing the game. Just little things like someone saying "well done" or making comments really can affect my concentration. It usually happens when I get up-tight and my game doesn't flow as I would like [...] but when I am able to concentrate my game does seem to flow along effortlessly [...] but I don't think I have control over when such an experience will occur [...] it just sort of happens.

The ability to forget the self on a temporary basis seems to be immensely enjoyable for participants in all three serious leisure activities, though it would appear to have added significance in the realm of acting. For the actor, due perhaps to the self-evaluation accentuated by its public nature and the many opportunities for judgement it provides, the temporary loss of self allows for a permissiveness that is not found outside of this experience. The comments of two amateur actors describe the significance of the sensation of being able to 'play at' being another person:

[Actor #2a] It's strange, before I go on stage I'm as nervous as anything, no matter how well I've learnt my lines. And yet, the moment the curtain goes up or I step out on to the stage, all the nerves are gone and I am lapping it up [...] I'm enjoying myself so much just being someone else in a situation that's make-believe.

[Actor #1a] And in a way that's what's lovely, I mean I think that's why actors become actors because they get a chance to pretend to be someone else for a couple of hours [...] I mean you can do things that perhaps you wouldn't normally do.

[Actor #2a] You can just act

[Actor #1a] It's somewhere where I can be truly expressive in what I am doing [...] where you can be playful and not care because you're so involved.

However, with this being the full extent of research participants' descriptions, the loss of sense of self was the only flow characteristic not strongly endorsed by all three groups. Either the majority of research participants were not hindered by self-awareness during the time they were participating, or the individuals misunderstood the clarity of perception and acute awareness of body described

so openly in the precedent section with the more evaluative component of being self-conscious.

This notwithstanding, the permissiveness, discovery and exploration embodied in these and earlier comments implies what Csikszentmihalyi has labelled self-transcendence; a sense of stretching individual capacity to new dimensions of skills and competence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a). According to Bloch (2000: p. 56), this experience is not 'conceived as a delusion in which the person has lost his/her critical powers, but rather as a revelation in which a more profound reality is encountered'. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) supports this, noting that sensations of self-transcendence are experienced on occasions when an individual is able to invest all of their attention into an activity, which leads to a deep and effortless involvement that removes from awareness the concerns and frustrations of life outside of flow. What is interesting to note here is that the permissive involvement characteristic of participants' descriptions of this dimension of flow would appear to negate the seriousness with which they pursue the activity, in many cases fostering what Csikszentmihalyi *et al.* (1993) term as 'serious play'. Furthermore, this sensation appears to have special meaning to individuals, the goal being simply to do the activity for its own sake, or more precisely, for the experience it provides.

5.8 Time is experienced differently

Many of the research participants mentioned they had felt a different sense of time in such experiences. According to the flow framework, what happens is that time is experienced more subjectively 'so that at various times it seems to speed up, slow down, or stand still' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003: p. 54). Rather, the unusual level of

individual involvement when in flow means the sense of time tends to adapt itself to the action at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). The words of two volunteer sports coaches are typical of how research participants described this sensation:

[Coach #5a] There have been times when I've been coaching that I have been so engrossed in the session that people have had to tap me on the shoulder and say "time to finish" and I'm like wow where has that session gone? The time has just flown by and I've not realised it

[Coach #1a] Yeah, there is definitely a sense of loss of time [...] but at the same time you're always aware of it [...] you plan and deliver each session within a certain time frame so, it's always there, I guess it's just not important when you are so engaged in what you are doing

These comments stand as supporting evidence for Jackson's earlier noted observation (2.3.3) that the transformation of time, in flow, can be both a by-product of being completely involved in an activity and part of the challenge for that activity, wherein normal clock time is replaced by experiential sequences structured according to the demands of the situation (Jackson, 1996; Jackson and Marsh, 1996).

5.9 A distorted sense of 'place'

Discussions also turned up an additional feature of flow that is often over-looked in conventional expressions of this experience. Implicit within many participants' descriptions was the sensation of an altered sense of 'place' in flow; as is evident in this collection of comments taken from an amateur acting group discussion:

[Actor #5a] It's a mindset thing [...] your concentration is just so intense that it puts you outside of that particular place.

[Actor #4a] I think it's because it's so physically demanding that you have to put yourself somewhere else [...] otherwise you're not concentrating on what's important. As soon as the first line is out and gone I'm in it and that's it [...] I don't think of anything else.

[Actor #3a] When I'm in this place I move effortlessly, there is no conscious thought involved, I'm completely lost in the moment.

Two table tennis players describe the significance of this sensation for them:

> [Player #5b] you're so focused on what's in front of you, it's like a separation point from the outside world. You play within your own little world, your own sphere if you like [...] and it's somewhere where you can't be touched [...] It's such an intense feeling.

> [Player #3a] It is like stepping into another world. But in this world I have control over what happens.

Such is the intensity of experience in flow for these participants that it gives the impression of having been somewhere not accessible normally. Rather, when concentration is highly-focused on an activity which provides non-contradictory demands for action appropriate to the individual's capabilities, with clear and immediate feedback in the form of feelings of personal control, a psychological state may be reached that is quite separate from what is termed as the 'normal' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) or 'baseline'(Metzer, 1989) state of consciousness. Flow-producing activities, suggests Csikszentmihalyi (1990: p. 74), have the ability to 'provide a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality' pushing the individual to higher levels of performance leading to 'undreamed-of states of consciousness'. This sense of being in a world where all external consideration is suspended may explain in part why flow-producing activities can become so addictive for those involved and offers further evidence of flow's distinctive boundary-transcending qualities (Bloch, 2000). The significance of these qualities in the total structure of experiencing flow will be reviewed in greater depth in Chapter Six when the focus turns to the intricacies of pre-flow and post-flow experience.

The alterative sense of place captured in the comments of research participants is also consistent with Williams and Roggenbuck's (1989) notion of 'place dependence' (see also Bricker and Kerstetter, 2000; Kyle *et al.* 2003; Williams *et al.* 1992). From this perspective, the sense of place in flow relates to the functional utility attributed to a particular setting by those involved because of its ability to facilitate desired 'flow-related' serious leisure experiences. Such an association is likely to forge a strong attachment through the emotional and symbolic meanings ascribed to particular leisure settings. Low and Altman (1992; see also Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001) have used the term 'place attachment' to refer to the phenomenon of human-place bonding. However, though they claim that 'affect, emotion, and feeling are central to the concept' (Low and Altman, 1992: p. 4), they have also indicated that these emotional elements 'are often accompanied by cognition (thought, knowledge, and belief) and practice (action and behaviour)' (ibid: pp. 4-5). When considered together, then, the 'away-from-it-all' qualities of the flow state coupled with the concepts of place dependence and place attachment would appear to be direct co-constituents of a broader and more encompassing 'sense of place' which at once consists of affective, cognitive and conative components.

To summarise, this chapter has shown that when asked to describe their flow-related leisure experiences, research participants have provided evidence to suggest that experiencing the qualities of flow is what makes their performances most memorable, describing experiences that embody the familiar theoretical descriptors presented at the beginning of this chapter (5.1). Most salient of these flow descriptors was the 'autotelic experience', with all research participants referring throughout their descriptions that their flow-related leisure experiences were both intrinsically rewarding and enjoyable. However, not all of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) dimensions

of flow were strongly supported when research participants' descriptions of flow were matched with these dimensions, in particular the loss of sense of self. On the one hand, this variance underscores the idea that there are individual and/or activity specific differences in how flow is experienced. On the other, such variety in description adds to the understanding of the flow state in the context of serious leisure.

From a serious leisure perspective, the richness and variety of research participants' descriptions evoke the affinity of serious leisure activities for flow experience, adding an empirical body to the previously identified (2.12.2) theoretical linkage between the 'seriousness' of the activity and the 'likelihood' of experiencing flow. What has become clear is that one of the main reasons that research participants devote time and effort to their leisure is because they gain a deeply enjoyable state of experience from it, an experience that is not accessible in everyday life. However, involvement in these leisure activities and settings does not guarantee flow will be experienced. What makes these activities conducive to such deeply enjoyable experiences is that the structural design of their core activities facilitates concentration and individual involvement by making an activity as distinct as possible from the comparably routine cadence of day-to-day living. This chapter has allowed for a closer scrutiny of this design and has found a number of the 'special qualities' of serious leisure to retain a structural function and are not so much conducive to but interrelated with the known conditional components necessary for flow to occur.

In a structural sense, the activity-involvement, that is, the endeavour and perseverance of research participants to meet the challenges of their leisure has been shown to produce a variety of flow-like experiences. The pursuit of challenge is a

motivating factor with the accompanying thrill sustaining continued interest. These activities have been shown to provide involvement and intrinsic motivation at the same time promoting intentional effort toward well-defined personal goals and skill acquisition that give a clear sense of how well the individual is performing. Activities that require such commitment and investment of personal effort are seen to produce opportunities to maintain and further develop the sense of competence that allows individuals to frequently experience enjoyment and develop positive feelings about themselves (i.e. self-actualisation and self-expression). The significance of this emergent structural interdependence between flow and serious leisure will be considered in greater detail throughout Chapters Six to Eight as the discussion shifts to pre- and post-flow experience.

5.10 Concluding Remarks

The findings presented in this chapter stand as the first direct empirical documentation of flow experience in serious leisure activity, providing a handle for understanding what is perhaps a central motivational component of the serious leisure experience. This initial foray into examining the nature of flow in serious leisure has demonstrated that the capacity to experience flow seems to be both an important personal skill and source of intrinsic motivation for serious leisure participants. At the same time, though the structure of these serious leisure activities appear well-adapted to the inducement of flow, it is clear that the way in which the opportunities for action are structured within such leisure activities affects the ease with which individuals are able to enter flow. Some individuals, for instance, appear to rely more on this structure of the activity, while others seem to need fewer structural supports. In an attempt to understand how research participants come to structure their leisure so as to experience flow, Chapter Six examines the phenomenology of what occurs before and

after such experience, as revealed by the final narratives of pre-flow and post-flow experience.

Chapter Six: Final Narratives of Pre- and Post-Flow Experience

6.1 Introduction

When asked what occurs before and after the experience set out in the descriptive statements on the concept board (3.7.5), research participants reported their own experiences of flow to be framed by distinct, intricate and highly-personalised phases of pre-flow and post-flow experience, details subsequently captured in the narratives of pre- and post-flow experience. To reiterate, each narrative of experience is representative of the pre- and post-flow experiences of all three sample groups and was collaboratively derived along with research participants. Having been accepted by research participants as being phenomenologically accurate (3.8.3), the final narratives of experience presented in this chapter stand as the first empirically-based accounts of pre- and post-flow experience to date.

Until now, however, emphasis has been focused on to the phenomenon itself, the actual experiencing of flow 'as-lived' by research participants, in an attempt to bracket out (3.5.3) any categories and pre-existing (conceptual or theoretical) interpretations. The main problems with phenomenological inquiry, suggests van Manen (1998), is that it is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon being studied, but that we know too much. More accurately, 'the problem is that our "common sense" pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon' before it has been possible to come to grips with the significance of the phenomenon captured (van Manen, 1998: p. 46). For this reason, much of van

Manen's work (see, for example, 1982 and 1998) interweaves narrative description of the phenomenon studied with interpretative 'readings' or 'reconstructions' in which the constitutive elements of the experience embedded in the narrative are carefully unfolded and theoretically rationalised for the reader (Willis, 2004). This chapter follows van Manen's lead in that both narratives are first presented in full to allow for a sense of the whole experience and then deconstructed, drawing out and isolating for the reader the key phenomenological structures involved so as to give significance to each in its role as a supporting structure in the act of experiencing flow 'as-lived by research participants. In order to understand the significance of each emergent structure, the chapter draws upon substantial theoretical discussion. Occasionally, this will involve the continuation of theoretical debate initiated earlier in Chapter Two, though it is important to note here that the originality of pre- and post-flow experience together with the paucity of previous coverage means much of the theoretical content, as relating to pre- and post-flow experience, will be introduced for the first time in this chapter. In this sense, Chapter Six is presented more as a systematic theoretical interpretation of each narrative of experience, starting with that of pre-flow in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Narrative of Pre-flow Experience

[1] *It's not a matter of waiting for things to be right, you need to be prepared. Before I start I take some time to clear my mind, that period of calmness focuses me, allowing me to get my concentration to a level I know is right, where I am focused on what needs to be done.* [2] *From here it's all about building up confidence and momentum, you concentrate on the smallest thing, the smallest detail to carry you through - through to that positive state of mind where there is a strong belief in your ability and a respect for that situation, where I am relaxed and completely focused on what's in front of me.* [3] *If my preparation has gone well I am more likely to achieve that balance, where all at once you feel in control, relaxed and ready for whatever might happen.* [4] *Your focus turns inwards at that crucial moment. Your mind and body seem to come together and you lose yourself letting the energy of the situation take you.* [5] *But this is a purely personal thing, you have to work hard to reach this mindset, and sometimes, for whatever reason, you just don't get that balance right and you come away having just gone through the motions.*

[1] ***"It's not a matter of waiting for things to be right, you need to be prepared. Before I start I take some time to clear my mind, that period of calmness focuses me, allowing me to get my concentration to a level I know is right, where I am focused on what needs to be done."***

In this opening structure [1] of the pre-flow narrative, research participants identify that pre-flow experience is initiated within a distinct phase of preparation, which is itself begun with a purposive investment of attention to facilitate concentration on the task at hand. For example, amateur actors tell of how this preparation begins for them:

[Actor #1a] You can't just turn up at the theatre and ten minutes later you're in your costume and you're walking on stage [...] I mean if you can do that then fantastic but I certainly can't do that, I have to have a bit of quiet time and time away from everything. I feel I need to be on my own, a time for concentration and focus, I couldn't be backstage all chatty like some people.

[Actor #5a] Yeah, I have to be there as early as I can to prepare and focus my attention on what it is I need to do.

[Actor #2a] I'm very much the opposite in that I'm so hectic beforehand. I'm very often the last one to the theatre [...] but once I'm there then nothing distracts me [...] I make a conscious effort to focus on my mind is on my character and my lines.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997a) has offered a similar notion to what is being described here, claiming that each flow-producing activity requires prior investment of attention, what he terms 'activation energy' (2.8.2), before it can begin to be enjoyable. He asserts, 'one needs such disposable activation energy to enjoy complex activities' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a: p. 68). What is clear from both the pre-flow narrative and the corresponding comments of amateur actors (above) is that this initial investment of attention is not a simple matter of switching attention from one activity to another, as would seem to be implied by Csikszentmihalyi's notion of activation energy. Rather, concentration needs to be focused on the 'here-and-now', but only on task appropriate cues and not interrupted or diverted by anything that may be irrelevant to the forthcoming activity. This is something that research participants revealed demands significant conscious effort on the part of the individual. Two of the volunteer sports coaches tell of the effort required:

[Coach #4a] you need to be prepared before you walk through the doors of the sports hall or out on to the field, otherwise if you go there and you haven't prepared then your session might fall apart because the kids will be ready and you're not.

[Coach #2a] before I start a session, whether it be that morning or 10 minutes beforehand, I tend to take a moment to clear my mind of anything

not relevant to that session. I will go over in my head the ideas for that session [...] this process could and does start straight after a session [...] when you look to next week.

[Coach #4a] you have to go into each session with a positive frame of mind and [...] whatever might have happened before the session or you know is going to happen after the session, whatever is happening around you [...] you need to put all that to one side otherwise it will reflect on what you do [...] you need to turn all of your energy [...] all of you, to that one session.

Though these comments are descriptively different from those made by the amateur actors, the need for significant individual effort to turn focus on to the activity at hand is evident. Two table tennis players describe the need for similar endeavour when preparing for a match:

[Player #3a] It's hard [...] for me, it's definitely sort of a process, I always try and begin by turning all of my attention to the up-coming match, to the point where all I am thinking about is my game and nothing else.

[Player #7b] Beforehand, I always grapple with my concentration [...] I will try and channel my attention fully into what I need to do and away from everything else that might be going on.

Clearly, the ability to control attention so as to quieten the mind, shifting focus away from the self and the concerns of day-to-day life on to preparing for the task at hand, represents an important part of this pre-flow phase. A case in point is the significant levels of concentration needed in the early stages of 'getting into character' described here by two actors:

[Actor #9b] I tend to take myself away from everyone and just close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, I think it's to clear my mind ready for what lies ahead. That period of calmness focuses me [...] it gets rid of me and leaves room for whoever I'm playing.

[Actor #7b] I definitely feel that I cut everything not to do with my performance off [...] well you have to else you're thrown and then you're not concentrating on your role. I'll try and have some time away from everyone else so that I can focus on me and my lines [...] you know [...] put everything not to do with the character out your mind [...] I usually spend

some time on my own with my eyes closed just relaxing and clearing my mind [...] from here I know when I'm ready, when I'm focused on the performance ahead.

For these actors, the tendency to isolate themselves from other members of the group helps to create an inner calm that clears the mind allowing for concentration to be wholly focused on to the impending performance. That individuals should seek to focus their concentration prior to the beginning of an activity is not unexpected, given that flow is built upon a deeply focused, all-absorbing state-of-mind (Jackson, 2000; Nakamura and Csikszentmihlayi, 2002). Furthermore, earlier in Chapter Five (5.2), the three serious leisure settings that are the focus of this research have been shown to provide a clear structure, progression of challenges, and opportunities to achieve goals, all of which are amenable to the deep involvement characteristic of flow. However, both the pre-flow narrative and the comments of research participants indicate that it takes a disciplined mind and significant conscious effort, pre-flow, to negate the many potential obstacles, what Mannell *et al.* (1988) have labelled 'psychological inertia', to reach the level of concentration sought in this initial phase. According to Mannell and his colleagues, there are moments in daily life when people are confronted with the opportunity for free-choice, as they are in leisure, there is always some natural resistance or 'psychological inertia' to overcome in choosing to engage in activities requiring higher levels of investment and effort, in leisure activities that are pursued seriously (Mannell *et al.* 1988).

Any setting has the potential to either facilitate or hinder the intensity of an individual's experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). In addition to the many possible physical environmental influences (e.g. stage lighting or coaching outdoors), research participants also revealed a number of social factors that can create an environment of

their own. For instance, a table tennis player tells of how the presence or absence of spectators creates an impact that has the potential to distract:

[Player #5] It's strange because there are times when I am totally focused on the game that I'm not aware of anybody watching, they're not important, I'm just there to play the game and that's all I'm focused on. But there are times when, perhaps when my focus isn't quite what it needs to be, that I am aware of everything and everyone around me [...] it can be really off-putting actually.

For one amateur actor the presence of family and friends creates additional expectations in the mind which can detract from the focused concentration needed in this initial phase:

[Actor #4] Knowing that you have family and friends in the audience can be quite pressuring, you kind of feel you need to raise your performance or something [...] if that's the case then you tend to focus on the whole performance as opposed to the process that gets you through, you know, the finer details that focus your concentration and allow you to perform at your best.

Add in the interactions between colleagues, as one volunteer sports coach describes, all are factors influencing the social setting:

[Coach #7] Team coaching where there are three or four of us running a number of sessions has a completely different dynamic compared to when you're coaching on your own. It's often hard to lose yourself in a session when there are a group of you working because it's a collaborative effort, very stop start. I find there is more fluency to my concentration when I'm coaching alone.

By shifting focus on to the process of pre-flow preparation, participants appear better able to channel attention away from all other task-irrelevant information and into what needs to be done in the present.

[2] *"From here it's all about building up confidence and momentum, you concentrate on the smallest thing, the smallest detail to carry you through - through to that positive state of mind where there is a strong belief in your ability and a respect for that situation, where I am relaxed and completely focused on what's in front of me."*

Still within this preparatory phase, once concentration is wholly centred on the activity at hand, structure [2] of the pre-flow narrative tells of how attention then becomes focused on to a specific goal or end state, identifiable in the pre-flow narrative as *"that positive state of mind"*. At first glance, given what is known of the intensely positive nature of experiences associated with the flow state, such a statement would appear unremarkable. However, despite the descriptive similarities, usage appears to suggest this 'goal-state' is perceived by research participants as more of a positive space or ground that must first be reached in order to perform well in an activity. As two actors discuss:

> [Actor #2a] if my preparation has gone well I'm more likely to find that positive frame of mind, that mental place, needed in order to perform at my best.

> [Actor #1a] It's all about building up momentum for when you step out on to that stage [...] you try and make it so when you step out on to the stage you are at your maximum.

> [Actor #2a] I think it's building up to a strong positive of mind, one where you know you can perform well [...] from here you know when you're ready.

Two sports coaches make similar reference to the significance of this goal state:

> [Coach #4a] It's definitely important to build up to this positive mind set, if you don't you're vulnerable and it shows

> [Coach #9b] How you prepare for a session sets the tone for that session. It is important that you work up to a positive state of mind pre-session... either by remembering or continuing positive energy from a previous

session... the overall quality of the experience to had from that session for coach and child alike is dependent on the coach finding this positive place.

It is evident from these comments that this space does, in fact, present itself in awareness and is thereby known to the individual. Furthermore, what this goal-state seems to create is an awareness of relative distance between an individual's present state-of-mind and progression towards or regression away from the desired state, as is exemplified by one table tennis player:

> [Player #2] It is important to find that personal positive frame of mind, one where you know you will play well no matter what happens during the match. But it's not as simple as wishing to find that mindset [...] I know when I start whether I'm close or not.

The goal-state referred to by research participants appears to also have significant implications for task-involvement, for just as motivation is aided by setting goals, the power of goals increases when there is high motivation to achieve them (Harackiewicz *et al.* 2002). From this perspective, placing importance on an event like this goal-state functions to energise and focus attention in this preparatory phase. But more than this, the identification of an aim or purpose of this kind seems to inspire a point toward which initial effort can be directed and behaviour concentrated, suggesting that it is not only a state-of-mind that must be reached but is one that must also be purposefully built up toward by each individual.

As is revealed in structure [2] of the pre-flow narrative, research participants came to describe this as *"building up confidence and momentum"*. The role of confidence in facilitating flow is well-established in that flow occurs only when a person perceives his/her skills as matching the challenges present in a particular setting (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988;

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Jackson, 2000). By comparison, the role of momentum is less well-known, itself an elusive and challenging concept which is still poorly understood (Burke *et al.* 2003). The notion of momentum began as a recurrent theme across descriptions derived from early group discussions, though its significance in the total act of experiencing flow was only to surface during the collaborative process of narrative construction (3.8.3). As will become evident in forthcoming sections, research participants emphasised the role of momentum for raising the intensity and quality of experience prior to flow. Its potential links to enhanced psychological functioning and performance underpin the importance of us achieving a clearer understanding of the notion of momentum.

6.2.1 Building Psychological Momentum

The phenomenon of psychological momentum predominates in the field of sports psychology, where it is broadly conceptualised as the perception of moving towards a goal following the purposeful striving for its accomplishment (see Adler, 1981; Burke *et al.* 2003; Kerick *et al.* 1990; Perreault *et al.* 1998). The onset of momentum in sport is suggested to yield enhanced psychological power that influences performance and is bi-directional. Whereas 'positive' psychological momentum reflects psychological empowerment and concomitant shifts in motivation, perceptions of control, optimism, energy, and autonomy of performance; experiencing 'negative' psychological momentum would be expected to result in the reverse effects (Burke *et al.*, 2003; Kerick, *et al.*, 2000). Changes in perceptions of psychological momentum, it is claimed, are likely to mediate performance via cognitive and affective processes (i.e. optimism, a sense of control, motivation, self-efficacy, and concentration) (Taylor and Demick, 1994). However, many of the proposed mediators have not been empirically tested, but are still speculatively used as indicators of psychological momentum (Kerick *et al.* 2000).

Though it may not be explicitly stated, the notion of momentum is not unfamiliar to theoretical descriptions of flow. Consider, for instance, the descriptive statement used in Chapter Two (2.3.1) to introduce the main features of the flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990: p. 36) reveals that the term 'flow' is a metaphor for a process:

In which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present and future.

In this statement is captured the complete, all-absorbing focus and effortless movement that comes with surrendering to the natural momentum of flow-in-action. Add to this Perry's observation that 'flow is commonly expressed using metaphors that include a sense of travel, of having to perform a physical movement through space and time to get to the place of no time, no self, and perhaps, no rationality... in the usual reality, space and time are thought of as two dissimilar concepts, which then collapse into the state of flow' (Perry, 1999: p. 22). The movement referred to by Perry demonstrates an implied sense of agency and mindfulness, of an active participation in finding flow. However, though Perry in the same study goes on to prescribe mechanisms in the form of routines and rituals designed to better facilitate this movement, these mechanisms remained descriptively limited due to a lack of empirical grounding. In contrast, when asked to describe what they did to reach the 'positive state of mind' characteristic of the goal-state, research participants from each of the leisure activities told of how they had developed personalised preperformance

routines designed to build up the necessary momentum to reach the desired goal-state. In the following passage of discussion, members of the sports coaching group talk of their own personal routines:

> [Coach #4a] How you do it varies from one coach to the next [...] I wouldn't say I have a set routine but before a session I like to feel as if I have prepared fully. I will meet with the other guys [coaches] and discuss ideas for the session. We will then put together a flexible provisional session plan [...] it is important to go into each session with at least some idea of structure, it not only channels your attention but also gives something structured for the kids to concentrate on. When this is in place I know I'm ready, that structure allows me to feel confident that I have prepared fully for the session.

> [Coach #3a] I tend to set up for a session quite early, that way I can physically walk through each drill to get a feel for how it could work.

> [Coach #5a] I think you've got to have that long term plan else we'd never get anywhere, we'd just be doing the same thing all the time. What do you want the kids to get out of the sessions? What do *you* want to get out of the session? Then, before the session, maybe twenty minutes beforehand you go over things in your mind, getting into that mindset and then you've off [...] It's all long-term building down into that very short-term planning, even to ten seconds before you start the session.

> [Coach #2a] It's the smallest thing. You concentrate on the smallest thing, the smallest detail to carry you through.

Though the notion of 'building down' may, at first glance, seem oxymoronic, it is very much central to the momentum process, representative of facilitating the 'short-term' focused concentration needed in order to achieve the 'longer-term' goal-state. For the table tennis players, the pre-game 'knock-up' functions in much the same way, as this discussion excerpt illustrates:

> [Player #1a] As I knock up I try and set out some sort of strategy of how I'm going to approach the game. What strategy I form is very much dependent on how I'm feeling.

> [Researcher] That's interesting. Can you expand on what you mean?

[Player #1a] If I've been knocking up and I don't feel right or I'm just not hitting the ball as I would like, I will tend to concentrate on just hitting the ball for the first few points, then go from there. If I'm feeling good in the knock-up, then I might decide to go for a more attacking strategy from the start.

[Player #3a] Sometimes if things aren't going to plan then you have to assess it as you go along [...] there are certain shots I like to get on the table before a game whether it's practice or match play.

[Player #2a] For me there are two steps. Firstly, I ready my mind. Secondly, I ready my body.

[Researcher] Can you describe how you do this? What do these steps usually involve [...] for you?

[Player #2a] I will prepare mentally by going through the shots, almost going over the game in my head before I even hit a ball. Then, I will start knocking up and physically go through these shots until I feel completely confident in how I feel.

[Player 4a] I try and knock up with someone of similar ability to me to allow my shots to flow so I can find my rhythm in my game. Playing a few explosive or attacking shots are good to help assure myself I'm able to play them shots if and when I should need them. As a move through and if the knock up is going well I definitely feel the intensity of my play up as well as my concentration.

For the amateur actor, "getting into character" is as varied as there are individuals. As

this collection of comments demonstrates:

[Actor #4a] I tend to break my role down into acts and then go through my lines in each act with my book in front of me. I'll then do the same again but this time without the book. If I can get through this without any major slip ups I know I'm moving in the right direction [...] doing this really helps to build up my self-confidence, knowing that the book is there but you don't need it [...] it's like you have control of the situation.

[Actor #1a] I can't look at my lines beforehand. I have to have the book there with me but it must be shut. Instead, what I will do is in my own little space I will walk through my part [...] going over my lines in my head and imagining the other characters saying their lines.

[Actor #6b] I will go over my lines once in the morning of a performance and then once backstage about ten minutes or so before I go on. My preparation is a lot more physical. I have been taught to think about the moment before you go onto stage, to think about what you are doing just

before you walk into the room or scene. You are not you walking into the room, you are your character off stage in those moments when you're waiting to come on.

Captured in these personal level descriptions of preperformance routines is a definite sense of personal agency and purpose in finding flow. Csikszentmihalyi has himself acknowledged that there are innumerable ways of achieving ordered patterns of experience necessary for flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), and yet, he has made no explicit mention of the utility of ritualised or routinised behaviour. This is somewhat surprising especially considering that it has been shown in this chapter that regularly finding a state of flow appears not to occur by chance but is, in fact, a state-of-mind that must be individually prepared for and actively cultivated by each person prior to a skilled performance. The possession of a routine may help individuals to divert attention away from negative or irrelevant thoughts and to establish the appropriate physical and mental state for the ensuing task and prevent them from devoting excessive attention to the mechanisms of their performance or movements, a habit which can unravel automaticity and impact negatively upon felt competency, and, as a consequence, the likelihood of reaching that positive state of mind pre-flow. The comments of two table tennis players best illustrates the role of the preperformance routine:

> [Player #1] Having a set routine allows me to concentrate on what's important for me to play well. It allows me to get myself right mentally and physically, so that when it comes to match play, I'm not thinking about my shots.

> [Player #5] You can think too much before a match definitely [...] If I didn't have a routine or structure to my preparation, I think my mind would wander. That structure, that routine helps me to put my mind on to my game, it channels me if you like.

6.2.2 Routine or Superstition?

The term 'preperformance routine', is indigenous to the realm of sport psychology, taken to refer to a sequence of task-relevant thoughts and actions, which an athlete engages in systematically prior to his/her performance (Lidor and Singer, 2000). In more formal terms, it is 'a systematic routined pattern of physical actions and preplanned sequence of thoughts and arousal-related cues' (Moran, 1996: p. 177). The general purpose of a preperformance routine is to put oneself in a focused, confident, and optimal emotional state immediately prior to a performance (Singer, 2002). Preperformance routines are highly valued by athletes and are proven to be directly related to flow-like states. Jackson (1992 and 1995; Jackson and Roberts, 1996) has applied the flow framework to sports situations in an attempt to determine what conditions are needed for high-level athletes to optimise their chances of experiencing flow. Jackson found that elite athletes in a variety of sports relied upon routines when preparing for competition. Having a routine and following it is an effective way of ensuring what Jackson has come to term as optimal mental and physical readiness (Jackson, 1995; Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Jackson and Marsh, 1996). In a separate study, Jackson and her colleagues found that the presence of psychological processes such as being confident and positive, feeling motivated to perform and attaining an optimal state of readiness seemed to be critical factors associated with the best performances of high-level athletes (Jackson *et al.* 1998). However, these findings reinforce the need to distinguish between flow experience and peak performance. For the athletes in these studies, the flow state is thought of as an asset in striving for excellence (peak performance) in the framework of a positive psychological state (flow) as opposed to being the overall goal of participation in the case of research participants.

In further research, Jackson *et al.* (2001) have demonstrated a moderate relationship between self-assessment of flow and performance, and identified psychological factors related to optimal experience as well as performance. Competitive athletes in orienteering, surf lifesaving, and road cycling reported that emotional control, appropriate activation level and avoidance of negative thinking were related to flow. On this evidence, it may well be that achieving a flow state is dependent on an individual developing the ability to effectively activate a relevant pre-flow routine. That said, Ravizza (2002) has reported that even at the very highest levels of competitive sport, where athletes generally have considerable mental resilience and psychological skills, they only experience flow-like states during 10 to 15 percent of the time. The fact that performers with (supposedly) superior mental skills often struggle to find flow consistently would suggest that something else is needed in addition to a relevant pre-flow routine. This may be the empirical niche needed for understanding the emerging relationship between finding flow and building psychological momentum in pre-flow, as revealed by the narrative of pre-flow experience and research participants' related personal-level descriptions.

According to Adler (1981), such routines are significant as the experience of psychological momentum is not ignited by aimless, wandering behaviour 'for any enterprise to rise above the ordinary it must be purposely directed along a conscious path toward a specific end; only this concentration can inspire the fullness of performance and intensity which characterises momentum' (p. 30). In addition to aforementioned descriptions of preperformance routines, a number of individuals told of how they often reverted to superstitious traditions in order to acquire the confidence and momentum necessary to proceed. A table tennis player said:

[Player #5b] Before a competitive match I will always check my blade and rubber then I'll always check the net to make sure it is correctly tied. I've no idea why I do this, superstition Isuppose? I'll then start to think through a game plan for the match. This is especially important if you have played your opponent before. Then I knock up. I try and complete a variety of shots, starting with my forehand, then my backhand, and finally some defensive strokes. It can take some time but eventually I reach a place where I feel ready.

For these amateur actors their preperformance routines border on the excessive:

[Actor #8b] I'm very superstitious when on a run of performances [...] I have my own set routine prior to a performance that I must do, it's something that has been with me for years. Firstly, I'll take myself away from the group [...] I'll find a little corner somewhere backstage [...] this is calming for me. Then I will go through my lines.

[Actor #3a] I won't look at my lines when I'm back stage waiting to go on, if I do I feel I don't know my lines and I become anxious. I'll leave for the theatre at the same time every evening not a minute earlier or minute later. I think once you've had a really intensely positive experience on stage you try and remember what you did beforehand so you can make sure you repeat then the next time

[Actor #4a] I suppose I have a ritual or superstition of sorts [...] It's really silly but I don't eat before a performance [...] so I leave room for my character

In the sports psychology literature (i.e. Bleak and Frederick, 1998; Womack, 1992), it has been implied that the ambiguity and high-risk (possibility of failure) inherent in sporting and similar performance-related activities, may cause individuals to seek control and certainty through the use of rituals and taboos of this kind. Superstitious behaviour typically occurs when 'people interpret random associations between events in causal, rather than correlational, terms' (Moran, 1996: p. 181). More formally, Moran has submitted a superstition as being 'a belief that one's fate is in the hands of unknown external forces and, as such, is governed by factors outside one's control' (Moran, 1996: p. 181). Womack (1992) postulated that superstitious behaviour is used by individuals as a means of maintaining emotional stability in

order to perform optimally and also as a means of dealing with conditions of preperformance stress and anxiety. These movements and mechanisms invariably evolve into predictable patterns of behaviour meant to exert perceived control over factors normally considered outside the individual's domain (Bleak and Frederick, 1998; Womack, 1992). Despite their believed prevalence, there has been very little empirical research into superstitious behaviour or rituals, their perceived effectiveness, or the underlying determinants of these behaviours (Womack, 1992). In the context of the research participants' pre-flow preparation, however, even the more excessive preperformance routines outlined by research participants appear to serve a genuine purpose in that they build up positive momentum energy, facilitating a desired shift in the intensity and quality of experience pre-flow, a shift that closer examination revealed to be dependent upon a complexity of interrelated factors.

6.2.3 Factors Influencing Confidence and Momentum

When describing their preperformance routines, research participants made a clear distinction between specific situational antecedents that are likely to facilitate perceptions of momentum and the consequences of such events and altered perceptions which lead to changes in performance. For example, two table tennis players tell how this process begins for them:

[Player #5b] It can be one shot or one block that starts it all [...] smashing a clean forehand to the edge of the table or something like that can really energise your preparation and performance to follow.

[Player #4a] I know if I am consistently hitting the areas that I am aiming for that I am moving towards where I want to be mentally and physically

Putting on the costume to be worn during a performance helps facilitate a similarly important shift in the intensity of involvement for the amateur actor, as this passage of discussion illustrates:

> [Actor #1a] Once I know what I'm going to be wearing it's like it completes my character.
>
> [Researcher] Go on, what do you mean?
>
> [Actor #1a] It's a mindset, once you dress your character it gives you an insight into who you are and how to behave.
>
> [Actor #3a] It all comes together for me when you put on the costumes [...] the whole experience just starts to feel more real.
>
> [Actor #2a] Once I have my costume on it calms me down. I'm very serene, very gentle even when speaking.
>
> [Actor #1a] It's all to do, you know, when you put your make-up and costume on [...] or it's the shoes you put on [...] it's always one thing and [...] it gives you that initial buzz that really moves you along.
>
> [Actor #5a] It's true [...] I find after I take off my normal clothes, what I was wearing before... and I do that almost as soon as I get to the theatre [...] that I become more focused and start to believe that I can put in a good performance.
>
> [Actor #1a] When you get your costume on, because it makes you stand or hold yourself differently, it starts the transition from the normal you to the you that is your character.

The act of 'dressing your character' seems to trigger a physical and mental transition in these actors, at once raising the intensity of the experience and further honing attentional focus as individuals start to become their characters. Some of the actors also described how they experienced high anxiety but were self-confident at the same time during their preperformance routines, as is captured in the following collection of comments:

> [Actor #9b] If I'm not nervous beforehand I start to worry and my mind begins to wander. On occasions I've not been nervous beforehand and I

have known that I didn't perform very well. It's as if I need to be nervous in order to feel ready, otherwise what's driving you? It's learning to harness that nervous energy and use it to your advantage.

[Actor #8b] If I'm not absolutely confident then I'm more nervous, you know, off stage. I think being badly nervous [...] deeply anxious off stage is a sign that you're not a hundred percent. If you're a hundred percent then you're relaxed [...] emotionally and mentally, but nervous at the same time. You need that nervousness there, don't you?

[Actor #7b] Yeah you need that edge, don't you?

[Actor #8b] But it's finding that balance like I say. Too much and your concentration is not right, too little and your preparation will suffer.

For these actors high anxiety is not perceived as a danger signal but a source of energy and is a message that they are nearing mental and physical readiness for the forthcoming performance. For the voluntary sports coaches, drawing on previously successful sessions provides a similar energy and confidence for their pre-flow preparation, as the comments of two coaches illustrates:

[Coach #4a] Using the energy of a previously positive experience can really help your state of mind pre-session [...] but you have to know what to concentrate on as it can have the opposite effect and totally disrupt things

[Coach #2a] It's also a matter of knowing when to forget and when to remember [...] remembering positive past performances can sometimes help you build up confidence and momentum and pushes you closer to where you want to be

It is clear from these descriptive comments that the ability to regulate arousal cues is regarded as an important and necessary step in the preperformance routines of individuals from each of the leisure groups. Implicit in these personal descriptions is that these cues are not only experienced but are interpreted by each individual. Thus, whilst such arousal cues appear necessary for individuals to experience the desired movement forwards, the individual's perceptions and ability to manage them may be

the variables most highly related to making favourable progress during pre-flow preparation.

The variance in description of research participants' pre-flow preparation underscores the fact that there are both individual and situational specific differences in how they are lived out. However, all of the research participants appeared to recognise the need to engage in some form of physical and/or mental activity that serves both to increase the energy and intensity of experience and sharpen their attentional focus prior to performance. Taylor and Dimeck (1994), support this proposing that psychological momentum is typically begun with a precipitating event or series of events. Precipitating events are proposed to trigger altered cognitions, affect, and physiological changes, which in turn influence the individual's behaviour, his or her performance, and ultimately the event outcome (Taylor and Dimeck, 1994). What is clear from research participants' descriptions is that these precipitating or trigger events are manifest in ways unique to the nature of each activity. For the sports coach, for instance, it might involve the continuation of positive energy from a recent past experience, for the table tennis player it might be hitting a perfect forehand, whilst for the actor it typically involves putting on the costume to be worn, as well as feeling the appropriate amount of nerves. Whatever form taken these 'momentum triggers' are perceived by individuals as providing initial impetus to preperformance routines. Furthermore, the comments of research participants also implicate the significance of such triggers for attentional processes, suggesting that attention is positively or negatively influenced by such precipitating events.

6.2.4 'Triggering' Positive Momentum Energy

From the evidence considered so far it would seem that the initial impact of a precipitating event is for the mind to trigger a reaction, whether outwardly displayed (e.g. enhanced performance) or inwardly controlled (e.g. honed attentional processing), this 'activation' appears to serve as a catalyst to momentum, giving the impression of psychological and physical readiness and elevated intensity of experience. Consider again, for instance, the earlier comments of this table tennis player:

[Player #6b] It can be one shot or one block that starts it all [...] smashing a clean forehand to the edge of the table or something like that can really energise your preparation and the performance to follow [...] it raises my concentration to a level I know to be right, where I kind of feel like I am totally ready whoever I'm playing.

And those of this volunteer sports coach:

[Coach #2a] It's also a matter of knowing when to forget and when to remember [...] remembering positive past performances can sometimes help you build up confidence and momentum and pushes you closer to where you want to be.

These personal mechanisms add complexity to the process of building momentum, suggesting it is how the individual reacts experientially to the circumstances of the activity setting that influence its direction, either positively (movement towards the gaol-state) or negatively (movement away from the goal-state). Support for this is found in the 'set-setting hypothesis' (Cohen, 1990; Metzer, 1989). In particular, this hypothesis states that experience is at once a function of an individual's mental 'set', the expectations, intentions, personality, values, attitudes, and beliefs conveyed into each 'setting', that is, the physical and social environment (Cohen, 1990). These additional constructs reinforce the inherently subjective nature of psychological momentum. From here, it would follow that the ability of the event to trigger positive

momentum is dependent upon its salience, that is, its capacity to alter an individual's perceptions about their performance. It is for this reason that the cognitive and behavioural contents of the research participants' preperformance routines vary considerably from one activity to another, depending upon the nature of the skills to be performed and level of experience of the performer. To this extent, research participants' preperformance routines function more as a knowledge structure or schema, informed by the existential observation that individuals actively construct their own reality. A schema is applied to any feature of the environment, physical or social, that assumes significance for the person, guiding them in the active and continuous process of seeking for meaning in their physical and social environment (Lee, 2003). In the context of research participants' preperformance routines, such physical and social environments are 'behaviour settings' (Lee, 2003), wherein activities have become routinised and may be described as events, so that each individual has to acquire event (what to do and where) and action (skilled performance) schema that become inseparable from the physical setting.

A recognisably symptomatic feature of the momentum process, evident within all research participants' descriptions, is the enhanced intensity it engenders. Once motion toward the goal-state gets underway, the sense of making clear progress yields a feeling of power and ability as participants come to recognise that they are acting closer to an optimal level of performance.

6.2.5 The need for competence and autonomy

Implicit both within structure [2] of the pre-flow narrative and research participants' descriptions of the momentum process is another important cognitive

change, that is, the individual's perception of control, as illustrated by the response of one amateur actor:

> [Actor #8] I tend to break my role down into acts and then go through my lines in each act with my book in front of me. I'll then do the same again but this time without the book. If I can get through this without any major slip ups I know I'm moving in the right direction [...] doing this really helps to build up my self-confidence, knowing that the book is there but you don't need it.

What seems to prevail is a clear sense of the ability to exercise control in a personally challenging situation. According to self-determination theory (SDT - introduced in Chapter Two: 2.3.2), such a feeling or perception that the activity is under individual control is inextricably related to felt competency, referring to an individual's capacity to deal effectively with his/her surroundings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). But self-determination is more than a capacity; it is also a need (Deci and Ryan, 1985). SDT is built upon a basic, innate human propensity to be self-determining that leads to individuals engaging in interesting behaviours, which typically have the benefit of developing competencies, and of moving toward a working and flexible accommodation with the social environment. Although the majority of research participants perceived it possible to enhance feelings of competence and control by adhering to personalised preperformance routines, others, namely members of the volunteer sports coaching group, perceived behaviour to be less controllable prior to flow independent of their personal input, as two volunteer coaches describe:

> [Coach #1] I think pre-session its important that each of us know and take in (a) what the goal or goals of the session are, and (b) our own role for the session [...] how this is done varies from one session to another, but usually there'll be a discussion or a run through of what is to be done. It's important, because knowing everything is in place helps your confidence for that session, without it self-doubt can creep in and you'll not be at your best

[Coach #6] I wouldn't say I have a set routine but before a session I like to feel as if I have prepared fully. I will meet with the other guys [coaches] and discuss ideas for the session. We will then put together a flexible provisional session plan [...] it is important to go into each session with at least some idea of structure, it not only channels your attention but also gives something structured for the kids to concentrate on. When this is in place I know I'm ready, that structure allows me to feel confident that I have prepared fully for the session.

For the volunteer sports coaches, many of whom often work in teams, there appears to be a sense of interdependence, feelings of perceived readiness dependent upon the successful co-ordination and integration of group endeavour pre-session. It is in the confluence of this collective endeavour that individuals experience as a sense of 'personal' controllability. Whatever form taken, it would appear that the events and structures that conduce towards feelings of control during this preparatory phase can enhance positive affect for action because they allow satisfaction of the basic psychological need for competence and are accompanied by a sense of autonomy. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), presented by Deci and Ryan (1985) as a sub-theory of Self-Determination Theory, specifies that feelings of competence will not enhance positive affect unless complemented by a sense of autonomy. Autonomy connotes an inner endorsement of an individual's actions, the sense that they emanate from the self, or put another way, 'the more autonomous the behaviour, the more it is endorsed by the whole self and is expressed as action for which one is responsible' (Deci and Ryan, 1987: p. 1025).

The need for competency seems to provide the energy and focus for participants' preperformance routines, the implicit experiential aim being the feeling of competence that results from effective and autonomous (or self-determined) action which in turn translates into feelings of heightened intensity of experience and

propulsion towards the goal-state. A table tennis player describes how this feeling of competence is experienced for them:

> [Player #2] When I'm consistently hitting the ball well during my warm-up, it's a reflection of my confidence [...] how I'm feeling in myself. When I'm hitting the ball well I know I'm nearing where I want to be physically and mentally for a game.

The implied linkage indicated between self-determined behaviour and finding the conditions necessary for flow to occur is supported by Kowal and Fontier's (1999) research into the relationship between flow and motivation. Using Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory to examine motivation, they found positive associations between flow and the situational motivational determinants, autonomy, competence and relatedness. Kowal and Fontier (1999) surmised that flow represents a descriptive dimension that signifies some of the purer instances of intrinsic motivation, that is, when one engages in an activity that is optimally challenging. Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) flow framework provides perhaps the fullest psychological definition of optimal challenge. The framework states that when people exercise their skills optimally, in other words, when the opportunities for action are in balance with their skills, they are more likely to experience flow. When a person perceives that the opportunities for action are too demanding for his/her capabilities, anxiety or worry will be the person's experience. Similarly, the implicit goal of research participants' preperformance routines would seem to be to gain a positive judgement concerning personal competency in relation to situational challenge.

The narrative of pre-flow experience along with the majority of descriptions offered by research participants of their preperformance routines bear the

psychological hallmark of self-determination, flexibility in managing the interaction between the self and the environment (Ryan and Deci, 2000). When self-determined, an individual acts out of choice rather than obligation or coercion. In the context of research participants' preperformance routines, these choices appear to be based on an intuitive awareness of proximity to the goal-state and a flexible interpretation of external events. In the words of one amateur actor:

> [Actor #5] It's a matter of knowing what to do and when to do it so that you can make sure you are where you need to be mentally and physically before your performance. When you have those components tied down, I think you are more likely to find that sense of confidence, that sense of belief you need to perform well.

The drive for self-determination often involves individuals intentionally controlling their environments so as to experience satisfaction of both the need for competence and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 1987). For instance, the preperformance routines of participants are supplemented with cognitive and behavioural strategies, the most common being the physical and mental rehearsal of desired movements. For example, the amateur actor may engage in the physical and/or mental re-enactment of their role, reciting lines and even performing physical movements when getting into character. The table tennis player tends to enact certain game-like scenarios incorporating the fundamental techniques in their pre-game knock-up, whilst it is not unusual for the sports coach to mentally and physically rehearse key drills for an up-coming session. By a variety of such methods, the individuals are, in effect, changing the rules of the interface between themselves and the environment, creating a relatively stable and predictable 'personal' reality. In this intuitively developed and self-paced reality it seems that participants are better able to regulate cognitive and behavioural patterns that are at once competence-building and autonomy-supportive.

Whether or not an individual makes favourable progress in this preparatory phase and experiences the joy of competency building would seem to depend upon the standards of performance the individual employs as well as the absence of detrimental (external) pressure, as these comments from the table tennis group exemplify:

> [Player #7] It's easy enough to just go through the motions before a match, you know, put in a few forehands here, the odd backhand there. But you'll not find the kind of intensity you need to play well by doing that. My knock-up always starts off pretty relaxed, not going through the motions but working my way through the shots I want to get on the table. I'll then raise the intensity a little, mixing my shots, trying to get in touch.

> [Player #4] Knocking-up before a match is a time and space to do your own thing [...] whatever it takes to find that sense that you are ready, where you are confident in your ability to perform well and not thinking about what the team is thinking or expecting of you.

By altering the evaluative criteria to more accurately reflect personal performance standards, participants' preperformance routines have sources of performance or competence feedback (Harackiewicz *et al.* 2002; Elliot and Thrash, 2001) built into them. The event of positive competence feedback has been widely studied with its presence found to enhance intrinsic motivation by affirming competence (Elliot and Thrash, 2001). This is consistent with past research on flow. Research has found that individuals who perceive that they lack the skills to take on efficiently the challenges presented by the activity in which they are participating experience anxiety or boredom, depending on how much they value doing well in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi and Lefevre, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi *et al.* 1993). For research participants, realisation of this feedback appears strictly internal; rather there is an implied kinaesthetic awareness of movements and sensations as being both familiar, in the sense that they are positively or negatively associated with momentum and

movement toward or away from the goal-state, as well as being self-determined. One amateur actor explains:

> [Actor #2] I know very early on in my preparation if I am moving in the right direction, that's the advantage of having a routine to work from [...] it allows you to gauge where you are in relation to being in the right frame of mind to perform well. The stronger the feeling is that you are moving forwards, the more confident you become in your ability to perform well. Of course the opposite can be just as true.

Though whilst executing competent skills in any activity requires this kind of 'know-how', such an awareness, notes Sutton (2007) 'can only be derived from long-repeated training, from routines and practices, from many related experiences, rather than one'. From this perspective, it follows the more experience an individual has in and of a particular setting, the more situations are likely to become familiar or meaningful and potentially controllable prior to performance (Sutton, 2007).

Though the various structures that interject participants preperformance routines do not, in a straight forward sense, determine behaviour, their recurrent appearance within the descriptive comments of members from each of the serious leisure settings studied indicate that research participants attach psychological meaning, what Deci and Ryan (1987) describe as 'functional significance', to these structures. In the words of Sutton (2007), 'we do more than understand and respond to typical sequences of events or routines: we grasp the causal connectedness of events in the personal past, and the asymmetry of experienced time'. It is this meaning which is the critical element in the determination of behaviour, and more specifically, feelings of confidence and positive momentum pre-flow. But perhaps the most recognisable feature of the momentum process, which is not explicitly stated in the pre-flow narrative but has been profoundly evident in the descriptions provided by

research participants to this point, is the elevated performance it yields. When the functional significance of events is perceived as competency-building and autonomy-supportive individuals are more likely to experience the desired confidence and momentum within their pre-flow preparation.

The emergence of this pre-flow preparatory phase substantiates the earlier claim (2.8) that, given its dynamic nature, it is hard to imagine flow to be an instantaneous manifestation of internal harmony, characterised as it is by a requisite balance between perception of high situational challenge and adequate personal skill, deep concentration, sense of control, and clear, continuous task-specific goals and feedback. Structure [2] of the pre-flow narrative has revealed that these same conditions are, in fact, present and active agents in structuring individuals' pre-flow preparation. Clear goals, immediate feedback and manageable levels of challenge orient the individual in a unified and coordinated way so that attention becomes completely focused on to the imminent performance, gradually raising the quality and/or quantity of achievement to a level judged to be more in-line with personal capacity.

[3] *"If my preparation has gone well I am more likely to achieve that balance, where all at once you feel in control, relaxed and ready for whatever might happen"*

When all has gone well in the precedent phase of 'pre-flow preparation', that is, if the individual is perceived as having made favourable progress in his/her preperformance routine, structure [3] of the pre-flow narrative tells of how it is more likely that they will realise a 'balanced' state prior to performance; the emotional rewards of which are compelling, as is exemplified in the following comments of two volunteer sports coaches:

[Coach #5a] Doing this allows me to build up to that mental place where I am both relaxed and completely focused on what needs to be done. My preparation sets the stage for my session.

[Coach #10b] If all's gone well with my prep I am more likely reach that place where I feel calm, controlled, and completely confident in my ability to do the session [...] I don't get that feeling anywhere else.

Evident in these comments is that this mindset is a state that is free from expectations, doubts or other conscious activity, built as it is upon an unwavering belief in their ability to cope with the demands of that action-context developed within the preceding phase of pre-flow preparation. Confidence of this sort is expressed by a level of composure, which is associated with a quiet mind and a relaxed body, allowing for a clear and present focus prior to skill execution. Though relaxation is referred to as an aspect of this state, it is interesting to note that relaxation in this sense is separate from the physical interpretation of the word. Instead, the term relaxation is used by research participants to describe what appears to be a focused mental clarity, a stillness of the mind, that offers individuals temporary respite from the normal chaotic workings of consciousness; a sensation of inner relaxation, as is illustrated by these two volunteer coaches:

[Coach #8b] There, in that moment, your focus turns to you and all at once you feel in control, relaxed, and ready for whatever might happen

[Coach #7b] It's more than that for me [...] it's a feeling of total readiness, it doesn't matter who you're playing, they simply don't stand a chance

Clearly, being prepared for an event and following a proven preperformance routine are important components for setting the stage for flow, to the extent that the individual feels ready and has a clear idea of what he/she is going to do during performance. The sense of 'total readiness' characteristic of this particular state of

awareness calls to mind Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) notion of optimal preparation considered in Chapter Two (2.8.2), the combination of the mental and physical components of readiness prior to flow. Knowing that everything is in place allows for the individual to focus on the task and to switch into a more relaxed mode of functioning prior to performance, as is intuitively captured in the comments of this amateur actor:

> [Actor #6b] It's all about achieving that relaxed-focus before a performance [...] marrying the two in that one moment [...] I call this the moment before, the moment before you first step out on to stage [...] a place and space where there is nothing else but my character.

Unlike in Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi's (1999) portrayal of optimal preparation, the resultant sense of total preparation, referred to above as *"that moment"* or *"the moment before"*, seems to present itself in awareness as more of a mental space or ground revealing a distinctive temporal and spatial significance, the phenomenological result of preparing physically and mentally well. Implicit in this awareness is the direct and undeniable realisation that this space is somehow prerequisite and, thus, is prior to entering a flow state, as is captured in the comments of this amateur actor:

> [Actor #9] If my preparation goes well I am more likely to find that balance [...] for the briefest period I feel totally relaxed knowing that I have prepared well and am ready both mentally and physically to perform. I suppose it's a sort of a marker, a sign that ok I'm ready now.

The apparent temporal and spatial significance of *"the moment before"* suggests the balance identified in structure [3] refers not simply to the matching of challenge and skill deemed necessary for flow but may, in fact, be meant as a euphemism for 'getting things right'; the confluence of all the positive thoughts, feelings and actions

nurtured during pre-flow preparation in *"that moment"* prior to performance. This 'pre-flow moment' is the stage for what appears to be a higher-order shift in awareness, as is now captured in component [4] of the pre-flow narrative.

[4] *"Your focus turns inwards at that crucial moment. Your mind and body seem to come together and you lose yourself letting the energy of the situation take you"*

What is evident from structure [4] of the pre-flow narrative is that participants' experiences of this pre-flow moment are definitely not blank or empty but are filled with intense, profound, and vivid perception. In fact, research participant's personal-level descriptions identified this pre-flow state as the setting for a quite distinctive shift in awareness. One of the amateur acting groups discusses what this shift feels like for them:

> [Actor #1a] When you do actually start, you forget the nerves [...] you forget yourself [...] your focus turns inwards at that crucial moment and the energy of the situation takes you
>
> [Actor #4a] But you have to let go or you lose the moment [...] the joy of acting lives in the moment, the feeling that you are doing what you are doing because that's what feels natural and that it couldn't be done in any other way than the way you're doing it
>
> [Actor #2a] I guess it's kind of like a rollercoaster [...] you just have to go with it and see where it takes you
>
> [Actor #5a] I don't think you could do it any other way [...] how could you possibly walk on stage and not totally let go?
>
> [Actor #2a] I agree, beforehand I am incredibly nervous [...] I'm awash with emotion as it were, but at *that* moment just as I am about to walk out on to stage for the first time, the nerves, my emotions simply don't matter. All that matters is what I'm about to do, that's all I'm focused on [...] everything else kind of slows down around me and then I walk on [...] completely composed

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For these actors this shift in awareness involves a letting go of the conscious controlling tendencies of their pre-flow preparation when, in the process of doing, they become totally absorbed in and connected to the task at hand, in a sense becoming what they are doing, suspending all judgements about their performances and themselves. Members of the volunteer sports coaching group described this shift in awareness in terms of a similar need to let go as they begin a session:

> [Coach #1a] when you feel the conditions are right [...] I guess you do just have to let yourself fall into that session

> [Coach #9b] It's as if you've been released from the restraints of your normal routines and given the freedom to do as you like [...] it's an exhilarating feeling

> [Coach #3a] It's like you mind and your body come together in that one moment and you're just swept off

Closer scrutiny of these and earlier comments (associated with structures 1 to 3 of the pre-flow narrative) revealed a descriptive pattern as participants shift back and forth between first and second person descriptions of their experiences of this pre-flow state, wherein there is almost a duality within themselves. Perry (1999) found a similar pattern in the flow descriptions of creative writers, suggesting that this shift is a 'linguistic tag' for the split between losing and finding the self. In her words, 'this shift is emblematic of the split between your everyday self and the self in flow, which is somehow 'other' (Perry, 1999: p. 20). Perry offers that because these shifts 'occur precisely as writers describe slipping into or out of flow, it suggests they may be experiencing a split between their non-flowing self and the self that is in flow (Perry, 1999: p. 21). If Perry's interpretation of this shift is accepted to be phenomenologically accurate then it may be claimed that what research participants are actually referring to above is them entering into a state of flow.

Unlike in Perry's study, however, research participants also drew attention to the significance of what they refer to as *'the moment'* in their descriptions of this shift, and, in doing so, make explicit the view that moving from a state of non-flow (or more accurately pre-flow) to a state of flow occupies a specific spatial and temporal presence for individuals. The recurrence of this linguistic tag revealed an apparent dual-meaning in that 'the moment' had been used by research participants as reference to two seemingly separate structures of the pre-flow experience; the other being the pre-flow moment outlined in structure [3] of the pre-flow narrative. The difference between the two only became clear in the latter stages of data analysis (3.8.3) wherein research participants were asked to read over and clarify certain descriptions whose meaning remained unclear. Research participants differentiated this second moment as a subjectively experienced moment in time, wherein there is an absolute implicit belief regarding the specific abilities necessary to perform in that action-context. Two volunteer sports coaches clarify what this means for them:

[Coach #3a] It's built on a kind of belief in [...] and respect for yourself [...] for those around you, those in the group [...] and the setting as a whole, once this is in place things will start to happen.

[Coach #4a] Yeah, there in that one moment, everything is just left behind, you leave all your emotional baggage at the threshold of the session [...] your mind is focused on what's in front of you, and you just sort of know that you're ready and that you're going to have a good session.

Confidence of this sort is expressed by a level of composure, which has been associated with a quiet mind and a relaxed body that typifies 'the pre-flow moment'. However, rather than label this as self-confidence, usage suggests a sense of trust as the individual lets go of the conscious controlling tendencies characteristic of the precedent pre-flow preparation. The respect and belief present in this particular state

of awareness implies this sense of trust is connected to previous trust-related experience in that task domain. That is, in order for the situation to become familiar enough to be deemed trust-worthy, it needs to have been experienced several times, for instance, a technique or sequence of action rehearsed several times, so that it can be recognised as one which has been done before, as being tried and tested, and the emotions connected to it are those associated not just with a state of trust, but with a state of flow. In this sense, repeated flow experiences (flow history) in such places creates a trust-related knowledge structure or schema which acts as a trigger to achieving flow. The 'letting go' that characterises the transition captured in structure [4] of the pre-flow narrative, is more accurately initiated by a sense of 'trust-in-trust', only then it seems is the individual allowed to enter into flow.

6.2.6 Moving from "Trust-in-Trust" to "Trust-in-Flow"

The emergence of trust as a threshold concept prior to flow is not entirely unexpected, for its role as a necessary precondition for flow has already been critically considered in Chapter Two (2.8.2). According to the term's originators, trust is viewed as a separate mental performance skill that is characteristic of automatic execution of well-learned movements/skills (Moore and Stevenson, 1991; 1994). A trust-state is said to be achieved when an individual is able to free themselves of expectations, fear, or other conscious activity and maintain a clear and present focus necessary to attend to the higher aspects of performance most commonly associated with experiencing flow (Thompson *et al.* 1998). It was argued previously (2.8.2) that the trust-state be more directly related to the achievement of peak performance than a state of flow. However, evidence counter to this argument was found in many research participants' descriptions of the flow experience (5.6) wherein an implicit sense of 'trust-in-flow' was reflected in the positive affect associated with the

complete investment of attention and sustained concentration and effort as the individual surrenders any concerns of the situation and suspends any concerns about doing so. Consider again, for instance, the comments of two table tennis players:

> [Player #6b] It may take a while, but once you're inside its exhilarating. It's as if your mind and body come together all at the same time [...] your bat is an extension of your arm and will do anything you tell it to [...] you don't think about what you're doing you just do it [...] there's no thought involved.

> [Player #1a] It's in such moments when I feel most free in my play [...] sometimes when you're playing you feel as if for some reason you can't completely let go, something's holding you back [...] but there are those moments when you're released and you just don't care [...] it is here where I feel I can fully express myself as a player.

The presence of this implicit sense of trust-in-flow implicates trust to be more than simply a threshold concept. Add to this that research participants' personal-level descriptions of the subtle and intuitive responsiveness which characterises experience in the particular experiential moment captured in structure [4] of the pre-flow narrative would appear to underline the importance of affective immersion pre-flow; when, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's (2006), 'we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world'. Two amateur actors tell how that experiential moment feels like for them:

> [Actor #9b] When it happens, there's no feeling like it, it's like the achievement of a higher consciousness [...] a super-awareness [...] of a mental agility, where you're free and anything is possible.

> [Actor #7b] It's as if there's a unity, a feeling of a collective-conscious [...] on-stage and off it [...] between actors and audience. There is no us and them, it's as if we're all in it together, we come together in that place feeding off one another.

Two volunteer sports coaches discuss a similar sensation:

[Coach #4] There comes a point when everything sort of merges together [...] all of your preparation, all of your aims for the session, I don't see them as being two separate things, they sort of merge into the background. You know they're there, but don't consciously have them to hand, you just let whatever happens happen, if that makes sense?

[Coach #5] I know what you mean. There's moments when I've felt like I'm not coaching at all, when that distinction between you as coach and those being coached isn't there, or is there but you're not aware of it. It is like a coming together, I suppose, and when it happens, you know you're going to have a good session.

The high-value, the meaningfulness and the intensity reported of such experience suggests that the trust-flow state of mind has a quite different scope from that of the peak performance/motor programme related conceptions developed by Moore and Stevenson (1994).

So far, the dominant theme has been the narrow, contracted focus of pre-flow preparation [structures 1 and 2 of the pre-flow narrative] and the literal and figurative 'away-from-it-all' qualities of the pre-flow moment [structure 3 of the pre-flow narrative]. But there is now evidence that within this intense contraction, indeed on account of it, individuals experience what appears to be a paradox of perception. On the one hand, attention in the trust-flow state is said to *"turn inwards at that crucial moment"* as individuals come to trust in their ability to manage competently with the demands of the imminent activity, relinquishing conscious control of their actions letting the natural energy of the activity direct them. On the other hand, some participants have also described reaching this state of mind as akin to the achievement of a 'higher-consciousness', of a 'super-awareness', or a 'mental agility', a feeling of extending beyond themselves, an opening out to the wider action-context that is invisible to the observer but is very much real and compelling in the mind of the participant. Other research participants have described the sensation of having a

'collective conscious', a fusion or blending together with the outer world that presents itself with a new intensity and clarity. In both cases, the person slips into an experience of belonging to a totality that is characterised by a depth, clarity and connectedness of experience that is higher-order, more exclusive and less readily achieved than a purely skill-related conception of experiencing a trust-flow state.

6.2.7 Trust-flow as higher-order experience

These extraordinary emotional and boundary transcending dimensions are not far removed from what Valle (1989; and later Valle and Mohs, 1998) term 'transpersonal awareness'. Experiencing this kind of awareness is described by both a deep stillness and peace and a feeling of contentment with one's surroundings and 'an open embracing of everything and everyone just as they are, which literally melts into a deep peace when I find myself able to simply *let it all be* [emphasis in original]' (Valle and Mohs, 1998: pp. 100-101). There is a greatly diminished and, on occasion, absent sense of self where 'the sense of *perceiver* and *that which is perceived* has dissolved [emphasis in original]' (Valle and Mohs, 1998: p. 100). In this transpersonal awareness the normal sense of space seems transformed to the extent that 'there is no sense of being there, of being extended in and/or occupying space, but simply being' (Valle and Mohs, 1998: p. 101). But more significantly for the present discussion concerning the trust-flow state, there is, in this awareness, a surrendering of the sense of control with regard to the outcome of one's actions and the sensation of strength and power that seems to initiate this 'letting go' (Valle, 1989). The positive sense of connectedness implicit in both structure [4] of the pre-flow narrative and research participants' comments emphasises a feeling of harmony between people and between people and the environment in terms of feeling rooted in an original sense, and the dissolution of individual boundaries. Other characteristic elements of this connected

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awareness are feelings of power and an altered consciousness of time and space. Time, it seems, stands still momentarily, so that the past is not experienced as pressure nor the future as threat, allowing for the individual to temporarily perceive and understand the structure of the action-context as one that can be trusted and successfully negotiated.

Given the proximity between research participants' personal descriptions of the trust-flow mind-set and Valle and Mohs' (1998) dimensions of transpersonal awareness, there would appear to be a very real need to reconceptualise the trust-flow state of mind to acknowledge that 'trust-in-flow' occupies a field of awareness that is higher-order than the superficial motor-programme definitions currently available. There is a depth of integrity to the trust-flow state-of-mind, itself a confluence of a profound sense of self-belief and respect grown out of personal commitment and perseverance within an action-context.

In the structure of pre-flow experience, then, the trust-flow state of mind, as captured in structure [4] of the pre-flow narrative, is a transient but necessary conduit for finding flow, experienced as a momentary resonance, a seamless fit between how an individual wants to feel (a goal-state) and the action-context in which they participate. However, the predominantly referential nature of research participants' personal accounts are descriptive only of the phenomenological conditions that structure experience at the point of transition, not the transition itself, thus how it feels to actually move from a state of non-flow (pre-flow) to a state of flow remains elusive. This is not unexpected suggest Valle and Mohs (1998), who note that some experiences and certain types of higher-order awareness do not seem to be captured or illuminated by phenomenological reflection or description. Often referred to as

transpersonal or transcendental, these types of experience differ from experience in the typical sense. The existential-phenomenological notion of intentionality is helpful in understanding this distinction (3.3.4).

To reiterate, in existential-phenomenological psychology, intentionality refers to the nature or essence of consciousness as it presents itself. Consciousness is said to be a physical object, a person, or an idea, or a feeling and is always a 'consciousness of' something that is not consciousness itself. From this perspective, the notion of intentionality implies a deep, implicit interconnectedness between the perceiver and that which is perceived that characterises consciousness. The implied inseparability of the perceiver and that which is perceived in intentional consciousness is said to be intensified in the context of higher-order experiencing (Valle and Mohs, 1998), suggesting why the actual point of transition into flow remains implicit and unlanguaged within individual personal-level descriptions.

The elusive nature of the actual point of transition posits that the act of entering flow is representative of an intuitive moment or space within or from which both intentional consciousness and phenomenal experience is manifest. This realisation underscores the importance of achieving the quiet mind and relaxed body associated with the pre-flow moment [structure 3 of the pre-flow narrative]. Quieting the mind, it seems, is necessary for it provides a reference point for feeling trust. From here, the capacity to trust and so enter flow is in direct proportion to the individual achieving a still mind and relaxed focus pre-flow. From this comes the realisation that it is the feeling of trust and not experiencing flow directly, that participants mindfully seek when they participate in their pre-flow preparation. Participants are certainly able

to distinguish between the feeling of trust and the absence of trust, as is captured in the final structure [5] of the pre-flow narrative.

[5] *"But this is a purely personal thing, you have to work hard to reach this mindset, and sometimes, for whatever reason, you just don't get that balance right and you come away having just gone through the motions"*

It is important to note here that early drafts of the pre-flow narrative did not include this final structure [5] since it evolved only as a consequence of conversations held with research participants as comment and feedback was sought on initial draft attempts of the narrative (3.8.3). In these conversations, many participants felt it important to add a final passage to emphasise the seriousness of pre-flow experience and that how this process is manifest is a purely personal affair, one requiring the investment of significant personal effort on the part of the individual. These comments will now be considered.

The seriousness component of pre-flow experience was associated with a degree of preparedness; a readiness to participate in a chosen activity at an appointed time and place to the best of their ability. For instance, two table tennis players speak of the considerable perseverance and commitment necessary to successfully negotiate the pre-flow realm:

[Player #2] It takes time to get my concentration to a level I know is right. Sometimes I will stop and use deep breaths to help me concentrate on an up-coming game.

[Player #4] It does take time. Sometimes it will take you till the second or third game to actually get going. But then you're there and you're concentrating on nothing but the table, the ball, and your opponent.

The comments of two amateur actors emphasise a similar sense of personal obligation and commitment to preparation, one that necessitates the purposeful and significant investment of energy in order to perform well:

> [Actor #1] But this is a purely personal thing. It's not a matter of waiting for things to be right, you react to the situation [...] you sometimes have to work hard to reach that mindset [...] and sometimes you just don't get that balance right and you're left just going through your lines.

> [Actor #5] There are times when my preparation runs smoothly and I can reach that place, that mental and physical space and place from where I can perform at my best. But this doesn't happen every time [...] I've experienced times when, despite my best efforts I don't reach that place, so you don't put in the kind of performance you want.

Significantly, these actors also reveal how there are occasions when an individual's pre-flow preparation does not go as intended, pushing them instead into a less intensive, though more accessible experiential state. A table tennis player added:

> [Player #1] It needs to mention that it doesn't happen all the time [...] sometimes you just don't reach that level of concentration, for whatever reason, and you come away having just gone through the motions

The following volunteer sports coaches identify the relatively unpredictable nature of the coaching session environment as one of the inherent difficulties facing the sports coach during their preparation:

> [Coach #2] There are certainly no guarantees with this kind of experience. It's something you have to work at to achieve and even harder if you want to repeat it. Your circumstances are always changing [...] what works for you in one session will almost certainly not work for you in the next, so you have to keep at it and find out what works best for you.

> [Coach #4] If there is belief in your ability to coach and a respect for that situation... then you are more likely to throw yourself into a session, if not, you tend to just go through the motions.

[Coach #5] You can sometimes go through whole sessions just coasting and not really hit this type of experience [...] you don't hit this type of experience every time you coach, often the natural path of the session means you're not able to put the necessary concentration and energy together.

Clearly, then, the seriousness component found to foreground so much of pre-flow experience is characterised by an important degree of commitment to the core activity, whether it be amateur theatre, playing table tennis, or voluntary sports coaching. Though a point that must be understood is that individuals become committed to a leisure role (either as actor, player, or coach) based on their deepening involvement in and attachment to its highly valued core activities (a process elaborated upon in post-flow and in Chapter 8); individuals will discover in the course of their involvement therein just how fulfilling the core activity can be (Stebbins, 2007a).

Inclusion of this final structure [5] of the pre-flow narrative has demonstrated the crucial fact that the act of finding flow in serious leisure retains an elusive quality, even when an individual possesses a tried and trusted mode of pre-flow preparation. Here again, in pre-flow experience, the seriousness component of flow-based serious leisure (5.10) is evinced in that the more serious an individual is about their preparation, the more likely they are to persevere in order to achieve the elusive yet necessary balanced state-of-mind associated with finding flow. The commitment and perseverance associated with such activities can help to facilitate flow by way of structuring experience taking on the form of a clear set of rules and procedures that have, over time, become associated with personal engagement, concentration, and effort toward meeting challenges and achieving personal goals. The associated activities are likely to be preferentially selected and cultivated in the form of

personalised preperformance routines. Put simply, it could be said that the more an individual invests in the activities in which they choose to participate, the more serious these activities will become and the more likely they are to create ways of experiencing and maintaining flow therein.

As has been demonstrated in structures [1] through [5] of the pre-flow narrative, the flow state is intentionally sought and prepared for by each individual. At first glance the notion of preparing for leisure appears counter to some traditional paradigms of leisure because it negates the element of choice, and freedom of choice and freedom from obligation (to self or to others) that have been traditionally cast as necessary preconditions for leisure to occur (Kelly, 1996; Neulinger, 1981; Parker, 1983). From a flow perspective, the idea of preparing for what was originally conceived as play-related experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971) would also appear problematic since it violates the fundamental conditions of freedom and spontaneity on which it is based. However, precedent analysis of the pre-flow narrative has shown that this notion of freedom is undergone by the seriousness with which these activities are pursued by individuals, which is likely to be characterised by a sense of necessity, obligation, and commitment expressed by self-discipline and regimentation, involving the rehearsal and practice of behaviour and technique. That an individual must invest time and energy to experience flow is supported by a bank of research (Delle Fave and Massimini, 1988; Mannell *et al.* 1988) that has shown that, contrary to expectations, freely chosen but extrinsically motivated activities produced the highest levels of flow. For instance, Delle Fave and Massimini (1988) have emphasised the importance of freely chosen obligations for setting the structure for flow to occur; they consider that 'given the freedom to choose, some people may need the feeling of compulsion, obligation to self or others or long term commitment

to overcome resistance to engagement in activities that require an investment of effort but as a consequence produce higher levels of intrinsically satisfying flow' (Delle Fave and Massimini, 1988: p. 302). The seriousness component of flow-based serious leisure experience, the need for personal commitment, persistence and perseverance in order to find flow in serious leisure activity, not only contradicts the positive psychological stance of contemporary flow discourse, but also suggests that negative experience cannot be avoided or ignored and that the positive and negative facets of experience may in fact be interrelated, as was suggested by Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003), see Chapter Two (2.7). Flow-based serious leisure experience certainly appears to be fundamentally constituted by the basic dialectic between positive and negative experience in that individuals must occasionally persevere in order to achieve the elusive yet necessary balanced state-of-mind associated with finding flow.

In the context of pre-flow experience, it is the person's personal positive commitment of self that indicates this willingness to undertake a disciplined physical and/or mental effort in order to leaven spontaneity with disciplined effort (and occasionally perseverance) to achieve the required intensity of experience. To speak of the commitment and obligation associated with pre-flow experience is to speak not about how people are prevented from or restricted when entering certain serious leisure activities, but instead is about a state of mind, an attitude in that an individual feels obligated to participate, and a form of behaviour in that a person must perform a particular course of action. Notwithstanding the inherent sense of obligation and commitment, the action contained therein is still perceived as being voluntary and discretionary. That such characteristics may still fit within the context of leisure is supported by the fact that the activities are selected with this experience in mind.

To summarise, finding flow in serious leisure is most certainly not a transitionless, instantaneous manifestation, rather pre-flow experience has been shown to consist of emergent and transitional states of mind; a collection of interrelated sequences of transaction between an individual and their environment that subsumes personal meanings associated with the challenges of a particular leisure setting and cognitions related to individual competence within its core activities. Over time and through continuous commitment and perseverance, these personally meaningful transactions are woven together to create personal pathways with varying temporal and spatial qualities that when successfully negotiated, culminate in a peculiar, dynamic, and holistic sensation of trust in and total involvement with the activity itself.

Interestingly, the high degree of personal variance in how research participants experienced the emergent structures found to constitute the act of finding flow, as revealed by the pre-flow narrative of experience, was offset by comparatively homogenous description of what occurs after flow captured in the narrative of post-flow experience in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Narrative of Post-flow Experience

[1] *Because I'm too focused and involved during such an intensely positive experience there's no room for anything else, it's only afterward when my focus is less intense when I find the most enjoyment, that's the real high.* [2] *Afterwards I will have an initial period on my own, some quiet time to collect my thoughts and reflect on what happened.* [3] *It's not until later that I will look for something more, from other people. These conversations are important because you do look to gain some kind of feedback, you're always trying to grow and improve.* [4] *When you start to talk about things in more depth... that's when you get a real sense of how well you've done... it allows you to place your experience. It's through such reflection and conversations that you get to know who you are.*

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[1] *"Because I'm too focused and involved during such an intensely positive experience there is no room for anything else, it's only afterward when my focus is less intense when I find the most enjoyment, that's the real high"*

Depicted in this opening structure [1] to the post-flow narrative is an explicit recognition on the part of research participants that awareness in flow differs from that in everyday reality. The holistic sensation that individuals feel when they act with total investment means the flow-state tends to remain impervious to conscious introspection or attentional control (Moran, 1996), for conscious flow is essentially broken flow. Such is the intensity of involvement in moments of flow that 'the individual is said to not even consciously acknowledge that he is flowing much less

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elaborate and comment on the experience and its meaning' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 90). The transcendental nature of flow experience (2.3.3) posits that in the realm of flow as it is lived, or as it has been termed in this research 'flow-in-action', there is no obvious self. From a phenomenological view point, Husserl (in Idhe, 1986: pp. 44-52) has noted how minimal self-consciousness is during such experiences:

> When we consider the most astounding, the most vital, the most involving experiences of our lives, those times when we felt the most alive, we find here the '*I*' is minimally self-conscious; indeed, during such times there seems to be little or any *I*-related experience... It is only once the experience has ended, when we return to it in order to give it qualitative and descriptive meaning, that the '*I*' takes centre stage.

It is only after the task is completed, then, that an individual can look back on what has happened; only then, in retrospect, is enjoyment found, as this selection of comments exemplifies:

> [Actor #7b] You don't really enjoy the experience until the end [...] you can't, else you will fall out of character and out of your lines

> [Actor #5a] I'm so focused when I'm performing [...] so into my character and the story it's like there is no room for anything or anyone else, not even you. But when the curtain comes down you're let back in and the feeling is just so intense [...] so rewarding.

> [Actor # 4a] There's no feeling like it, when the curtain goes down and you know you've performed well, that's the real high.

> [Actor #2a] It's the sense of achievement afterwards [...] the buzz that comes with the realisation that I did that [...] it was me out there.

> [Actor #8b] For me, when we've finished a performance, it's like I have completely switched off from what we were doing [...] like I was

somewhere else when I was performing [...] somewhere I can't get to normally.

[Coach #1a] You can't really enjoy a session [...] or know properly that a session has gone well till you stop [...] you're just so involved in what you're doing out there that enjoyment doesn't come into it [...] not till the end anyway.

[Coach #3a] after a great match, where I've really played well, I am totally buzzing and just want to tell everyone about it.

These comments evoke the implicit 'prereflective' nature of the flow state. It was noted in Chapter Two (2.8.3) that when the act of experiencing flow is analysed from a phenomenological perspective, the individual first experiences flow and then follows that experience with an attempted explanation or description of it. As it is, the experience of flow itself, as it takes place, stands beyond the realm of description or explanation, and as such is said to be prereflective. Dilthey (1985) has suggested that in its most basic form 'lived experience' involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life; a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself. From a phenomenological perspective, in the process of any experience taking place, no explanation or description can be given; it is only after an experience has occurred, in what is recognised to be 'reflective' experience that an individual can attempt to describe and explain it in any degree of adequacy.

As van Manen (1998: p. 36) so aptly puts it, 'there is a determinate reality-appreciation in the flow of living and experience... a 'lived' experience has a certain essence, a quality that we only recognise in retrospect'. Evidence was presented in Chapter Two (2.8.2) of Csikszentmihalyi's implicit recognition of flow's prereflective nature where he notes that 'it is later - in thinking back on the [flow] experience,

individuals will usually conclude that for the duration of the flow episode, their skills were adequate for meeting demands - where the most intense enjoyment is to be found' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 44). Though phenomenologically accurate, Csikszentmihalyi's claim that enjoyment is only to be found later 'when thinking back on flow' is hardly unexpected given that flow experience can evidently only ever be consciously realised *after* a flow episode. In this sense, reflective experience is not consequential in the act of experiencing flow, as Csikszentmihalyi would suggest, but is, in fact, integral to that experience, in that it is only in reflective experience that an individual can 'know of' flow at all. Not all research participants, however, associated experience immediately after such an intensely involving activity with a profound sense of enjoyment. Counter to Csikszentmihalyi's portrayal of post-flow experience as being the province of deeply enjoyable experiences, members from each of the leisure groups described how for them this initial reflective phase was initially experienced far less positively, as this collection of comments demonstrates:

> [Actor #1a] Straight after such an intense experience, I mean, I do feel I come down from it, down from a high that I just don't get anywhere else. But that's just part of being an actor I suppose.

> [Actor #7b] Afterwards there's a period where things are slowly coming back to normal, where you're coming back down from wherever you've been during that performance like you were somewhere and someone else.

> [Player #2a] When I've played well, when the game's over, I do feel as if I come back to reality almost. You know, I was just so in touch with my game that I wasn't thinking about anything else but playing.

> [Coach #5a] There is a feeling, immediately after these kinds of sessions that you're almost dragged back to the real world, and you know you've got to wait till the next session to have a chance of experiencing, of feeling that way again. That's why, I think, you come back [...] it's that search isn't it?

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These comments give an empirical body to a previously made theoretical proposition (2.8) that given its intense, all-absorbing nature, one cannot be in flow in its purest sense at all times. The sense of 'coming down', of 'returning to reality' captures well the movement from the higher-order awareness that characterises the flow state outlined in Chapter Five back to somewhere near the normal or baseline state of consciousness the individual had worked so hard to leave behind during their pre-flow experience. However, even this coming down is subject to the inherent prereflective-reflective dynamic of 'lived' experience, now further accentuated in structure [2] of the post-flow narrative.

[2] *"Afterwards I will have an initial period on my own, some quiet time to collect my thoughts and reflect on what happened"*

A clear distinction is made in structure [2] of the post-flow narrative between the experience as it happens (prereflective experience or flow-in-action), and subsequent interpretation of that experience (reflection), a distinction, as noted in Chapter Two (2.8.3), so rarely made in theoretical descriptions of flow that they are both assumed to be one and the same unitary *flow* experience. Presented in Chapter Two was further evidence of Csikszentmihalyi's apparent, though descriptively limited, recognition of the presence and import of this post-flow reflection where he notes 'realisation and elaboration take place when the action has ceased: where there is opportunity to solidify the experience through reflection' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: p. 47). However, unlike Csikszentmihalyi's implicit and often limited references as to the nature of post-flow experience, research participants' personal-level descriptions make explicit the presence of a post-flow reflective phase. Individuals from each leisure group reported that immediately after a period of such intense involvement,

there is invariably a period of reflection, wherein the individual looks inwardly in an attempt to make sense of what has happened during flow-in-action (prereflective experience). The following collection of comments is illustrative of how research participants described this post-flow 'reflective' phase:

> [Actor #1a] On a run of performances I have a period of maybe five or ten minutes afterwards where I just collapse and just be [...] some quiet time where I can sit and reflect on my performance just gone [...] what went well, what could I have done better?

> [Actor #5a] After I've finished a performance I'm buzzing [...] I tend to rest, and look back on my performance [...] try and make some sense of what has just gone on [...] picking out the good from the bad.

> [Coach #3a] You have to have a period [...] say 10, 15, 20 minutes afterwards to step back and think about what you've done. Kind of taking stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the session so that you can take those strengths into the next session and work on the weaknesses.

> [Coach #10b] But there are times when you don't have time to reflect, like when you have got three or four consecutive sessions. More often than not the next group are sat on the fringes of the session you're running and as soon as you have finished it's like, "ok we're next". It's only when I have completely stopped that I can then spend some time on my own looking at how well sessions have gone.

Captured both in these comments and in structure [2] of the post-flow narrative is how this initial reflection is typically experienced in isolation from other people, allowing for a quiet mind and for focus to be turned toward determining the nature of what was experienced. It is important to note here, however, that this initial post-flow reflection does not appear to change what was experienced in any way, instead, according to Karlsson (1993: p. 52) 'it merely brings to light or discloses that which was concealed in the actual living... bringing that which was lived to the level of the known'. It is in reflective experience that an individual attempts to provide some level of significance or meaning to prereflective experience, this meaning is at once person and context

specific, based as it is on the person's interpretation and understanding of a 'lived' situation (Reinhard, 2000). The emphasis upon individual interpretation within this initial reflective phase resonates with an individual constructivist approach to meaning-making.

6.3.1 Post-flow Reflection: the realm of individual constructivism

Individual constructivism proposes that knowledge is constructed by the mind's ability to actively explore and develop its own meaningful accounts of experience (Watkins, 2000). In the context of post-flow reflection, the source of such knowledge would appear to be generated from individuals' previous and concurrent interactions with their leisure settings and through their ability to reason about and symbolically transform these interactions into personally constructed meaningful interpretations of flow-based serious leisure experience. This discussion excerpt from two table tennis players best captures the nature of this interpretation:

> [Player #3a] You tend to get a natural sense of how well you've done when you're looking back on a match, you know, my forehand was sharp today or my backhand was a little off in the first game [...] and, that performance was better than in my last match or that last performance wasn't as good as last week's. You get all this information and somehow you've got to make sense of it.

> [Player #2a] Yeah, but like you say, you kind of already know how well you've done, you know, immediately afterwards [...] I think what you're talking about is actually understanding the details of a performance, you know, what worked well for me what didn't work so well and how can I improve for next time. You can never just finish a match and just walk away, there's always a period, whether its immediately afterwards or 20 minutes afterwards, there's always a period when you try and piece together how well you've done.

Knowledge formed in this initial reflective phase is subsequently represented as a symbolic interpretation that conveys meaning for the individual, with any changes in meaning understood as the ability to develop more complex interpretations that fit

with an individual's changing abilities in relation to that serious leisure setting. Empirical support for an individual constructivist interpretation of leisure meaning appears in the work of Lee *et al.* (1994), Samdahl (1992), and Shaw (1985). For example, Shaw constructed the definition of leisure as a subjective phenomenon that arises out of interaction and to be a function of individuals' capabilities to symbolically transform or modify their interpretations of those interpretations.

As has been captured in research participants' comments (above), the awareness of self that follows a flow experience, in this initial reflection, often includes recognition of enhanced and extended skills and a broader reach of understanding and mastery of a situation. The furtherance of personal skill is in keeping with the growth-producing nature of experiencing flow (2.6). The phenomenology of flow suggests the self emerges when consciousness comes into existence and becomes re-aware of itself as information about the body, subjective states, past memories, and the personal future; the self-concept (how we define ourselves) then becomes organised around this information and is typically experienced as being more complex than before. In order to continue experiencing flow, individuals must then identify and engage progressively more complex challenges (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). An amateur actor captures well flow's growth-producing nature when describing their own post-flow experience:

> [Actor #6b] There comes a realisation that that was me out there [...] I did that [...] it gives you a massive boost, an injection of self-confidence, to know that you did your job and you did it well [...] and you take that confidence into your next performance, it allows you to look for something more [...] you kind of challenge yourself to better your last performance, you know, I could do this better or I could be more convincing when I say a certain line.

Implicit in this and other comments made by research participants about this initial reflective phase has been the desire for continuity and progression of such experience to the extent that the sense of an enlarged sense of self functions not only to reinforce the action and intrinsic motivation that brought it about in the first place, but also seems to create expectations for future action within that action-context. Two volunteer sports coaches discuss the significance of such continuity and progression of flow-related leisure experience for them:

> [Coach #4a] Having such an intensely positive experience coaching, when everything has come together and worked [...] when you really feel that you got through to the kids, that they were as into your session as you were, you do, I know I have, you try and replay what you did in your mind so you can take that positive concept with into your next session.

> [Coach #1a] Yeah, but by having this totally positive session, you naturally raise expectation, not just in your own eyes but also in the eyes of whoever you've just coached. So the next session needs to be bigger and better. But this is why you keep coming back because you always want to improve on your last session, else where's that progression?

> [Coach #4a] Absolutely, it's that progression that drives you.

These comments would indicate that the act of experiencing flow is at once a function of how attention has been focused and effort directed in the past and how it is focused and direct in the present. Again, phenomenologically speaking, this is to be expected, as DeGrandpre (2000: p. 724) writes, 'meaning frames our sense of reality as we move through familiar contexts (at all levels of awareness), guiding action in a manner that produces other meaningful outcomes, the anticipated meanings of which, if consciously anticipated at all, are themselves defined by past experiences'. From this perspective, it follows the more experience an individual has in and of a particular action-context, the more situations are likely to become familiar, such that meaning stretches out across both sides of action.

The flow framework's dominant individual constructivist stance towards post-flow reflection would indicate individuals continually redefine their definitions of flow-related leisure experience and through it themselves. This would suggest the primacy of individual construction of flow experience, and the secondary and derivative value of thought and talking as if acquisition of explicit knowledge about the activity or explicit memory of that activity is an incidental by-product of skilled performance as opposed to a contributing factor in the exercise of that performance. However, this stance does not appear to be supported by the latter components of the post-flow narrative which in fact suggest a high degree of shared meaning as individuals later turn to others for feedback on their respective performances.

[3] *"It's not until later that I will look for something more, from other people. These conversations are important because you do look to gain some kind of feedback, you're always trying to grow and improve"*

In structure [3] of the post-flow narrative, research participants tell of how this initial post-flow reflection is followed by an active search for some sort of external or social validation of personal experience from other people. For these table tennis players, for instance, this interaction is an important and necessary source of performance feedback:

[Player #6b] Straight after a really intense, exciting match I tend to just sit down on my own and reflect on my own performance. It's not until later that I will look to other people and get into conversations about how well I played.

[Player #2a] It is only afterwards when I have stopped playing that I tend to sit down and spend some time going over what happened in the match [...] after that I talk to people about my matches [...] these conversations are

important as you do learn from other players, even if it is how not to play a certain shot [...] you're always picking up things.

[Player #1a] I will go over a match I've played well in with who ever will listen. Especially if they've been watching the match, you're also looking for that feedback because you're always looking to improve [...] you're never happy with where you are.

The amateur actors tell of a similar search for feedback post-performance:

[Actor #3a] After every performance, you do look to gain some kind of feedback as to how well you've done, either from your colleagues or from the people you know in the audience.

[Actor #2a] these conversations, I think have two functions [...] it's sharing in your happiness [...] sharing your enjoyment with others and knowing that they've enjoyed it too. But they're also an important source of feedback about your performance.

[Actor #1a] We're human beings at the end of the day [...] everybody likes to know that they've pleased or done well [...] It doesn't matter who you are, there's nothing better than someone saying to you – you did that really well [...] that's a lovely feeling and it's all part of the process of growing as an actor.

For the volunteer sports coach, conversations held post-session are a valued source of evaluation, as this discussion excerpt demonstrates:

[Coach #7b] After such an intensely positive session, I always spend some time evaluating my session [...] there's an initial period where I will spend some time collecting my thoughts, reflecting on the session if you like.

[Researcher] So what happens then?

[Coach #7b] Then I'll look for something more [...] this is where the other coaches come in [...] we're a close group, we are always asking each other about how our sessions have gone, this feedback is important. It's important because without the constant evaluation you don't get that progression in your sessions [...] that movement forwards.

[Coach #8b] As we usually work in teams, you do look to your colleagues for some form of feedback so that you can gauge the effectiveness of your session.

[Coach #9b] We do have an environment where we all feel comfortable commenting on each other's work.

It is clear from these comments that the conversations held in these interactions are not only deemed important for the giving and receiving of feedback but more importantly are where individuals start to piece together a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of the experience. These findings are highly similar to those of Patterson *et al.* (1998) in their research into the quality of recreation experience (2.5.1). In their study participants reported spending a period of time immediately following an experience analysing and sorting through what occurred. Patterson and his colleagues see the meaning that leisure practitioners create 'post leisure episode' as being the enriching content of leisure experiences and that these meanings become whole within the context of stories that people tell about themselves and others.

Considered together, the findings of this research and those of Patterson et al. are evidence thus that the 'realm of meaning' (3.3.1) is not itself locked within a purely personal existence, as would seem to be endorsed by Csikszentmihalyi's individual constructivist stance toward post-flow experience. Rather, in the words of Polkinghorne it seems to 'transcend us as individuals as we communicate our personal thoughts and experiences to others, and as we, in turn, participate as learners and viewers of their experiences' (Polkinghorne, 1988: pp. 15-16). Berger and Luckman (1991) would seem to reinforce the import of such post-flow interaction, asserting that conversations are the central instrument in the act of reality-maintenance, wherein the meaning of experience is ongoingly affirmed and reaffirmed in the individual's

interaction with 'significant others'. Significant others suggest Berger and Luckman (1991) serve to maintain subjective reality, occupying a central position in the economy of reality-maintenance in social settings. For the serious leisure groups of this study, the identity of these significant others varied from group to group. For the volunteer sports coaches, for instance, feedback from colleagues and those being coached are used to determine the nature and quality of each session. For the table tennis player, comments from team-mates and opponents help in placing the standard of performance following a match. Finally, the amateur actor may turn to fellow performers, friends and family in the audience, and even critic reviews to gauge how well they have performed during a production.

The clear emphasis on 'others' pertains to a social constructivist approach to meaning construction and reflects the basic existential fact that subjective reality must stand in relationship with an objective reality that is socially defined.

6.3.2 Social Constructivism: the search for social validation

Social constructivism proposes that knowledge is created by groups of individuals rather than by individuals as claimed by individual constructivist approach outlined earlier. From the perspective of social constructivism, knowledge is viewed as 'a collaborative inter-subjective construction and is appropriated by individuals from socially organised practices of the group in which they participate' (Watkins, 2000: p. 99). The meaning of leisure experience is, thus, embedded in participatory forms of social practice and, as such, is subject to the structuring influences of traditional processes and socio-cultural beliefs that surround these practices (Hamilton-Smith, 1991).

It is not possible to tell from this study whether this social feature of post-flow experience came about due to the inherently social nature of the serious leisure activities studied. It is possible this social dimension of post-flow experience would be less apparent in more individually-based serious leisure activities such as stamp collecting or angling for example, due to differing interpretative repertoires (Billig, 1995). That said, MacIntyre (1981) argues that the individual actions or individual agents responsible for action cannot be identified in isolation from the context and traditions in which they are embedded. From this perspective, phenomenologically speaking, conversations held and the stories individuals tell of their respective experiences are significant as they represent the principle tool for the individual in constructing the meaning of a particular flow-related leisure episode.

[4] *"When you start to talk about things in more depth… that's when you get a real sense of how well you've done, it allows you to place your experience. It's through such reflection and conversations that you get to know who you are"*

Conversations held in this post-flow phase appear to be an important vehicle in understanding what has been experienced, allowing individuals to talk through various elements of experience and allocate them a definite place through meaning. Research participants' descriptions of this social validatory phase of post-flow experience revealed an inherent narrative scheme, one wherein individuals create narrative descriptions for themselves and for others about their own past actions, and develop storied accounts that give sense to the behaviours of others (Polkinghorne, 1988). Two amateur actors tell of how this narrative meaning may subsume the assessment of strategies, and techniques as well as the performance outcomes:

[Actor #1a] A few days after a performance [...] when we start to talk about it in more depth [...] that's when you really start to understand your performance. People say things like you did this really well or you were really convincing when you said this [...] it's then when you get a real sense of how well you did.

[Actor #5a] Yeah definitely, these kind of conversations often become very deep and meaningful taking in everything [...] your performance, your approach, how you held yourself on stage, your voice projection when saying this line, how convincing you were when saying that line [...] you try and take it all in, even more so when you've had a great performance because you just want to repeat that feeling again and again.

[Actor #4a] We do go over performances gone by, we do it all the time when we're all sat around chatting. But that's part of the process of enjoying it [...] you do sit around and tell the same stories [...] but it's through such stories and conversations and reflection that you get to know who you are as an actress.

Such narrative description also takes on the norms and values of that particular leisure group by providing positive models to emulate and negative models to be avoided, as two table tennis players discuss:

[Player #7b] On match nights we will go up to the bar afterwards where we'll usually run through our matches, it's then when you get a real idea of how well you played. It certainly makes you feel good about yourself and for me raises my confidence for my next match. Of course, the opposite is true [...] if people say negative things about your match play then it can knock you back.

[Player #8b] It works two ways, if you're playing well it sort of reinforces what you have done, but if you go on a bad run, then it reinforces whatever form you are in [...] your mind-set follows form.

But this narrative meaning is not static, rather it is continually shifting through reflection and recollection, and by doing so, facilitates the continuity and progression of experience through the creation of intentions and expectations about performance that provide future focus for attention, as three of the volunteer sports coaches describe:

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[Coach #6b] When a session has gone really well and you're getting positive feedback too, it's a great feeling. You just feel a bigger and better coach, don't you [...] But that intensity afterwards raises the level for your next session because you want to feel like that again, you want to better that last session.

[Coach #10b] Sometimes you will be having a random conversation about a session you did last week and somebody will start talking about how they thought certain bits went. It all counts as feedback which allows you to place your experience, you know, that was a good session because [...] or that wasn't a great session I might need to rethink what I did.

[Coach #8b] there's always different opinions, people see things in different ways [...] people have different opinions of themselves as coaches, and these opinions [...] these perceptions aren't static [...] they're constantly changing.

It could be claimed that such narrative explanation of flow-related leisure experience is 'retroactive' (Polkinghorne, 1988) in that it clarifies the significance of events that have occurred on the basis of the outcome that unfolds. Hence, it is legitimate to say that the processes that constitute post-flow experience, considered so far, from perceiving and reflecting, to thinking and talking, are ways in which some fundamental effort after meaning seeks expression.

In this sense, post-flow experience stands as a subjective experience that integrates three different but interrelated levels: the individual, significant others, and the place or leisure setting. The first, *individual*, level comprises of the initial subjective interpretations of the individual of his/her personal skills and competencies as they attempt to provide some degree of significance and meaning to their actions. The second level concerns the social interaction with *significant others* as individuals start to collaboratively put together a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of their experience. The third and final level subsumes the relations with the *places or settings* in which leisure experiences occur. During leisure time people relate to

different places or settings, with this affiliation comes the realisation that specific places contribute to specific leisure experiences. The terms 'place dependence' and 'place attachment' were used in Chapter Five to refer to the phenomenon of human-place bonding. The evolvement of meaning in perception and the giving of meaning to an environment or setting through action are integral to the process of meaning construction (DeGranpre, 2000). It is this interaction between the individual, significant others, and the leisure setting that defines the overall meaning of flow-related leisure experience for an individual. The multi-dimensional and dialectical nature of post-flow experience captured in the post-flow narrative reveals a complexity that is certainly not evident in contemporary expressions of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework.

As a consequence of this dialectical process, individuals can learn more about themselves as active and interactive beings. For example, based on the success or failure of an individual's efforts, and the feedback he/she receives from others around them, that person may come to see themselves as a competent actor, table tennis player, or sports coach. According to Taylor (1989: p. 28), 'to know who you are is to be oriented in a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad... what has meaning and importance and what is trivial and secondary'. The individual and social constructivist dimensions of post-flow experience appear to constitute a bounded and defining space within which to forge a positive identity. In this sense, it could be claimed that selfhood (who we are) and the good (captured most profoundly in flow) are inextricably intertwined themes essentially tied up with what the individual is committed to, what is valued and what the individual strives for in their leisure.

The central project of post-flow experience is essentially that of personal growth and development, or more specifically, of differentiation, of moving an individual forward, and of integration, establishing a union with significant others, with ideas, traditions and values that transcend the boundary of the self. However, analysis of the post-flow narrative has shown that it is only in the bounded and defining space of post-flow experience that these two broad-ranging psychological processes come together and shape our inner and social character. But a range of factors can affect the individual's capacity to fulfil this project. Meaningful or symbolic differentiation and integration depends upon such criteria as commitment from participants, high levels of effort and skill in the activity, time involvement, and willingness to maintain and/or increase their involvement in the activity in the future. This would indicate that the seriousness component already found to be present both within pre-flow experience as well as flow itself extends further still into the realm of post-flow experience, and, as such, further substantiates its emerging significance in the act of finding flow.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

As a medium of data representation, the use of narrative meaning has enabled the researcher to capture nuanced descriptions of the specific situations and action sequences that constitute pre- and post-flow experience that are stringent in meaning and interpretation. Furthermore, the use of narrative description has turned out to have analytical significance, enabling the researcher to trace out the temporal and sequential meaning of events and psychological processes that coalesce to form pre- and post-flow experience as it is 'lived-out' by individuals. As such, this chapter has provided the first empirical glimpses into the phenomenology of pre- and post-flow

experience, revealing compelling evidence that the flow narrative extends further and is far more complex than is currently conceived.

In this chapter, deconstructive, interpretative analysis of each narrative of experience has shown there to be so much more to the act of experiencing flow than the experientially isolated, transitionless, and instantaneous realisation of internal harmony depicted by contemporary expressions of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework. More accurately, flow has been found to be a single state of mind in what is a much wider multi-phased, multi-dimensional experiential process. Firstly, the narrative of pre-flow experience has shown that the flow state must be intentionally sought and prepared for by each individual. This preparatory phase consists of emergent and transitional states of mind; a collection of interrelated sequences of transaction between an individual and their environment embodying personal meanings associated with the specific challenges of a particular leisure setting and cognitions related to individual competence within its core activity of amateur acting, playing table tennis, or coaching sport. The embodied meaning conveyed by an individual into the interaction between themselves and a leisure activity will typically, over time and through continuous commitment and perseverance, evolve into personal pathways in the form of routinised patterns of action that when successfully negotiated, culminate in a peculiar, dynamic, and holistic sensation of trust in and total involvement with the activity itself; a necessary precursor for entering into a state of flow.

Secondly, emphasizing flow's prereflective nature, the post-flow narrative of experience has shown how realisation, translation and elaboration of the meaning associated with each phase of flow-related serious leisure experience (both pre-flow

and flow itself) can only occur after the flow has stopped. Research participants have reported that immediately after a period of such intense involvement, there is invariably a period of self-reflection, wherein the individual looks inwardly in an attempt to make sense of what has happened. This initial phase of post-flow reflection is then followed by an active search for some sort of social validation of personal experience from significant others (e.g. fellow group members, family, friends). The conversations held in these interactions not only provide an opportunity for the giving and receiving of feedback but, more importantly, are where individuals start to piece together a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of the 'lived' leisure experience. Finally, the post-flow narrative has also shown that when associated with personal interest and cultivated in a context of social support for challenge-seeking and self-expression, flow-based serious leisure experience represents a meaningful source of personal growth and development representing the principle motivational drive for an individual's continued involvement in a particular leisure setting.

When considered together, the descriptive accounts of flow-based serious leisure experience captured in Chapter Five and the narratives of pre- and post-flow experience presented in Chapter Six have shown that in order to understand the true meaning of what it is to experience flow it must be considered as a broader experiential whole, interpreted as an element in a process, as opposed to its more traditional treatment as a monistic experiential state. From this process perspective, Chapters Five and Six have mapped out the broader phenomenological landscape of experiencing flow, tracing over the highly-personalised experiential terrain or what might be termed as 'flowscapes' of individuals involved in their serious leisure. In light of the evidence presented in Chapters Five and Six, to simply posit the experience of flow prescriptively, as what one ought to be like, without consideration

of the emergent qualities and systems found to structure the experience is to miss the essence of flow altogether. Rather, flow has been found to be the defining object in personal leisure journeys, parts of which involve the collection of meaningful experiences in the form of intangibles such as specific knowledge or understanding, or lasting products such as memorable personal/collective performances; both are developed through a combination of continued involvement within the activity and the development of the skills required for that serious leisure activity.

Chapter Seven: Towards an Experience-Process Model of Flow-based Serious Leisure

7.1 Introduction

A major limitation of the contemporary sketch of Csikszentmihalyi's flow is its outline character, that is, its lack of elaboration and detailed reflection on procedure. As was noted in Chapter Six, this study stands as the first research to focus on flow as a 'broader experiential whole' and, more specifically, on flow as a process experience. Before this chapter, experiencing flow itself (Chapter Five) and pre- and post-flow experience (Chapter Six) have been presented out of sequence, reflecting the manner in which they were discussed during data collection. In proposing a process-model of flow-based serious leisure experience this chapter sees the re-ordering of these phases of experience, presenting a more accurate depiction of the broader experiential process 'as-lived' by serious leisure participants in this study. The model (Figure 14) identifies and describes the salient phenomenological structures to emerge from analysis and interpretation in Chapters Five and Six, each of which are interdependent upon the activity-setting, building a sense of flow-based serious leisure experience as 'situated' experience. The chapter closes with commentary on the significance of a process-model of flow-based serious leisure for Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework.

7.2 Flow-based serious leisure as 'Situated' experience

The model presented in Figure 14 is an extension of what was referred to earlier (6.2.4) as the 'set-setting hypothesis'. This hypothesis states that the particular contents of consciousness are a function of the individual's personal mental set: the expectations, intentions, values, attitudes and beliefs an individual conveys into a

leisure setting, and the physical and social setting: the context, physical and social environment, and others present. The *set* and *setting* components of the model demonstrate that the contents of consciousness, that is, the particular thoughts, feelings, images, perceptions, and sensations that individuals experience are determined primarily by the interaction between their personal mental set and the leisure setting in which they find themselves. The set-setting hypothesis is built upon the fundamental existential fact that subjective reality must always stand in relation to an objective and socially defined reality. From the perspective of existential-phenomenology, the individual and his or her surrounding environment are regarded as inseparable, that is, they are said to co-constitute one another (Valle and Mohs, 1998). In this regard, the situation and experience are rendered inextricable, being that it is always with references to the immediately engaged situation, and the meaning individuals attach therein, that they derive knowledge of themselves and their social worlds. Simply put, the focus is on understanding how people participate in and bring meaning to situations experienced in their leisure. In the case of the experience-process model being presented in this chapter, these situations are flow-based serious leisure activities.

The personal mental set is located above the main graphic to give priority to the fact that the intentions, beliefs, and expectations of the individual will influence how they interpret the circumstances of a particular setting. In this sense, the personal mental set functions as a pervasive 'interpretive lens', containing the intentions and predispositions of the individual (the product of past experience, training and tradition) through which the contemporaneous aspects of the setting are filtered, and is the main determinant of their progress in the overall process of experiencing flow. The flow process is now known to consist of three broadly interrelated phases of

experience, namely: 1) pre-flow; 2) flow-in-action; 3) post-flow. Each of these phases of experience is now discussed in relation to its salient constitutive phenomenological supportive-structures, as illustrated in the "Experience Process-model" presented in Figure 14.

7.3 The Phenomenological Supportive-Structures of Pre-flow Experience

From the analysis of the pre-flow narrative (6.2) it was possible to distinguish four constitutive supportive-structures of pre-flow experience, termed respectively: 1) initial investment of attention, 2) activation and energisation, 3) the pre-flow moment, and 4) the trust-flow imperative. These four distinct phenomenological structures of pre-flow experience are now presented.

In this research, flow has been taken to refer more generically to an optimal psychological state in which complete absorption in the task at hand leads to a number of positive psychological qualities which include: the perception that personal skills and the challenges provided by an activity are in balance, centring of attention, loss of sense of self, unambiguous feedback to a person's actions, feelings of control over actions and environment, and momentary distortion of time. Since the world outside of flow and the affordances it offers are not as neatly to hand as when these qualities are present, it becomes important to set the activity as clearly apart from everyday experience as possible. The ability to establish a distinction between everyday reality and that of flow turns on the level of personal commitment and involvement or seriousness of the individual. The seriousness component of pre-flow experience is associated with feelings of preparedness; an individual's readiness to participate in a chosen activity at an appointed time and place to the best of their ability. The commitment and perseverance associated with such serious leisure activities can help

to facilitate the conditions for flow by way of structuring experience in the form of a clear set of rules and procedures that, over time, come to be associated with deep personal engagement, concentration, and effort toward meeting challenges and achieving personal goals. In this phase of what is termed *pre-flow preparation* it has been found that there is need for an initial investment of attention to facilitate a clear and present focus onto the task domain.

7.3.1 Initial Investment of Attention: commitment to purpose

The initial investment of attention characteristic of this first supportive structure is not a simple matter of the individual switching their attention from one activity to another, from non-leisure to leisure; it demands significant conscious effort on the part of the individual. Maintaining a clear and present focus at this early stage involves attending to what is happening in the here-and-now. The 'here' is the object of an individual's attention, and the 'now' refers to what is happening in the present. To facilitate this shift, attention is focused onto a positive goal-state characteristic of how an individual wants to feel. This goal-state was described by research participants as a prerequisite to finding flow, a distinctly positive space or ground that must first be reached in order for them to perform their best in an activity, identifiable in Figure 14 as 'the pre-flow moment'.

Personal Mental Set
Individual expectations, intentions, values, attitude and beliefs
held in relation to a particular leisure setting

Intentions &
Expectations
for Action

Pre-flow Preparation

P
R
E

Flow-in-Action

P
O
S
T
F
L
O
W

Meaning Construction

Trust-Flow
Imperative

Activation &
Energisation

F
L
O
W

Merging of Action
and Awareness

R
E
F
L
E
C
T
I
O
N
S

Alterations
Made To
Personal
Mental Set

Building
Confidence and
Momentum

Control is No
Problem

Initial
Investment of
Attention

M
O
M
E
N
T

Loss of Sense of
Self

Search for
Validation

Altered Sense of
Time and Space

Commitment to
Purpose

Elaboration and
Affirmation

Baseline/Normal Consciousness

Figure 14: An Experience-Process Model (EPM) of Flow-based Serious Leisure

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Determining a clear purpose at this early stage in proceedings provides a direction to one's action and a centre for one's focus. Given the heightened intensity and quality of experience associated with the pre-flow moment, it is not enough to establish a clear purpose pre-flow; this purpose must result in strivings, that is, intent has to be translated into action for any distinguishable progress to be made. The challenge for the individual in this initial phase of pre-flow preparation is to discover and perfect a focus that works for them, one that frees them to perform at their best and to find that fully connected focus on the task-at-hand. When something is invested or staked in an activity, the participant's absorption tends to deepen, raising the level of commitment and increasing the intensity of involvement in the present. During this initial phase, then, the purpose is set and the will to reach it established, though the true dynamic thrust remains, as yet, elusive, as this is dependent upon further development of mental and physical readiness.

Any setting, leisure or otherwise, has the potential through the confluence of physical and social factors, to either facilitate or hinder an individual's involvement in an activity. By controlling concentration so as to quieten the mind, shifting focus onto the process of pre-flow preparation, individuals are better able to channel attention away from all other task-irrelevant information and on to what needs to be done in the present. From here, the identification of an aim or purpose, in the form of a positive goal-state, creates an awareness of relative distance between an individual's current state of mind and movement towards or away from the desired state. In this sense, the goal-state functions more as a phenomenological point of reference toward which initial effort can be directed and behaviour concentrated; initiating the second structure of pre-flow preparation, wherein the previously established positive and

absorbing focus channels concentration onto a series of positive actions known to the individual to raise the intensity and quality of experience prior to flow.

7.3.2 Activation and Energisation: building confidence and momentum

Finding the positive state of mind associated with experiencing flow is largely a function of how attention has been focused in the past and how it is focused in the present by the activity's structural conditions. A state of flow was found to occur not by random chance but is a state of mind that must be individually prepared for and cultivated in some way by each person prior to a skilled performance. All research participants recognised the need to engage in some form of physical and/or mental activity that serves to increase the intensity of experience and sharpen their attentional focus, telling of how through their experiences as actor, table tennis player, and volunteer sports coach, they had developed personalised preperformance routines designed to build up a sense of confidence and momentum deemed necessary to reach the desired goal-state prior to a performance. The possession of a routine was found to be beneficial to pre-flow preparation in two ways: firstly, it improves concentration by encouraging individuals to focus their thoughts on task relevant cues, rather than extraneous distractions, so as to establish the appropriate physical and mental state for the ensuing task. Secondly, following a routine facilitates consistency in actions by reducing the variability of the individual's movements prior to performance, increasing the confidence of the individual and thereby enhancing their sense of perceived control over the action-context.

Preperformance routines function to facilitate and maintain a process focus, meaning the individual is paying attention to actions in the present moment, the psychological correlate of which is a sense of momentum, a movement forwards. The

first outwardly visible sign of momentum's onset is lodged in the impetus that provides the initial surge forwards. Psychological momentum is typically begun with a trigger event or series of events, a 'momentum trigger', perceived by individuals to raise the energy and intensity of experience and sharpen attentional focus prior to performance. Such a shift provides feedback about the challenging relationship to the environment; what enters into consciousness are the capacities for action and the attentional cues that are engaged by the presently encountered environment. This activation serves as a catalyst to 'positive momentum energy', meaning the individual experiences a movement forward, giving the impression of heightened physical and mental readiness and, more importantly, elevating the intensity of experience. The capacity of this event to trigger the desired positive momentum energy is dependent upon its symbolic value, that is, its capacity to positively affect an individual's perceptions about their performance. For this reason the cognitive and behavioural contents of preperformance routines tend to vary from one activity to another, depending upon the nature of the skills to be performed and level of experience of the performer. Whatever form taken, once motion toward the goal-state gets underway, the sense of making clear progress yields feelings of empowerment and ability as the individual begins to recognise that they are acting closer to the level of performance associated with the goal-state, which in turn further sharpens his/her concentration on to the present. Phenomenologically speaking, a patterned involvement develops in which actions are performed with a marked ease and rhythmicity that proves effective in relation to the given activity.

By blocking out negative thoughts and external distractions and developing personalised and meaningful self-regulatory patterns of behaviour, individuals can direct their emotions, thoughts and movements in a way that creates feelings of

competence and autonomy in action. It is possible, however, that individuals may handicap themselves with self-doubt, too much tension and distractions, fear of failing, or letting others down, experiencing as a consequence, 'negative momentum energy' and subsequent movement away from the goal-state. For this reason, early experiences of an activity may be frequently unrewarding because of the resistance (negative momentum) and unfamiliarity with the task at hand. Action occurring at this stage is directed primarily toward overcoming these barriers, requiring continuous personal commitment and perseverance. Through continued involvement, learned patterns of behaviour are carved out of personal potential, creating mental and physical habits that can be enacted consistently and smoothly at higher performance levels. The preperformance routine is an enabler in this sense in that clear goals, immediate feedback and manageable levels of challenge orient the individual in a unified and patterned way so that attention becomes completely focused on to the imminent performance, gradually raising the quality and quantity of achievement to a level judged to be more in-line with personal capacity, allowing the individual to become immersed in the act with confidence and belief that their performance will be effectual.

The ingrained intensity and quality of experience that accompanies effective negotiation of preperformance routines marks the difference between the early and latter phases of pre-flow preparation. An impression of the shape and nature of the positive goal-state occurs fleetingly in the course of this process and there is an expectation of being able to achieve and maintain this state, adding a new higher-order dimension of meaning to the process itself.

7.3.3 The Pre-Flow Moment

Feeling prepared for an event and following a proven preperformance routine are important components for setting the stage for flow to occur to the extent that the individual feels ready and has a clear idea of what is required of them during an activity. When all has gone well during pre-flow preparation, when it is perceived that favourable progress has been made, all of an individual's attention is captured and through this absorption the individual moves into a sphere of meaning that has its own structure, giving the impression of being wholly removed and separated from normal or baseline consciousness. Such is the intensity of experience, the individual not only enters this sphere, their sensory reactions and experiences of time and space belong momentarily to it. The sphere presents itself in awareness as more of a mental space or ground, retaining a distinctive temporal and spatial quality wherein existence of places other than that space is forgotten, and possibilities other than those the presently engaged activity permits are rendered irrelevant. Such a level of involvement leads to a unified experience referred to by research participants as 'the moment before' to accentuate the fact that this mental place and space occurs in the instant immediately prior to, and thus is prerequisite for finding a flow state.

Built as it is upon an individual's unwavering belief in his or her ability to successfully cope with the demands of the imminent activity, the mindset associated with this particular sphere of meaning is free from expectation, doubt, or other irrelevant conscious activity. Knowing that everything is in place allows for the individual to maintain a present focus and switch to a more relaxed mode of functioning prior to performance; expressed by a level of composure, a focused mental clarity, and a relaxed body; a state of awareness that, when found, gives off the sensation of complete and total readiness to perform. Experience characteristic of this

pre-flow moment was found to be filled with intense, profound, and vivid perception, a heightened sense of things, framing a higher-order shift in awareness as the individual experiences a sense of functioning optimally (feelings of strength, power, control and a mental clarity) and a sense of being above and beyond oneself guided by the intensity of experience characteristic of this experiential moment.

7.3.4 The Trust-Flow Imperative

The shift in awareness experienced during the pre-flow moment occurs only when an individual is prepared to give themselves over to the task fully and without reservation. Contrary to pre-flow preparation, this movement takes place just at that moment when control is handed over to something other than the individual and his or her physical and mental capabilities. The paradox here is that, whereas pre-flow preparation was about increasing perceptions of control, entry into flow seems to occur just at the point when, in the process of doing, the sense of self disappears, and the task and the individual seem to merge as they suspend any judgement about their performances and themselves. This transition reflects a subjectively experienced moment in time wherein there is an absolute implicit belief on behalf of the individual regarding the specific abilities necessary to perform well in that place at that time. Confidence of this sort is founded upon a distinct sense of trust as the individual lets go of the conscious controlling tendencies of their pre-flow preparation. This sense of trust is not experienced as being in control *per se*; rather it is by letting go of attempts to control the situation that an individual allows him/herself to enter into flow. There is a depth of integrity to this trust-state, the product of a profound sense of self-belief and respect grown out of continued personal commitment, perseverance and previous trust-related experience in that task domain.

The trust-flow state is experienced as a 'psychological imperative', a transient but necessary pathway to finding flow set apart at the very cusp of flow by a momentary positive-affective resonance shared between how an individual wants to feel and the contemporaneous conditions of the action-context. The higher-order nature and intensity of such experience implies the trust-flow state has quite a different scope from that of the preceding pre-flow moment, further accentuating the importance of reaching the quiet mind and relaxed body associated with that structure. On this basis, the ability of the individual to trust and so enter into flow is in direct proportion to the individual achieving a still mind and relaxed focus pre-flow. For this reason, trust-flow should be viewed as a state of being that requires ongoing commitment to master due to its tenuous nature as both skill and situation specific.

To slip into flow at all, an individual must attain certain levels of experience, skill, and conditioning appropriate to the challenge presented by the activity before them. However, even with the possession of a tried and trusted mode of pre-flow preparation, achieving a trust-flow state in serious leisure has been found to retain an elusive quality; often individuals have not been involved long enough under the right circumstances to have happened upon the experience or to be able to construct situations in which it is likely to occur. It is here that the seriousness component of pre-flow experience is substantiated, in that the more seriously an individual is about their preparation the more likely they are to persevere in order to achieve the elusive yet necessary balanced state-of-mind associated with finding flow. From here, the more an individual invests in the leisure activity, the more serious the activity will become and the more likely they are to create ways of experiencing and maintaining flow therein.

7.3.5 Flow-In-Action

The defining features of being 'in flow' during serious leisure were found to be highly similar to those identified earlier in this chapter, characterised above all by an intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity, or as it is depicted in Figure 14, 'flow-in-action', the activity of experience itself as it is lived out by the individual. In flow-based serious leisure, everything is experienced as optimal. Mind and body are in harmony, negative thinking and self-doubt is absent, and functioning is enhanced. However, the alternative phenomenological focus of this research has exposed additional features common to flow-based serious leisure experience that are not captured in conventional expressions of this experience: the importance of trust in experiencing flow and the presence of an altered sense of place in flow.

Firstly, the subtle and intuitive responsiveness which characterises experience in the trust-flow state at once emphasises the importance of achieving affective immersion prior to flow and advocates trust as being more than a threshold concept. The implicit sense of trust-in-flow reflects the positive affect associated with the complete investment of attention and sustained concentration and effort, during pre-flow, as the individual surrenders any concerns of the situation and suspends any concerns about doing so. Add to this the complete, all-absorbing focus and effortless movement that comes with surrendering to the natural momentum of flow-in-action implies trust's role as both condition for and characteristic of flow. The duality of trust suggests that its presence may be more predictive of flow than a perceived balance between high situational challenge and adequate personal skill, deep concentration, sense of control, and clear, continuous task-specific goals and feedback forecast by the original flow framework. These same conditions have been found to be present and active agents in structuring pre-flow preparation facilitating experience

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in a unified and coordinated manner so that attention becomes performance-focused, raising the intensity and quality of individual action to a level that promotes trust-related experience.

Secondly, such is the intensity of experience in flow that individuals are given the impression of having been somewhere not accessible outside of this experience. When concentration is highly-focused on to an activity which provides non-contradictory demands for action appropriate to the individual's capabilities, with clear and immediate feedback in the form of feelings of personal control, a psychological state is reached that is quite separate from what is termed as the 'normal' or 'base-line' state of consciousness giving the sensation of an altered sense of place in flow-in-action. This sense of being in a world where all external consideration is suspended reveals flow's distinctive boundary-transcending qualities as a sphere of meaning wherein an individual's sensory experiences of time and space belong to it temporarily. The sense of place in flow was also found to relate to the functional utility attributed to a particular leisure setting by the individual because of its ability to facilitate the desired flow-related serious leisure experience. The away-from-it-all qualities of the flow state and the feelings of attachment it engenders are thus evidence of a much broader, holistic sense of place that encompasses affective, cognitive, and symbolic meaning for the individual.

7.4 Post-flow Experience

A clear distinction was made by research participants between the experience of flow as it happens, flow-in-action, and subsequent interpretation of that experience, post-flow, when flow has either run its course or is disrupted in some way. Analysis of the post-flow narrative (Chapter Six) unearthed three main phenomenological

structures of post-flow experience, termed respectively as: 1) post-flow reflection; 2) search for validation; and 3) alterations made to personal mental set.

7.4.1 Post-Flow Reflection

When the act of experiencing flow is analysed from a phenomenological perspective, it is revealed that an individual first experiences flow and then follows that experience with an attempted explanation or description of it within post-flow experience. The intense, all-absorbing nature of flow-in-action stands beyond the realm of conscious description or explanation, the 'I' of normal or baseline consciousness is in abeyance, and as such, is said to be prereflective in nature. Phenomenologically speaking, in the process of flow as it is lived out by those involved, no explanation or description can take place; it is only once the experience has occurred, in what is termed 'post-flow reflection', that an individual is able to describe and explain it in any way. For this reason, immediately after a period of such intense involvement, there will invariably be a period of personal reflection, wherein the individual turns their focus inwardly in order to determine the nature of what was experienced during flow-in-action. It is in this phase of post-flow reflection that the individual attempts to ascribe some level of significance and/or meaning to prereflective flow experience.

7.4.2 Search for Validation: elaboration and consolidation of meaning

Initial post-flow reflection is followed by an active search for validation of personal experience either from within (self-validation) and/or through interactions with significant others (social validation), people whom individuals are closely related to like friends, relatives and fellow members of a leisure group, with whom they interact and share experiences. The conversations held in this post-flow phase are an important vehicle in understanding what has been experienced, representing the

principal tool for the individual in piecing together the meaning of a particular flow-related leisure episode. This meaning takes on the norms, values, and traditions of a particular leisure group, as well as providing positive and negative models of behaviour for participants.

When considered together, the individual and social components of post-flow experience can be seen as integrating three interrelated levels of meaning: that of the individual, of significant others, and the place or leisure setting. At the *individual* level are found the subjective interpretations of individual performance in relation to his/her personal skills and competencies as they attempt to provide some degree of significance and meaning to their actions. The self-knowledge formed in this initial reflective phase is manifest as a symbolic interpretation of experience that conveys meaning for the individual. The second level concerns social interaction as individuals begin to construct a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of their experience which is consolidated in the individual's interaction with *significant others*. The third and final level includes the relations between the first two levels and the *places or settings* in which the leisure experience occurs. People tend to relate to different places or settings during their leisure time often associating specific places as contributing to specific types of 'preferred' leisure experiences. It is the information gathered in this interaction between the individual, significant others, and the leisure setting that defines the true meaning of flow-related leisure experience and is the material out of which individuals come to form conceptions of themselves and others.

As a condition of relatively relaxed openness, the post-flow realm presents the opportunity for the dialectical processes between individual, significant others, and leisure setting which are genuinely experiential because they necessarily refer to the

stock of past experiences which have been integrated into understanding and to new experiences which spring from the interactions with the leisure setting. This process is considered as an important supportive element to the self-development process as it helps individuals involved to realise an interpretative integration of elements of the new experience into patterns of familiar experiences through retroactive narrative explanations of personal flow-related leisure experience. The significance of events that have occurred are clarified on the basis of the outcome that unfolds, and in the process of doing so, work to continually confirm or change individuals conceptions of themselves, and their understanding of a leisure setting. From this perspective the self becomes what Giddens (1991) has described as a 'reflexively organised endeavour'. The reflexive self-making project of post-flow experience can thus be seen as consisting of sustaining coherent, yet continually revised, autobiographical narratives. These formulations incorporate both the future orientation of the project and its continuity with the past, the notion that every person has their own narrative autobiography, which they can construct for themselves and present to others as a coherent account of 'lived-experience'. As an individual's self-knowledge deepens they are more likely to seek out and repeat such experiences in subsequent participation.

7.4.3 Alterations made to Personal Mental Set: continuation and progression

The self-awareness that follows flow in post-flow experience invariably includes the sensation of enhanced and extended personal mastery of a particular situation. The furtherance of personal ability is in keeping with the growth-producing dialectic of experiencing flow in that to continue experiencing flow, individuals must move to engage in challenges of progressive complexity. The natural course of enjoyment of any moderately complex activity, leads to the refinement of judgements

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and the development of skills, and this in turn, helps to clarify and develop the self (Csikszentmihlayi, 1990). The enlarged sense of self experienced post-flow functions at once to reinforce the present action and intrinsic motivation responsible for producing flow and creates higher performance expectations in relation to the core activity of a particular leisure setting. When expectations and actions lead to new or profound consequences, the dialectic is reintroduced, and the meaning of the episode is transformed for the individual. With this transformation of meaning comes the subsequent alteration of the individual's own personal mental set, the expectations, intentions, values, attitude and beliefs held in relation to a particular leisure setting, as the individual moves away from previously held goals and knowledge of some activity. In Figure 14, an arrow links this supportive-structure to the personal mental set itself (positioned above the main graphic) to emphasise the belief that the transformation of meaning during post-flow experience functions to continuously hone the interpretative lens through which future leisure episodes are viewed.

In relation to Figure 14, personal growth is understood as a process of continuous exchange between the individual, significant others and the leisure setting. Meaning formed in the individual- and social-focused dimensions of post-flow experience is continually shifting through reflection and recollection, and facilitates the continuity and progression of experience through the creation of intentions and expectations about performance that provides focus for action when the individual seeks flow again in subsequent participation. To continue experiencing the exhilaration of flow 'it is necessary to take on a slightly greater challenge and develop slightly greater skills. So the complexity of adaptation increases, propelled forward by the enjoyment it provides' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: p. 367). Due in main part to the highly positive and rewarding characteristics of flow, the associated activities tend to

be preferentially replicated. This process shapes individual leisure repertoires, which are the sets of activities, interests, and goals a person preferentially selects and cultivates in his/her leisure time. From here, the problem of reaching and entering a flow state-of-mind is not a ladder to be thrown away once climbed, rather, the problem of finding flow is, and remains, part of the phenomenology of experiencing flow, and is subject to the progressive development and expression of individual ability. With experience, the building and testing of new skills in the course of more competent self-expression contributes to an increasingly complex self-concept. From this initial sketch, it can be seen how meaning and complex behaviour emerge collectively and contingently out of a dialectical interaction with the social and physical leisure setting. 'Experiencing' this leisure setting produces meaning that then defines the individual as an interpretative being (i.e. a self), adapting to the contingencies of the existing environment so as to increase the likelihood of experiencing flow again.

In judging the value and significance of flow-based serious leisure experience for personal development, one should keep in mind the principles of differentiation and integration. To reiterate, differentiation refers to a movement toward distinguishing oneself as unique or separate from others, whilst efforts to re-conceive information gained from that experience with existing patterns of information produce integration. Together, differentiation and integration represent a cyclical pattern of psychological growth and development. Openness to new experience (differentiation) is tempered with the insight gained from previous experience and self-knowledge (integration). As a source of relative freedom for self-expression, serious leisure has been found in this research to afford the opportunity for self-direction of personal development. Whether leisure is generative of meaningful growth and development,

however, would seem to depend primarily on whether the activity is entered into seriously – whether it is used to address higher-order intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and whether it results in feelings of personal expressiveness and social integration. From this perspective, the goal for the individual is to embrace the complexities and ambiguities of experiences that give the promise of deeply positive and enjoyable experience, concurrently as well as over time. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the more serious an individual is about their leisure, the greater the likelihood they will find, and continue to seek flow therein.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

Since its introduction to scientific discourse in the early 1970's, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow has been employed in a variety of theoretical contexts, each of which has tended to draw on particular dimensions of this relatively complex concept that happen to be relevant to the context at issue. Little effort has been made, however, to undertake empirical explorations of the dimensions of flow experience that might serve to underpin this theoretical discourse. Flow is readily accepted to be a state of mind, as mental activity, and as an experiential phenomenon. Contemporary flow research relies on concepts and methods depicting flow experience as something an individual can easily frame, that endures through time, and whose essential qualities are captured in a single isolated image as if the experience can be represented by a still-life photograph. The movement toward an experience process model (EPM) of flow-based serious leisure challenges some of these traditional thoughts and addresses flow-based serious leisure experience as dynamic, emergent and embedded within personal journeys. The transient nature of the flow-state means that in order to understand the true nature of what it is to experience flow it must be considered as a broader experiential whole, including both

what occurs in the instances before and after flow, in what is termed pre- and post-flow experience. To the extent that they can be meaningfully differentiated in the minds of individuals, pre- and post-flow make important contributions to finding and sustaining flow. The shorter-term focus of pre-flow helps the individual structure experience by channelling attention rather than being an end in itself, consequently limiting awareness to a restricted field of possibilities and raising the intensity and quality of experience. The reflection and social interaction of post-flow facilitates the longer-term layering of experience through the creation of intentions and expectations about performances that provides future focus for attention.

The pre- and post-flow phases of experience identified in this research have revealed that the process of experiencing flow consists of several distinct yet interrelated structures. It is likely that the typical beginner does not know of such structures, while the typical expert probably incorporates them automatically into his or her interactions with an action-context. The challenge for the individual is to learn to manage time, space, and the activity, to internalise as many of these supporting structures as possible. It is proposed that these different structures and specific combinations of their sub-structures may account for the different meanings of flow experience in relation to different leisure settings. Chapters Five through Seven have presented evidence to suggest that instead of talking about flow on the assumption that there is one uniform type, it would be more appropriate to talk about variants of flow experience across different contexts. From this perspective, this study is a key step toward refining Csikszentmihalyi's original model of flow to more specifically describe flow in leisure settings (a topic taken up in detail in Chapter Eight). Certainly it seems meaningful growth and development in flow-based serious leisure can be associated with affective governance of pre- and post-flow, which in turn, is directly

proportionate to the seriousness component known to underpin the experiential process; the continued commitment and involvement, high levels of effort and skill and the motivation to maintain as well as increase involvement in the activity.

Finally, to learn how to enter into flow more easily or at least more regularly, this research has shown it is necessary to first know precisely what it feels like to make that shift in conscious. The original flow model would have difficulties accounting for such transient, emergent flow experience, reliant as it is upon what is now known to be the overly simplistic notion that reaching flow is representative of matching individual ability with the challenges present by an activity or environment. A theoretical framework that deviates from such prescriptively limited assumptions, however, is set to liberate and enhance understanding of flow-based leisure experience.

Chapter Eight: Extending the 'Seriousness' of Flow in Serious Leisure[8]

8.1 Introduction

Chapters Five and Six have demonstrated that one of the main reasons that individuals devote time and effort to their leisure is because they gain a deeply enjoyable state of experience from it, an experience not usually found outside of their avocation as an amateur actor, table tennis player, or voluntary sports coach. However, as was noted in Chapter Five (5.10) and later in Chapter Six (6.2.1) involvement in these leisure activities and settings does not guarantee flow will be experienced; there are certain conditions that must be in place if these activities are to successfully attract high-investment from participants in their leisure, and so increase the likelihood of experiencing flow.

Closer examination of the core activities of stage acting, table tennis, and sports coaching as a source of flow in Chapter Five revealed an implicit structural interdependence between the known conditions for flow and serious leisure. To reiterate, flow-based serious leisure experience demands perseverance and personal effort in the development of specifically acquired knowledge and skill. Only activities that require such an investment of effort are seen to provide opportunities to maintain and further develop the sense of competence that allows the individual to frequently experience enjoyment and develop positive feelings about themselves. The commitment and intense involvement associated with such activities has also been

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[8] Parts of this chapter form a paper presented at the 12th Canadian Congress on Leisure Research (CCLR), see Appendix C

found to help structure experience pre-flow in the form of personal routines (6.2.2), a clear set of rules and procedures associated with personal engagement, concentration and effort in finding flow.

The emergent structural interdependence between flow and serious leisure has further strengthened the linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow. When this dynamic is brought to bear on the broader interaction between individual and activity, an interesting explanatory framework begins to emerge wherein the experience-process model (EPM) presented in Chapter Seven can be used to focus attention on to the phenomenological experience of high levels of commitment and involvement in serious leisure activity and the identification and explanation of the conditions and features of these activities that lead to experiences of flow in serious leisure. Since the conditions of flow-based serious leisure experience have already been outlined above and in Chapter Five, the remainder of this chapter focuses on better understanding the associated emergent features.

The activity-involvement of devotees from amateur theatre acting, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching shares a degree of intensity that is consistent with experiencing flow, experience that is usually associated with high-quality performance and a pattern of commitment that joins them with others in *a unique ethos* of shared meaning and perseverance, in a personal and collective sense. This commitment and personal endeavour forges a connection with other individuals or groups that share these interests, reinforces shared commitment and creates the experience of being part of a defined social world containing clearly defined activities and roles, perhaps only known to its members/the individual. For each of the serious

leisure groups involved in this study, this social world was experienced as somehow separate from wider society, with this separation largely based upon the special skills, knowledge and attributes required to perform well in each. Within this social world, participants may have their own language or terminology, their own behaviours, norms, values, and attributes that reinforce this 'separateness' and associated experiences.

The investment of time and effort in such activities to the point that there is perseverance and a sense of future potential for action and continued commitment is often manifest in the form of a career-like involvement from participants. So far, exploratory research on careers in serious leisure has proceeded from a broad definition that depicts the leisure career as 'the typical course, or passage, of a type of amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer that carries the person into and through a leisure role' (Stebbins, 2007a: p. 19). Flow-based serious leisure is likely to involve career-like progression through stages of personal achievement and skill development. The notion of 'career' used here is more related to personal journeys or progression through stages of achievement or personal mastery associated with a particular serious leisure role. If the notion of career is viewed as the extended lifespan of the serious leisure activity, or what Stebbins (2001c: p. 9) has termed 'temporal continuity', then it seems reasonable to suggest that individuals will seek to extend the lifespan of a leisure activity that provides flow-related experiences. Similarly, leisure researchers have recognised the importance of the symbolic value of such high-investment, committed leisure activities for continued involvement (e.g. Funk and Jones, 2002; Havtiz and Dimanche, 1990; Havtiz and Dimanche, 1997; Havitz and Mannell, 2005; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004), a relationship to be taken up in greater detail later in this chapter.

Continued involvement in flow-based serious leisure activities has been found to lead to the accrual of certain personal and social benefits, including the enhancement of self-concept, self-actualisation, feelings of accomplishment, enhanced self-esteem and social interaction. As was captured in the narrative of post-flow experience, the accrual of the majority of these benefits, with the exception of perhaps social interaction (due to its inherent pervasiveness), occurs as a consequence of flow-based serious leisure experience and is associated with increased perceived competence in these activities. This would suggest that it is not enough for an individual to just do an activity to feel good about themselves, but that some expression of skill is necessary to create that affect, forging a strong attachment to or identification with that leisure setting as being one that is flow-producing.

This sense of attachment to a particular serious leisure setting reiterates the notion of place dependence previously noted in Chapter Five (5.9). It seems the strength of attachment is partly determined by the functional utility of a leisure setting concerning its ability to facilitate desired 'flow-related' serious leisure experiences, often giving the impression of an altered sense of place. This process of emotional and symbolic place affiliation also serves to reinforce and shape individual identity (Kyle and Chick, 2007). Preceding analysis of the narrative of post-flow experience (6.3) has shown that leisure identities can become highly salient to the self-concept of people for three reasons: firstly, and perhaps most significantly, these identities express and affirm individual talents and competencies in relation to a particular leisure setting. Second, they provide some degree of social recognition. Finally, they affirm central values and interests for continued commitment. This identification not only describes individuals as members of the group, but also prescribes their

behaviours as part of the group. These behaviours allow participants to clearly distinguish between themselves and non-participants.

The post-flow narrative has also shown that when tied with personal interest and cultivated in a context of social support for challenge-seeking and self-expression, flow-based serious leisure experience serves as a context for growth and personal development. The growth of self, the realisation of personal potential, seems to depend upon undertaking and pursuing action that is both personally meaningful and challenging. Furthermore, as individuals seek flow again in the future, the level of commitment is raised, thereby increasing the intensity of involvement and, as a consequence, the seriousness of that leisure activity for the individual. These findings contribute to an emerging bank of research proposing such variables as situational involvement and psychological commitment are important mediators of leisure involvement, also referred to as 'enduring involvement' (e.g. Funk and Jones, 2002; Havitz and Mannell, 2005; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004).

In recent research Havitz and Mannell (2005) found strong and consistent relationships between enduring involvement, situational involvement, and flow, with participants reporting higher quality experiences, leading to more flow-like experiences, in those activities for which they have greater enduring involvement. Enduring involvement was also found to partially mediate the level of situational involvement in a specific episode of participation in that activity. In other words, the greater the enduring involvement a person has for a particular activity, generally, the higher the situational involvement in any specific episode of that activity, and in turn the higher the level of flow would be experienced. Consequently, Havitz and Mannell identified situational involvement as being a better predictor of quality of experience

(flow) than was enduring involvement. Havitz and Mannell's findings are highly similar to those presented in this and earlier chapters (Five and Six) in that finding flow has been shown to be inextricably linked to the nature and intensity of individuals' involvement when acting, playing table tennis or coaching sport. A high level of leisure involvement indeed appears to drive or influence the nature of participation. However, where Havitz and his colleagues (i.e. Havtiz and Dimanche, 1990; Havtiz and Dimanche, 1997; Havitz and Mannell, 2005; Iwasaki and Havitz, 2004) have recognised psychological commitment as being the key variable linking both enduring and situational involvement with experiencing flow, in the context of flow-based serious leisure experience, the nature and intensity of involvement has been found to be mediated by a seriousness component (see Figure 15), itself a psychological marker characterised by an important degree of personal commitment to the core activity.
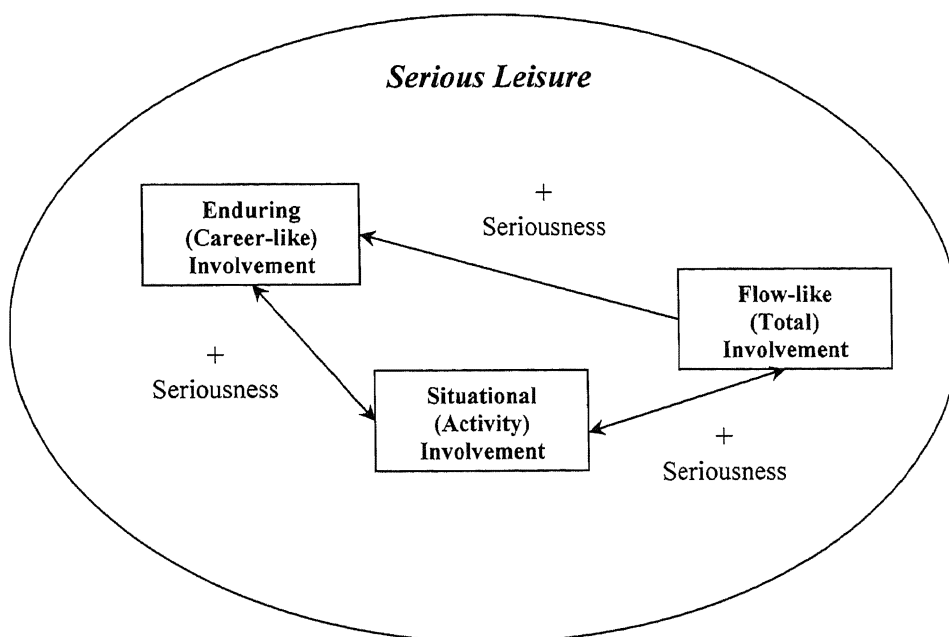
Figure 15: A Model of Serious Leisure Involvement showing the 'seriousness' component as a connective medium in the relationship between enduring involvement, situational involvement, and flow in serious leisure (adapted from Havitz and Mannell, 2005: p. 161).

According to the model of serious leisure involvement depicted in Figure 15, itself an abstract representation of the experience process-model (EPM) presented in Chapter Seven, the greater an individual's enduring involvement in a particular leisure activity, the more serious this person tends to be about their participation with that activity, and the higher their situational (activity) involvement in a specific leisure episode. Subsequently, the more serious an individual's activity or situational involvement, the more likely they are to find the total involvement associated with flow. That said, building an experience-process understanding of flow has also revealed evidence to suggest the concepts of enduring and situational involvement may not be synonymous with flow, for even though a person may be very involved in a particular activity and hence somewhat predictable, specific circumstances will impact decisions leading up to participation in a leisure episode (pre-flow), the experiential outcomes of a leisure episode (finding flow), and ultimately how that episode is interpreted (post-flow). It is likely that in addition to enduring involvement, factors present in the immediate circumstances surrounding participation in a specific episode of the activity also influence the level of situational involvement. Thus, the nature and intensity of situational involvement will vary from individual to individual and context to context.

By combining flow and serious leisure this research has also revealed an empirical linkage between individuals finding flow and their continued (enduring) involvement within a serious leisure activity. Though it would seem reasonable to expect that higher levels of enduring involvement and situational involvement in a particular activity would be accompanied by high quality (flow) experiences, any connection between these constructs has, until now, remained theoretic (e.g. Havitz and Mannell, 2005). Flow-based serious leisure experience has been found to be a

source of deep and personally enriching experiences that provide opportunities for the progressive development and expression of individual ability, representing perhaps the principle motivational drive for individuals in their leisure. Rather, repeated episodes of high activity (situational) involvement leading to flow-like (total) involvement will, over time, elevate the level of enduring involvement, that is, in seeking flow again in future episodes of participation the individual's level of commitment is raised, increasing the intensity of involvement and with it the seriousness of that leisure activity for the individual. Concomitantly, the individual may gain a profound sense of continuity of experience, and hence leisure career, from their continued and steady development as a skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable participant in a particular form of serious leisure and from the deepening fulfilment that accompanies such personal growth. A person's sense of the unfolding of his or her career in any complex leisure role, observes Stebbins (2007a), can be a powerful motive to act therein. It is also possible the inverse of this effect may occur, where repeated episodes of low activity (situational) involvement and failure to achieve flow-like involvement, over time, deflate the willingness for continued involvement. To the extent that enduring involvement is long-term involvement, it also seems possible that some participants will reach a plateau in their level of seriousness. That is, they will continue to participate in the serious leisure, but no more seriously than earlier. Others may even cut back on their seriousness, as for example, work forces reduction in leisure time or when physical skills wane.

In addition to the associated positive affective-motivational qualities, the potential for psychological growth through flow-based serious leisure experience demonstrates important quality of life consequences; the ultimate achievement in this

is perhaps the development of a personal life theme, 'a meaningful arrangement of goals and means' forged around the focused well-being that is characteristic of flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984: p. 263). It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that the activities that people continue to take seriously are those that are likely to be intrinsically enjoyable and flow-producing, in many cases taking on the form of broader leisure lifestyles. This notion of leisure lifestyle fits well with Stebbins' (2007a) Serious Leisure Perspective, standing as a distinctive set of personally meaningful and shared patterns of behaviour organised around a set of coherent interests and social conditions, that are explained and justified by a set of related values, attitudes, and orientations and that, under certain distinctive conditions, becomes the basis for a separate sense of identity and a central life interest for its participants. In a sense, this notion of leisure resonates with the subjective leisure ideal (introduced in 1.2) that advocates leisure as a way of living, characterised by a sense of freedom and learning for its own sake and as being undertaken for self-development (de Grazia, 1962). Thus, flow-based serious leisure, like the subjective leisure ideal, is intimately concerned with the self and more specifically, the constructed idea of self-growth as a mode of continuous participation.

Whilst this research has focused on three distinct serious leisure practices – table tennis, amateur dramatics and volunteer sports coaches – given the pervasive nature of the research findings, it would seem reasonable to expect that similar experiential outcomes would be found in other groups as well as individual-oriented amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer-based activities. Furthermore, drawing on Stebbins's notion of an optimal leisure lifestyle, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the most profound and fullest or optimal sense of flow-based serious leisure is achieved only when complemented by a measured amount of casual leisure. Typically, as noted

in Chapter 2 (2.11.6), participating in casual leisure activities alone is unlikely to yield the deep sense of involvement and personal achievement of more serious leisure pursuits due to it being lower intensity, commanding lower-level skill and knowledge, if any at all. Though this is not to say that flow does not occur in such activities; it is important to reiterate here that the flow framework is built upon the adage that the relative (the perceived) balance of challenge and skill is relevant to flow, not their absolute (objective) values. That is to say an activity could offer very little, or low-level challenge, and yet could still produce flow if the skills of the person are commensurately low. For example, consider the casual act of reading a book or novel.

On this basis, project-based leisure, the third and final component form of the Serious Leisure Perspective, is also a potential source of flow and thus can also enhance a person's leisure lifestyle. Project-based leisure typically fails to engender the career-like involvement so prevalent with more serious forms of leisure participation and, as such, lacks the continuity of experience needed for the regular generation of flow. That said, there is still need to persevere and some level of personal effort, skill and knowledge may be required. There are also some recognisable benefits to be had from project-based leisure, a special identity, and often a social world of sorts, though one comparably less complicated than those surrounding serious leisure. Stebbins (2005b; 2007a) has noted that project-based leisure is, in fact, capable of generating many of the same rewards as serious leisure, including experiencing flow, constituting part of the motivational basis for pursuing such highly fulfilling leisure projects.

It is the principle notion of the optimal leisure lifestyle that is appealing, at least for the emergent explanatory framework of serious leisure involvement being

discussed in this chapter; the notion that casual, less demanding activities have a role to play either side of more intensive serious leisure endeavours (Elkington, 2006). For instance, leisure researchers have more recently begun to understand and emphasise the enduring effects of relaxation for enhancing an overall sense of inner-calm and self-focus, most notably in the interstices between periods of intense activity (Kleiber, 2005). This is particularly relevant to post-flow experience in that a sense of composure is invariably accompanied by a period of reflection, wherein the individual looks inwardly in an attempt to make sense of what has happened during a flow episode.

Another benefit of casual leisure which seems to have particular relevance to post-flow experience is the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, particularly pertinent in this regard is sociable conversation. The nature of such interpersonal relationships is likely to be highly varied, encompassing those that form between friends, spouses and family members. Hutchinson and Kleiber (2005) have found such interpersonal relationships can foster personal psychological growth by promoting discussion of shared interests and, in the course of this process, new positive appraisals of self. Similarly, the narrative of post-flow experience revealed how the meaning of flow-based serious leisure experience is often affirmed and reaffirmed in the individual's interactions with 'significant others'; individuals whose views and opinions the participant values, usually involved others with a vested interest in the serious leisure activity to hand, though can also be family members and even work colleagues. Whatever the identity of these significant others, the conversations held in this post-flow phase were found to be an important vehicle in understanding the meaning of what has been experienced. In this sense, it may be postulated that experiencing flow-based serious leisure experience turns on the

presence of both serious and casual leisure in a person's leisure repertoire, transcending the serious and casual as isolated facets of leisure, acknowledging that each has a role to play in a broader leisure lifestyle, the achievement of which will inevitably enhance the quality of life and well-being of the individual.

8.2 Concluding Remarks

This research has established flow to be an important, and yet understudied pathway to positive or optimal serious leisure experience. The theoretical synthesis and empirical findings of this research have shown that deep enjoyment and self-improvement are never far away from serious leisure pursuits. With reference to the characteristics of the flow-based leisure experience and to the seriousness component known to underpin it, it would seem reasonable to claim that flow and serious leisure are certainly not disparate frameworks, sharing much more than simply a theoretical kinship (2.12.2), but are, in fact, 'mutually reinforcing'. That is to say when conditions are appropriately aligned they function synergistically reinforcing and promoting each other's presence, blending as one in the total process of experiencing flow-based serious leisure. In this process, flow functions, more specifically, as a unifying positive psychological construct for the special qualities of the serious leisure experience. In the past, leisure researchers have loosely referred to such leisure experience as high-involvement or high-investment leisure (e.g. Kelly *et al.* 1987; Mannell, 1993), though on the evidence considered these conceptions do not satisfactorily capture the intensity or complexity that has been found to characterise flow-based serious leisure experience. Given the higher-order nature of flow together with individuals' total personal commitment of self to its achievement during pre-flow, and its continuity and progression during post-flow, it is claimed that flow-

based serious leisure experience represents the richest, most nuanced portrayal yet of what might more accurately be referred to as 'optimal leisure experience'.

Empirical evidence has been presented in this research to suggest the likelihood of achieving an 'optimal leisure state', as defined by flow-based serious leisure experience, can be predicted by the 'seriousness' with which an individual pursues their leisure; thus building the beginnings of a framework for optimal leisure experience. From this perspective, the previously mentioned 'deep involvement' and 'high investment' denotations of leisure can be seen as an 'expression of' as well as 'conditions for' a strong commitment and attachment to a flow-producing leisure activity; not that flow is the only path to such experiences, but it is a sure way to enjoy the positive qualities of serious leisure. However, conceiving of flow-based serious leisure as optimal leisure experience should not lose sight of the key psychological properties found to structure the experience itself and the role they play in individual growth and continued leisure involvement, as such knowledge adds significantly to the faculty of Stebbins's (2007a) Serious Leisure Perspective as an *explanatory* and not simply a *descriptive* framework of leisure participation.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions and Implications

9.1 Introduction

Today, the term 'flow' stands as an established metaphorical expression for the dynamic 'flowing' nature of experience that follows the optimal functioning of consciousness. Such expressions are most likely to be associated with the contemporary perspective of positive psychology, wherein scholars and researchers have tended to move away from the conventional experiential content of flow towards a more objective conception and the prescriptive operationalisation of its structural features. The positive psychological orientation of flow has seen a thematic shift in discourse concerning optimal theory with proponents predominantly referring to the existing flow framework, channelling their efforts into furthering its applicational scope. This has, however, diverted researchers from seeking answers to more fundamental questions, such as gaining an understanding of the experiential nature and significance of what goes before and after flow. This study set out with the aim of bringing clarity to the experiential, conceptual, and theoretical uncertainty surrounding what goes before and after a state of flow and with it a more complete and holistic understanding of flow experience. To this effect an experience-process model (EPM) of flow-based serious leisure has been developed building upon the key findings of this research. These findings will be outlined in this chapter.

9.2 Conclusions: an overview

i. This research has revealed there to be significantly more to the act of experiencing flow than is depicted in Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) original framework, re-conceptualising flow as a focal state of mind in what is a broader experiential process framed by distinct, intricate, and highly-personalised phases of pre- and post-flow experience.
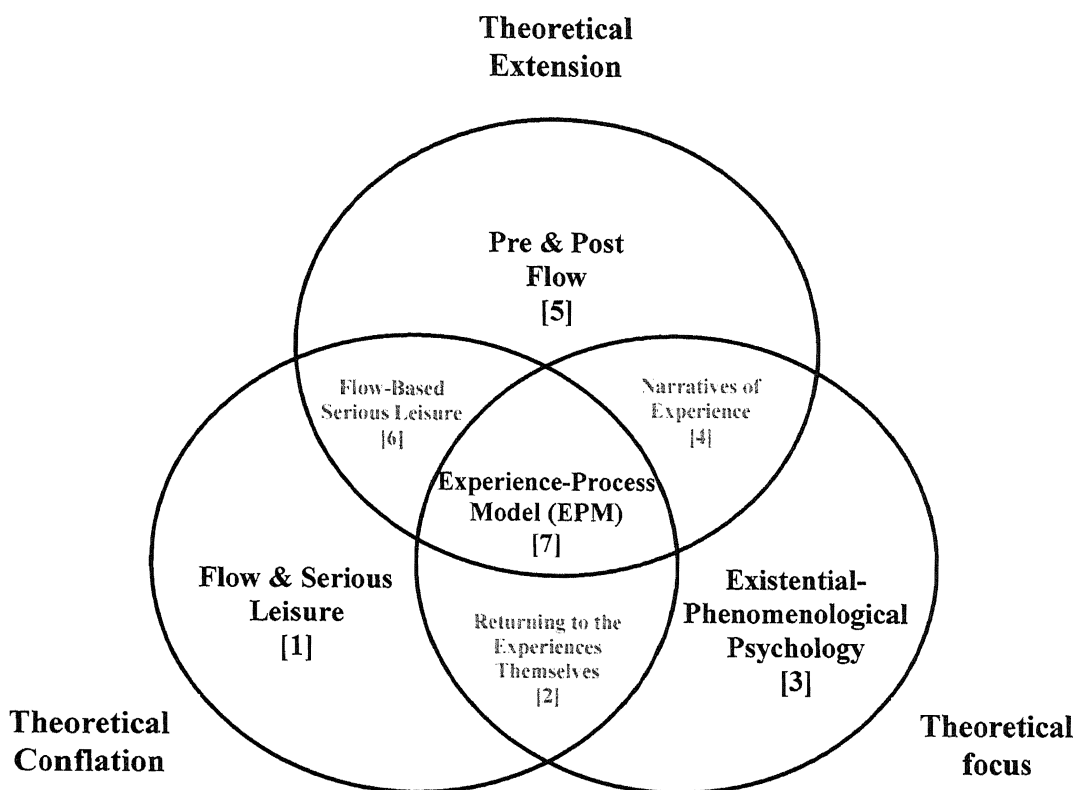
ii.   To the extent that they can be meaningfully differentiated, pre- and post-flow experiences have been shown to make important contributions to entering and sustaining flow, with each phase of experience comprising distinct and interrelated supportive-structures. From an experience-process viewpoint, the flow state must first be intentionally sought out and prepared for by each individual in pre-flow experience, while realisation, translation, and elaboration of the meaning of each phase of flow (pre-flow and flow itself) can only occur in post-flow experience when the flow has stopped.

iii.   The process view of flow developed in this research exposed two features common to flow-based serious leisure experience that are not captured in normative expressions of flow. First, far from being an instantaneous realisation of internal harmony, this research has shown that a flow state is more accurately predicted and initiated by an implicit sense of trust. Described in this research as the psychological imperative for reaching flow, the trust-flow state is experienced as a transient, but necessary pathway to finding flow characterised by a momentary resonance shared between the individual and their environment. Second, the intensity of flow-in-action coupled with the functional utility attributed to a leisure setting as one that is flow-producing gives the impression of an altered sense of place in flow.

iv.   Exploring pre- and post-flow from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology has provided essential focus in achieving a greater holistic understanding of flow in serious leisure. Going back to the experiences themselves, to the actual experiencing of flow, this research has explored the intricacies of flow experiences of amateur actors, hobbyist table tennis players, and voluntary sports coaches showing each of these serious leisure activities to be capable of producing flow, and does so in ways unique to that activity, producing a wide variety of flow experiences. These findings stand as a direct empirical documentation of flow in serious leisure, and as such, are a contribution not yet made in either of these frameworks, providing a handle for understanding what is perhaps the central motivational component of serious leisure experience.

v.   The use of narrative meaning as an interpretative tool produced descriptions of the specific experiential situations and action sequences that comprise pre- and post-flow in order to craft a single representative narrative of pre- and post-flow experience. The final narratives of pre- and post-flow experience represent the first empirical insights into the phenomenology of such phases of experiences, adding a novel texture, in the form of a sequential and temporal dynamic to experiencing flow. This kind of narrative analysis enables the researcher to speak about the intricacies of the process of experiencing flow with a great deal more empirical grounding. Furthermore, using narrative meaning to reconstruct frames for capturing and representing this process has created new descriptors for discussing the flow experience, contributing new phrases to the language of the flow narrative: pre-flow and post-flow experience, pre-flow preparation, the pre-flow moment, the trust-flow imperative, post-flow reflection and the search for validation are insights-come-concepts, conveying the ways in which individuals attempt to construct and understand the montage of experiencing flow.

vi.   Combining flow and serious leisure has not only provided an original socio-psychological lens through which Csikszentmihalyi's flow can be viewed, but in doing so, has evoked the affinity of serious leisure activity for flow experience and the discovery that both serious leisure and flow share a theoretical reciprocity, and are not two disparate frameworks, but are structurally and experientially 'mutually reinforcing' of one another.

vii. There is strong evidence from the results of this research of an emergent structural interdependence between the known conditions necessary for flow and the special qualities of serious leisure. This association has not only strengthened the linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow, but when brought to bear on the broader interaction between individual and activity, an explanatory framework of optimal leisure experience has been developed. The newly-emerged process view of flow was used to focus attention on to the phenomenological experiences of high levels of commitment and involvement in serious leisure activity to provide insights into the essential nature of flow in serious leisure,

adding a previously missing explanatory dimension to Stebbins' (1992a; 1998) serious leisure theoretical framework.

On the basis of these key findings, this exploration into pre- and post-flow experience in the context of serious leisure represents a significant and important movement forwards in the research of Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework, which has been found to be all too often extended within and of itself, irrespective of there being clear opportunities for theoretical elaboration. The flow literature renders a limited and unsatisfactory understanding of pre- and post-flow, mainly because there remains no direct hands-on pragmatic approach to investigating such phases of flow-related experience. The originality of the research topic necessitated the evolvement of a tripartite research design, best represented as three concentric circles (see Figure 16) to demonstrate the theoretically original and co-generative contribution of its three main components, identifiable as: the theoretical conflation of flow and serious leisure; the theoretical focus provided by existential-phenomenological psychology; and the theoretical extension of the flow framework in the form of pre- and post-flow experience. To demonstrate the co-generative nature of the research process undertaken, this concluding chapter revisits each of the components depicted in Figure 16 and their related interstices in turn (one to seven), synthesising the key findings, implications, and emergent avenues for future research.

Theoretical Extension

Pre & Post Flow [5]

Flow-Based Serious Leisure [6]

Narratives of Experience [4]

Experience-Process Model (EPM) [7]

Flow & Serious Leisure [1]

Returning to the Experiences Themselves [2]

Existential-Phenomenological Psychology [3]

Theoretical Conflation

Theoretical focus

Figure 16: What's New? A Theoretical Original Research Design (adapted from Elkington, 2008: p. 158. See Appendix B)

9.3 Flow and Serious Leisure [1]

It was apparent from the review of flow-related literature, outlined in Chapter Two, that there was need to move away from the prescriptive content of the contemporary flow framework and return to flow as a phenomenon, to the actual experiencing of flow 'as-lived' by individuals. To better facilitate this shift in focus my research has returned to those activities from which the flow concept first originated, to leisure activities. Framing flow research within Stebbins' (1992a) serious leisure framework has seen the **theoretical conflation** of two established leisure-related frameworks and the discovery of an implicit theoretical affinity of flow experience for the serious forms of leisure, revealing a theoretical linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow. Associations made

between these two frameworks have remained until now, theoretic, conceptually linking flow and serious leisure. Focused through the inductive lens of the established serious leisure theoretical framework (Stebbins, 1992a; 1998; 2007a), this research has explored one activity characteristic of each of Stebbins's amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer-based serious leisure categories, namely: amateur dramatics, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching. Combining flow and serious leisure frameworks in this manner has widened and enriched the theoretical and conceptual lens through which Csikszentmihalyi's flow is viewed, breaking from the restrictions of positive psychological discourse to extend the search beyond the usual prescriptive content knowledge of flow and focus instead on the 'lived' flow-based serious leisure experience.

9.4 Returning to the Experiences Themselves [2]

Drawing upon flow's affinity for phenomenology, my research has explored pre- and post-flow experience from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology. In its broadest sense, the primary concern of phenomenology lies with the issue of personal, subjective experience, the structures of consciousness involved, and the description of how people come to make sense of their personal and social worlds (Moustakas, 1994). Existential-phenomenological psychology emphasises the subjective 'lived experience' in real and not contrived situations, wherein the focus is on investigating how individuals participate in and bring meaning to these situations experienced in their lives (Spinelli, 1992). In the context of my research, such an approach has brought to light that which presents itself as flow in experience, guiding the researcher back from the vaguities of theoretical abstractions, as is custom in humanistic psychology, returning to the reality of 'lived' experience of the individual in flow. The intention has been to return to a consideration of the things themselves,

focusing primarily on the phenomena of pre- and post-flow and how these are experienced and appear to individuals.

9.5 Existential Phenomenological Psychology [3]

Approaching the problem of pre- and post-flow from the perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology has provided the necessary and previously lacking **theoretical focus** that has been essential in achieving a greater holistic understanding of flow experience, enabling the researcher to gather detailed descriptions of the psychological processes that function to produce flow-based serious leisure experience. However, I have found that implementing a phenomenological approach to research is not a straightforward process, as researchers adopting such an approach must search long and hard to find material to assist them in developing their research plans. This has been found to be particularly the case for flow-related phenomenological research. In the following passages I explore the challenges I have encountered when implementing a phenomenological approach through a critical consideration of the nature of my own phenomenological project.

Looking back on the research process outlined in preceding chapters, I have gained an acute appreciation for why existential phenomenological psychology is presented predominantly as an 'orientation' taken towards a central psychological issue or experience that uses what is an exclusive methodology for phenomenological research, known as the phenomenological method. For perhaps the greatest challenge faced by researchers like myself, who are new to phenomenological endeavour attempting to engage with phenomenology for the first time, is the initial difficulty in deciding how to accomplish a phenomenological study. This occurs despite the

guidance that is provided by phenomenological researchers such as Cresswell (1998), Moustakas (1994), Polkinghorne (1989), Smith (2006), Spinelli (1992), and van Manen (1998). Notwithstanding this bank of literature, there exist few sources that offered concrete directions as to how I, as a novice phenomenological researcher, ought to proceed.
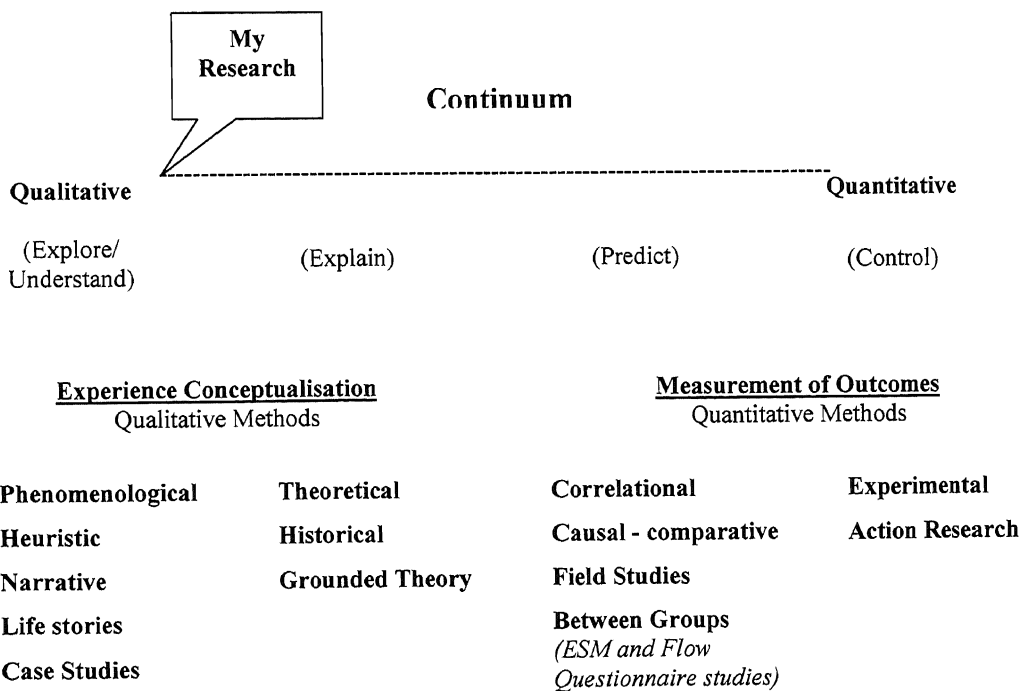
The acknowledged difficulty experienced by researchers new to phenomenology can be attributed to a number of factors, all of which I have experienced firsthand through my own research. First, substantial utilisation and subsequent modification of the phenomenological method in contemporary phenomenological methodological research has culminated in wide-ranging and differentiated interpretation, making it extremely difficult to articulate a thorough and accurate idea of how to do phenomenological research. This means beginning researchers in phenomenology like myself are placed in an indeterminate position because they are required to make judgements about the phenomenological literature for which they are in no way prepared. Adding to this challenge is the implicit expectation that researchers be sure that the studies by which they clarify their approach are informed by the philosophy that is held to guide them. This is a tall order indeed for researchers engaging in a new mode of inquiry since it requires that they fully comprehend the intricacies of phenomenology, and by extension the phenomenological method, before they can be reasonably expected to do so. From the perspective of my own research, it would certainly be more accurate to say that my comprehension of phenomenological research methodology has developed alongside my growing immersion in the project of exploring the nature of pre- and post-flow experience.

Proceeding from this initial platform of uncertainty concerning how to proceed, it was my task to navigate the diverse and often conflicting literature in phenomenological research and articulate an appropriate process and methods for achieving the aims of my research. However, as I now review my own research journey in its entirety, I find that my early reticence surrounding the practical aspects of how to conduct a phenomenological study has been replaced with a critical insight into what it means to do phenomenological research and a strong appreciation for the merits of allowing my research design to emerge rather than being constructed preordinately. Indeed, the lack of methodological direction I had originally considered to be a limiting factor when conducting phenomenological research, I now recognise to be at the core of its strength as an approach, reflecting an appropriate reluctance to prescribe techniques and procedures to the study of a phenomenon. What has emerged in this research, both in terms of research findings and my own understanding of phenomenological methodology, has been a function of the ongoing interaction between myself as a developing researcher, research participants and the phenomena under study, and as such was largely unpredictable in advance. In this regard, an existential phenomenological psychological approach has been in keeping with the exploratory underpinnings of my research, allowing as it has for an increasing understanding of the research process to emerge alongside the data as it unfolded.

On this basis, I feel comfortable in situating my research at the extreme left 'qualitative' pole of the research continuum, revised in Figure 17 to reflect my own newly-formed understanding of what it means to do phenomenological research. Braud and Anderson's (1998) original research continuum graphic had initially aided both my understanding of how and where to place phenomenology and the

identification of the research methods which best-fit this approach (see 3.3: p. 109). My subsequent experience of working with and implementing phenomenological research methodology has provided me with a more in-depth explanatory understanding of the placement and role of phenomenological research and its related methods leading to my revision of the research continuum graphic, as captured in Figure 17. Whilst I acknowledge the revised graphic remains overly simplistic insofar as it does not differentiate between the various sub-categories of phenomenological research (e.g. phenomenological psychology and existential phenomenological psychology), nor is it able to demonstrate the inherent complexities of doing research of this nature, I feel the revised features add to the explanatory capacity of the research continuum and is a truer representation of how I have come to make sense of my own research journey.

Figure 17: Revising Braud and Anderson's (1998) Research Continuum

| My Research | | | |

Continuum

Qualitative — Quantitative

| (Explore/ Understand) | (Explain) | (Predict) | (Control) |

Experience Conceptualisation Qualitative Methods		**Measurement of Outcomes** Quantitative Methods	
Phenomenological	**Theoretical**	**Correlational**	**Experimental**
Heuristic	**Historical**	**Causal - comparative**	**Action Research**
Narrative	**Grounded Theory**	**Field Studies**	
Life stories		**Between Groups** *(ESM and Flow Questionnaire studies)*	
Case Studies			

The primary intention of my research has been to return to a consideration of the experiences themselves, to the phenomena of pre- and post-flow and how these phases are experienced and appear to individuals in the context of their leisure. In addition to its exploratory orientation, phenomenological research is deemed qualitative in the sense that it involves research models that seek to develop a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon researched. It is important to add here that phenomenological research differs from the other types of qualitative work outlined in Figure 17 (e.g. Grounded Theoretical approaches) because of its central concern with the person's experience of a specific thing or event, and is directed exclusively towards the question 'what'.

Since it was evident in my review of the flow literature (2.8) that researchers have not sufficiently dealt with the question of 'what' with regards to pre- and post-flow experience, phenomenology certainly seems to have been the most appropriate approach, being closer and more amenable to the interests of my research. However, whilst my experience with phenomenological methodology has taught me that research of this nature is not constrained by the need to infer causality or association from the measurement of some outcome, it must be said that phenomenological research surrenders a degree of certainty about the actual referents and source of experience and events and about the contributions or importance of potential relationships or connections among these experiences and events. This kind of certainty, suggests Braud (1998), is only derived from those methods at the right-hand 'quantitative' pole of the research continuum as these methods provide the greatest degree of confidence and yield the least ambiguous findings. For this return, however, these methods forgo the depth of understanding of phenomenological research methods and in doing so lose valuable knowledge of complexity, process, and

richness of what is being studied. From this has come my realisation that phenomenology serves as the origin of new knowledge acquisition, focusing primarily as it has on developing a complete, clear and articulate description and understanding of pre- and post-flow experience using open-ended modes of data-gathering.

Conventional flow research has devised two main approaches to the empirical research of flow, those dealing in the immediate subjective experience (i.e. the experience sampling method, ESM) and those that encourage reflection upon subjective experience (i.e. flow questionnaire studies). Whilst these established 'between groups' experimental measures have distinguished differences between classes of events such as the general circumstances that are most likely to produce flow, they remain predictive tools focused primarily upon the measurement of outcomes and as such can be situated towards the quantitative pole of the revised research continuum depicted in Figure 17. When considered in the context of my own research and the investigation of pre- and post-flow experience, these methods were deemed to be too far removed from the descriptive and exploratory approach undertaken, incapable of determining the processes that constitute these events or of articulating the nature of experience in pre- and post-flow. My research has shown that the prevalence of such between groups methodology in contemporary flow research reflects the fact that flow is defined as a 'steady' or 'transitionless' state predicted by certain recognisable experiential indicators which can only ever be defined and researched by methodology that confirms that belief. This has perpetuated the self-fulfilling prophecy found to be so typical of flow research which, in turn, has functioned to stunt any fresh meaningful theoretical elaboration of Csikszentmihalyi's original flow framework.

Proceeding from the explorative perspective of existential-phenomenological psychology, through the contextual lens of Stebbins' (1992a; 1998) serious leisure framework, a participant-centred research process emerged in my research that made use of primary observation, open-ended group and individual discussions wherein research participants from the amateur acting, hobbyist table tennis, and volunteer sports coaching settings were collaboratively involved in both data gathering and analysis and the initial 'conceptualisation' of pre- and post-flow experience.

It may be argued that the collaborative and group-oriented modes of data-gathering and analysis used in my research are incompatible with the tenets of phenomenological research on the grounds that it requires that an individual or individuals describe their experiences in a relatively unbiased and uncontaminated manner (Webb and Kevern, 2001, see 3.7.4). I feel it is important to reiterate here, however, that the primary tool used to assist in describing the experiences of others in phenomenological research is dialogue. Furthermore, the existential phenomenological framework adopted in my research posits that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, is constructed through some form of interaction with others and that the 'phenomenological real' (Pollio et al. 1997: p. 31) is to be found nowhere else but in the ongoing, ever-changing context of the social encounter. Such dialogic data reflects individuals' perspectives on their own experience as they emerge in the context of the dialogue with involved others.

For the purposes of my own data-gathering, I constructed a variant of the flow questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982; Delle Fave and Massimini, 1988) which made use of open-ended group discussion. My contention here was that, as a method, group discussion, with its emphasis on capturing diverse descriptions of individual

experiences through multiple voices and perspectives within an interactive social environment was ideally suited to eliciting richly descriptive and contextualised accounts of pre- and post-flow experience from participants. From this has come my realisation that description through application of reflective discussion legitimately replaces the experimental-like methods of conventional flow research, and structure and meaning replaces the notion of cause and effect. Moreover, my research has provided evidence to suggest that the group and collaborative dialogic methods used not only allowed research participants to describe their experience in terms appropriate to them, it often also required that they clarify its meaning and perhaps even to realise it for the first time. With this in mind, I now recognise a very real challenge facing the phenomenological researcher is to discover what is really true of the phenomenon studied through interpretation of interpersonal knowledge and expression of experience that is obtained through data-gathering.

In the initial stages of the research process, it would be fair to say that I little understood the processes of interpretation in phenomenological work. Indeed, it was only after data collection had begun and there was a high degree of immersion in the data did I start to realise that, frequently, the data (research participant's descriptions) gave a subjective impression of how research participants remembered feeling at the time of the event, and that what was said and what was meant were not necessarily the same thing. This meant that accurate interpretation and the skills of its effective implementation came only gradually. Indeed, it was only after many episodes of trying to discover the sense of words, identify consistencies and inconsistencies in the data, and seeking to clarify the meaning of particular passages with research participants during follow-up discussions did I recognise that what I was engaged in was, in fact, legitimate interpretation in action. However, it was later reflection,

writing, and rewriting about the phenomena that produced another deeper level of interpretation which I had not anticipated. During this process of reflective writing, the analytical use of narrative meaning derived descriptions of the specific experiential situations and action sequences that comprise pre- and post-flow experience. It was at this point that I started to see the patterns implicit within research participants' descriptions of pre- and post-flow that related to each other in ways that had previously seemed incommensurable. Piecing together these narrative structures, using research participants' own words as far as was possible, a single representative narrative of pre- and post-flow experience from across all three leisure groups was produced. By endeavouring to construct experience-sensitive narratives of experience in this manner, I now recognise that I was an active participant in a process of collaborative knowledge development in which participants were treated as co-researchers and were equally active in the narrative construction process.

The collaborative nature of the narrative construction process used in my research might prompt concern surrounding such issues as truth of representation, or rather how accurately each narrative account reflects the nature of the experiences initially described by research participants. It is important to point out here, however, that it was not the intention of the existential phenomenological psychological approach adopted in my research to derive so-called 'pure' descriptions of pre- and post-flow. Rather the end-goal of existential-phenomenological research is to synthesise and integrate the fundamental descriptive and structural insights gathered into a consistent description of the psychological structure of the overall experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). The construction of this general description omits the particulars of the specific (leisure) situations reported by research participants in their primary descriptions of pre- and post-flow experience. Instead, this descriptive

statement brings together those aspects of the experience that are 'descriptive of the experience' in general (Polkinghorne, 1989). In the case of my own research, it was my task, in collaboration with research participants, to glean an accurate 'essential' description of the contents and the particular structural relationships that coheres the elements into a unified experience, producing a descriptive statement that transcends the specific experiences on which they are based. This descriptive statement took the form of a general representative narrative of pre- and post-flow experience across all three serious leisure groups. On the basis of having experienced firsthand the intricacies and inherent complexities of the emergent narrative construction process, I firmly believe the co-generative nature of this process has ensured the most nuanced descriptions of pre- and post-flow experience that are stringent in both meaning and interpretation.

9.6 Narratives of Experience [4]

Using narrative meaning as a medium of data analysis and representation has provided a way of capturing highly nuanced and experience-near descriptions of the specific situations and action sequences that make up pre- and post-flow, allowing the researcher to trace out the temporal and sequential meaning of events and the psychological processes involved. The resultant narratives of pre- and post-flow experience provide the first empirical insights into the phenomenology of such phases of experience, revealing compelling evidence that the flow narrative extends further and is more complicated than is currently conceived, more resembling a process than a singular state-of-mind.

It is not unusual for the 'lived' flow experience to be overlooked given the majority of flow research tends to refer to the established, prescriptive and

subsequently narrow view of what constitutes flow. The value of narrative meaning, in the context of the present research, rests on the belief that people are more than the sum of their traits, that places are more than a physical locale, and that the complex interaction between those people and those places are most profitably captured using narrative forms of description. Furthermore, constructing narratives is not opposed to making scientific contributions. For instance, if as in the case of pre- and post-flow, such narratives of experience paint a picture that is at variance with conventional expressions of the experience being described, these expressions must be modified to include or address the newly emergent data. However, whilst narratives certainly provide a promising way of representing the flow experience, this does not mean that flow researchers should write up endless stories that do not provide a link between theory and practice. Indeed, one of the main challenges of this research has been creating a persuasive connectedness between theory and practice, eventually leading to the deconstructive interpretative analysis of each narrative of experience in Chapter Six. This kind of narrative analysis has subsequently enabled me to speak about the intricacies of the process of experiencing flow with a great deal more empirical grounding. It answers the criticism often directed at flow research that there is too much loose interpretation taking place too far from the data. Furthermore, using narrative meaning to reconstruct frames for capturing and representing this process has created new descriptors for discussing the flow experience, contributing new phrases to the language of the flow narrative: pre-flow and post-flow experience, pre-flow preparation, the pre-flow moment, the trust-flow imperative, post-flow reflection and the search for validation are insights-come-concepts, conveying the ways in which individuals attempt to construct and understand the montage of experiencing flow.

Narrative inquiry has been shown to be a genuine alternative for researchers interested in the intricacies of flow experience, providing a new and viable mode of inquiry that affords future opportunities to expand the scope of flow research to regions not amenable to other, more conventional, modes of inquiry. For instance, should the narratives of pre- and post-flow experience be used in partnership with the established flow descriptors used in this research to depict a more holistic understanding of the flow experience, researchers are presented with a mode of inquiry that is sensitive to evolving situational contexts and embedded experience and meaning that potentially opens up the entire process of experiencing flow to further systematic research. Leisure scholars need to recognise the strengths and value of such participant-centred methodology and endeavour to explore its possibilities, as researching flow-based leisure experience in this way adds a fresh emphasis and direction to an emerging bank of research utilising phenomenological approaches in leisure inquiry (3.3.6).

The phenomenology of leisure

For phenomenologists data are descriptions of the experience of life as it is lived. For phenomenological leisure researchers, these data are descriptions of the experience of leisure itself. This research has presented evidence that leisure researchers are to benefit from not restricting themselves to describing human behaviour in the objective terms of time and activity, but should strive instead to determine the personal meanings people attach to their actions and related experiences. In response to such subjectivist approaches, Anderson and Hultsman (1988: p. 2) have warned 'if leisure is conceived as anything more abstract than time or activity, ambiguities characterise the context'. Such ambiguities, however, as they

are formed in the interplay between individuals and their social worlds, and in the negotiation of meanings, are precisely the data that phenomenologists seek. The researcher endeavours to construct the symbolic meaning of the setting which synopsises what research participants have 'felt', evoking for the reader the experience of that phenomenon as it is lived-out by those involved.

Phenomenological research of the leisure domain remains a minority enterprise, within which existential-phenomenological psychology stands untapped as a viable approach to studying the leisure experience. On this basis, this research not only provides for the beginnings of an empirically-based rationale for the use and appropriateness of existential-phenomenological approaches in serious leisure inquiry, sharing something of the beliefs and ways of knowing associated with it. It is in itself evidence of how intensive study of the phenomenology of leisure experience can reinvigorate leisure research, providing new and deeper insights into leisure meanings, added perspective that promises a more authentic understanding of leisure and its place and role in the wider context of peoples' lives.

9.7 Pre-flow and Post-flow Experience [5]

Systematic interpretative analysis of the phenomenology of each narrative of experience in Chapter Six provided for penetrating insights into the minutiae of pre- and post-flow experience and the **theoretical extension** of Csikszentmihalyi's (1975b) original flow framework, showing there to be far more to the act of experiencing flow than the descriptively limited, experientially isolated, and transitionless contemporary expressions. Flow has been depicted in this research as the focal state of mind in what is a more expansive, multi-phased, multi-dimensional experiential process, consisting of three broadly interrelated phases of experience,

identified as: pre-flow experience; flow-in-action; and post-flow experience. Each of these phases are now summarised below.

Pre-flow Experience

The narrative of pre-flow experience has presented strong evidence that flow experience is not a stand-alone affair for the conditions necessary for flow are rarely neatly to hand. The ability to establish a distinction between everyday reality and that of flow was found to turn on the level of personal commitment and investment, or the seriousness with which an individual approaches their leisure. Research participants associated this seriousness component of pre-flow experience with feelings of preparedness: of a readiness to participate in a chosen activity at a given time and place to the best of their ability. Relatedly, pre-flow experience was found to be initiated within a distinct phase of 'pre-flow preparation', which is itself begun with a purposive investment of attention to facilitate concentration on the task at hand. This pre-flow preparatory phase is composed of distinctive and yet transitional states of mind, a collection of emergent interrelated sequences of transaction between an individual and their environment that at once embody personal meanings associated with the specific challenges of a leisure setting and cognitions related to individual competence within its core activity. Through continued personal commitment and perseverance, the embodied meaning an individual takes into each interaction between themselves and their chosen leisure activity is shaped into personal pathways in the form of routinised patterns of behaviour that when governed optimally, culminate in a peculiar, dynamic and holistic sensation of trust in and subsequent total (flow-like) involvement with the activity itself.

Flow-in-action

Research participants' descriptions of their own flow-based serious leisure experiences revealed that as a serious leisure activity, amateur acting, playing table tennis, and coaching sport is each capable of producing flow and does so in terms unique to that activity, producing wide-ranging descriptive accounts and strong evidence that experiencing the qualities of flow is what makes their leisure rewarding. Common features of research participants' descriptions of being 'in flow', or 'flow-in-action' as it has been newly termed in this research to accentuate the activity of experience itself as it is 'lived-out' by the individual in flow, included: experiences of complete concentration and total involvement in the task at hand, of ease and enhanced quality of performance, the effortless 'flow' of inner and outer actions, of being present in an optimal all-absorbing capacity, of experiencing an altered sense of time in which the concerns of day-to-day life fade from awareness culminating in feelings of an enriched sense of self. The alternative phenomenological focus of this research also exposed two features common to flow-based serious leisure experience not explicitly captured in archetypal portrayals of this experience, namely: the importance of trust in experiencing flow and the presence of an altered sense of place in flow.

Trust as a predictor of flow

The narrative of pre-flow experience presented compelling evidence that flow is far from being an instantaneous manifestation of internal harmony, characterized as it is by a requisite balance between perception of high situational challenge and adequate personal skill. Indeed, the flow state of mind has been found to be more accurately initiated by an implicit sense of trust in flow. The trust-flow state reflects the positive affect associated with the complete investment of attention and sustained concentration and effort, pre-flow, as the individual suspends any concerns of the

situation and suspends any concerns about doing so. Personal level descriptions of the subtle and intuitive responsiveness which characterizes this 'letting go', along with the high-value, the meaningfulness, and the intensity reported of such experience showed trust-flow to represent a higher-order state-of-mind, experienced as a psychological imperative; a transient but necessary pathway for finding and experiencing flow set apart by a momentary resonance shared between how an individual wants to feel and the presently engaged conditions of the action context. However, the referential nature of personal-level accounts of the trust-flow state proved descriptively limited, telling only of the phenomenological conditions that structure experience at the point of transition not the transition itself. On the one hand, the elusiveness of the actual point of transition posits that the act of entering flow is representative of an intuitive moment or space within or from which flow experience is 'realized' by each individual. The capacity to trust and so enter flow is in direct proportion to the individual successfully negotiating their pre-flow experience. On the other hand, an understanding of the experiential nature and significance of the structural conditions necessary for the trust-flow state certainly reduces the sense of unpredictability surrounding exactly when individuals are most likely to enter into a state of flow.

The complete, all-absorbing focus and effortless movement that comes with surrendering to the natural momentum of flow-in-action has also implied the pervasive character of trust as a characteristic of as well as condition for flow, suggesting that deeply involving 'optimal' experience ought to be predicted with a much more complex set of indicators than that of the original flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975b). Far from this being disturbing to the fundamental values and structures with which flow has been hitherto sustained, these original conditions

have been found to retain agentic qualities in structuring pre-flow experience that, in turn, help to facilitate experience in a unified and coordinated manner so that attention becomes performance-focused, raising the intensity and quality of individual action, during pre-flow experience, to a level known to promote trust-related experience.

An altered sense of place in flow

Such is the intensity of experience in flow-in-action that a psychological state is reached that is abstracted from normal or baseline consciousness to reveal a sphere of meaning to which all an individual's sensory experiences of time and space belong, giving the impression of having been somewhere not accessible normally. This altered sense of place in flow was also found to pertain to the functional utility attributed to a leisure setting by those involved due to its ability to facilitate desired flow-like experiences. With time an association of this kind will likely create a strong personal attachment to and dependence on a particular leisure setting through the emotional and symbolic meaning ascribed to it as one that is flow-producing. Together with the boundary-transcending qualities of the flow state, the notion of human-place bonding exposes the duality of place in flow showing each as a direct co-constituent of a more encompassing, higher-order 'sense of place' couched in the affective, cognitive, and symbolic meaning it holds for an individual. It is important to acknowledge here that while this research has contributed to what is an initial understanding of the role of 'place' within the context of flow in serious leisure, it does not adequately represent an understanding of human-place bonding reflected in the wider literature. Further research is necessary into the plurality of place concepts, sense of place, and the construction of place meaning so as to better grasp how and why individuals become so deeply involved with their leisure experiences.

Post-flow experience

In the post-flow narrative, research participants clearly distinguished between the experience of flow as it happens (flow-in-action), and subsequent interpretation of that experience. Emphasising flow's prereflective nature, research participants from all three serious leisure groups reported that immediately after a period of such intense involvement, there is a period of self-reflection as the individual turns their focus on to themselves in an attempt to make sense of what has happened. This initial phase of self-reflection is followed by an active search for validation of personal experience from either within (self-validation) or from significant others (social validation). This dialectic was deemed important for the giving and receiving of feedback but more importantly it is where individuals start to piece together a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of experience. It is the information gathered in this interaction between individuals, significant others, and their leisure settings that delivers the true meaning of flow-based serious leisure experience for the participant, and through it new/enhanced conceptions of themselves. Meaning formed in post-flow experience will continually shift through reflection and recollection and facilitates the continuity and progression of experience through the creation of intentions and expectations about performance that provides focus for future action. The positively rewarding nature of experiencing flow, the sensation of enhanced and extended personal mastery of a particular situation that follows flow, means the associated activities tend to be preferentially selected, forming individual leisure repertoires. On this basis, personal growth in flow-based serious leisure experience can be understood as a process of continuous exchange between individuals and their leisure settings.

On reflection it is still not possible to tell from this study whether the social feature of post-flow experience has come about due to the inherently social nature of the serious leisure activities that came to be studied. I must therefore acknowledge the

possibility that this social dimension of post-flow experience may be less apparent in more individually-based serious leisure activities such as stamp collecting or angling, due to the differing nature of their core activities and the interpretative repertoires used by those involved. It is important to add here, however, that it was never my original intention to seek out purely socially-oriented leisure activities. Indeed, in the beginning, when piecing together my research design (3.5.2), it had initially been the prospective theoretical triangulation of emergent data provided by studying flow across the amateur, hobbyist, and volunteer categories of Stebbins's serious leisure framework, coupled with the fact that I had ready access to groups of individuals who were actively involved in amateur theatre, table tennis, and coaching sport that was appealing, not the activities themselves. On this basis, as I now look back on the emergent research process undertaken, it would be more accurate to say that my research has focused on three structurally different serious leisure activities that happen to have a strong social component. More than this, the inherent theoretical triangulation of emergent data suggests to me that while the experiential terrain of the flow process can be expected to take its form from the nature of the core activity performed, and would therefore be different for different activities, both social and individual, the dominant structures or landmarks of this process found to be prevalent across each of the three serious leisure activities in my own research would also be present in some form.

Taken together, the descriptive accounts of flow-based serious leisure experience and the narratives of pre- and post-flow experience, captured in this research, have allowed the researcher to map out a more complete experiential landscape of flow, revealing that in order to understand the true meaning of what it is to experience flow it must be viewed as a broader experiential whole, wherein the

flow-state is interpreted as an element in a process, as opposed to its more traditional treatment as an isolated and monistic experiential state. Re-conceptualising the act of experiencing flow in this way provides for a more complete and authentic representation of Csikszentmihalyi's original vision of a 'systematic phenomenology of intrinsically rewarding experience' (3.2.2), offering a way of describing precisely what goes on in the stream of consciousness before, during, and after flow, a vision previously inaccessible to the original flow model due to its abstracted and prescriptive nature.

Future research can extend understanding of the flow process further by addressing issues raised by this study that have remained outside the scope of work, including: the prevalence of pre- and post-flow experience across different serious leisure settings; what happens when an individual's pre-flow preparation is less than optimal; and determining whether the process of experiencing flow is the same for individually-based activities such as reading, painting, or collecting. To adequately address questions such as these participants from different leisure settings should be examined to determine whether activity-type has a significant bearing on the ability to experience flow. Furthermore, flow research should account for such differences through research that takes seriously the dialectic relationship shared between individuals and their social worlds across a range of activities.

To recognize that an individual's flow experience emerges from continued interactions with situational contexts is to recognize personal journeys. To the extent that flow has been found to be the defining object in these personal leisure journeys implies a far stronger relationship between flow and serious leisure than the existing conceptual and theoretical linkages (Stebbins, 2005a; 2007a).

9.8 Flow-based Serious Leisure [6]

Examining the nature of flow in serous leisure has shown one of the main reasons that individuals devote time and effort to their leisure is because they gain a deeply enjoyable experience from it. The activity-involvement, the endeavor and perseverance of research participants to meet the challenges of their chosen leisure has been shown to produce a variety of flow-like experiences. Indeed, the capacity to experience flow appears to be both an important personal skill and source of intrinsic motivation for serious leisure participants. These findings stand as a direct empirical documentation of flow experience in serious leisure activity, and, as such, provide a contribution not yet adequately made by either framework. However, involvement in these leisure activities and settings does not guarantee flow will be experienced; what makes these activities such rich sources of deeply enjoyable experiences is that the structural design of their core activities facilitates concentration and individual involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from everything non-leisure. Closer scrutiny of this core structure found that a number of the special qualities of serious leisure hold down a structural function, and are very much interrelated with the known conditional features necessary for flow.

The emergent structural interdependence between flow and serious leisure not only strengthened the linkage between the seriousness of the activity and the likelihood of experiencing flow, but when this association was brought to bear on the broader interaction between individual and activity, an explanatory framework of optimal leisure experience was revealed. Drawing jointly upon the newly-emerged process view of flow the optimal leisure framework can be used to focus attention on the phenomenological experiences of high levels of commitment and involvement in serious leisure activity and the identification and exploration of the conditions and

features of these activities that lead to experiences of flow in serious leisure and their implications. Amateur acting, playing table tennis, and coaching sport have each been shown to provide involvement and intrinsic motivation for participants, at the same time promoting intentional effort toward defined personal goals and skill acquisition that give a clear sense of how well the individual is doing. Activities that require such commitment and investment of personal effort provide opportunities to maintain and further develop the sense of competence that allows individuals to regularly experience enjoyment and positive feeling about themselves in their leisure.

The commitment and intense involvement associated with such activities has also been found to help structure pre-flow experience, in the form of personal routines, a clear set of rules and procedures that an individual associates with personal engagement, concentration and effort in finding flow. The post-flow narrative of experience also demonstrated that when tied with personal interests and cultivated in a context supportive of challenge-seeking and self-expression, flow-based serious leisure experience serves as a context for growth and personal development. The conflation of flow and serious leisure has thus accentuated flow's growth-producing potential. Such developmental significance is a notable contribution since flow's typical association with temporary activity and enjoyment has led leisure researchers to adopt flow experience as a tool to help explain the quality of leisure experiences. Symptomatic of flow's temporal interpretation is that the bulk of the Leisure Studies literature has tended to overlook the act of experiencing flow as a vehicle for self-growth.

The theoretical synthesis and empirical findings of this research has shown that with reference to the characteristics of flow-based serious leisure experience and the seriousness component now known to underpin it, flow and serious leisure share

far more than a theoretical kinship, but are more accurately mutually reinforcing. When conditions are appropriately aligned they function synergistically, with each reinforcing and promoting the presence of the other, to blend as one in the total process of experiencing flow in serious leisure. In this process, flow functions more specifically as a unifying positive psychological construct for the special qualities of serious leisure. Not only do these findings represent the first steps towards understanding how flow is 'lived-out' in the context of serious leisure, such knowledge adds significantly to the intellectual faculty of Stebbins' serious leisure perspective as an explanatory framework of leisure involvement. From a flow perspective, bringing flow and serious leisure together has gone some way toward responding to the conceptual and theoretical limitations of flow as a leisure-related framework, providing the first empirically-based examination of flow across different social contexts and the placement of flow within the broader context of 'real-life'. Strong evidence has been presented in this research that instead of discussing flow on the assumption that there is one uniform type, it is more appropriate to say that there are variants of flow experiences across different contexts or frames. In this regard, this study stands as the first step towards refining Csikszentmihalyi's original flow framework to more specifically describe flow in serious leisure settings.

Although in the context of this study, each facet of the research approach taken is recognisable as being theoretically original in its own right, neither has been singularly capable of producing a comprehensive understanding of pre- and post-flow experience. It is only when taken together that the separate components of this research have been able to capture, analyse, and present the first empirical record of pre- and post-flow experience, culminating in the development of an Experience Process Model (EPM).

9.9 The Experience-Process Model (EPM) [7]

Flow is readily accepted as a state of mind and as an experiential phenomenon. Proponents of flow believe that an understanding of this phenomenon must commence from the assumption that flow is, in some way, a separate entity in and of itself, and hence, amenable to being identified and defined as such. The contention of this research is that this is no longer an appropriate position, and that an alternative/extended understanding is necessary. With this reservation, the present study contests the traditional monistic conception of flow in preference of a more differentiated understanding of the phenomenon. The movement toward an experience-process model (EPM) of flow-based serious leisure experience outlined in Chapter Seven has challenged some of the traditional thoughts and assumptions surrounding flow, addressing flow-based serious leisure as dynamic, emergent, and embedded in personal journeys. The transient nature of the flow state posits that in order to understand what it means to experience flow it must be situated not just within specific dimensions, but across a broader experiential process encompassing the conditions which set the stage for flow, experiences which occur while engaged in flow, and the consequences of flow.

To present the experience of flow in this way is to recognize the specific systems of experience that coalesce to structure flow in relation to particular leisure settings. As it stands Csikszentmihalyi's flow framework does not suffice to break from the abstract individualism of its essential structure, to an adequate understanding of the interconnectedness and constructed nature of such experience. Subsequently, the flow phenomenon is all too often studied and debated in isolation from the settings in which it occurs. An experience-process model, as described in Chapter Seven, provides a framework within which to deal with the dynamic and interactive

relationship between internal and contextual factors which impact upon the nature, quality and meaning of lived flow experience. From this perspective, the internally driven aspects of an individual's experiences, based as they are on individual perception and conception of an external reality, have been shown in this research to be shaped by both social processes as well as personal experiences. In turn, an individual's internal capacities will impact upon the external world, both shaping their perception of it, and determining the ways in which they respond to it. This emphasis on the inseparability between the individual and their immediate environment/setting avoids the over-reliance on the internal faculties of the individual, which has characterised the conventional positive psychological approach to studying flow, and draws equal attention to the vital existential fact that individual experience is ever context-bound.

These are timely advancements in light of the resurgence of interest in the study of well-being which has led to considerable debate about what constitutes a 'good life'. Though even with this resurgence, work stating the phenomenological nature and dynamics of the links between leisure and well-being is limited. Stebbins (2007a) has made tentative links to serious leisure and well-being with research evidence suggesting that it is an important by-product of serious leisure participation (e.g. Haworth and Hill, 1992 Haworth, 1997; Mannell, 1993). Csikszentmihalyi has long considered the intense enjoyment characteristic of flow experience to play a pivotal role in well-being. In this line of investigation, the flow model is usually seen as the leading activity-based theory of personal growth and happiness. As previously mentioned (2.3.3), the typology of positive subjective experience derived from differentiated models like flow has been found to be useful in the prediction of subjective well-being and overall quality of life.

By capturing the first empirically-based insights into flow-based serious leisure, this research provides a handle for understanding what is perhaps the central motivational component of serious leisure experience, an understanding that bridges the intellectual divide between the actual experiencing of leisure and well-being. Furthermore, by pinning down pre- and post-flow experience and its interrelationship with the flow state within serious leisure activity, the present study provides knowledge of the structural mechanisms involved in finding flow in serious leisure, offering insights into the processes and circumstances that are most likely to facilitate well-being in individuals and impact positively upon the quality of life. Knowledge of these processes and circumstances is seen to have important implications for leisure education, for though flow is a highly desirable state associated with positive feelings, not all individuals are aware of how to create flow experiences within their current lifestyles. Research into flow-based serious leisure experience thus provides leisure service professionals with grounds on which to foster the development of self-directed, intrinsically motivating, personally meaningful, and enjoyable leisure participation patterns.

In so far as flow-based serious leisure may yield nuanced and qualified concepts of the serious leisure experience currently unavailable in discourses regarding Stebbins' serious leisure framework, there needs to be further examination of the utility of the newly-emerged optimal leisure framework in different serious leisure activities, as well as more broadly in casual, and project-based leisure activities. Such research would provide for a perspective-wide comprehension of the optimal leisure framework's value and the beginnings of an identity of its own.

Given the structural complexity of the Experience Process Model (EPM), to consider enjoyment to be the sole criterion of a flow-producing activity's worth does not allow us to articulate the worth of many activities, the pursuit of which has been found to require great personal commitment and deep levels of involvement or seriousness. The seriousness of flow-based leisure activities has emerged as a critical component, not just for the affective governance of the flow process, but for the potential transference of the experience-process model to domains of life outside of leisure. The voluntary control of attention in flow-based serious leisure activities has been shown to enhance both engagement and developmental impact. Control of attention in leisure activities as it is applied to improving individual skill and maintaining enjoyment, results in the kind of self-discipline and self-awareness that is necessary for building personal mastery and creativity and, in turn, improving the quality of experience in other areas of life. Flow is compatible with any skill-based activity, suggesting the applicational scope of the newly-emerged experience-process model is, in a sense, limited only by imagination, though it would appear to hold particular relevance for business and educational settings due to the emphasis placed on self-knowledge, knowledge transfer, and creative thinking in those domains. Csikszentmihalyi has himself remarked upon the usefulness of introducing and applying flow to encourage and enhance creativity, linking this to teaching and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997b; Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack, 1986) and business leadership and management (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; 2003). Operationalising the known structures of the experience-process model in business models and educational situations is seen to have anticipated benefits for finding and sustaining flow, enhancing the shorter-term quality of experiences and personal

performance, potentially leading to longer-term continued or serious commitment and 'creative' involvement within those settings.

On this evidence, it would appear flow is not reserved for serious leisure in the limited sense of sports, games, arts, or hobbies, but is possible wherever commitment, energy, and personal ability find meaningful and effective application and expression in the world of social experience. Subsequent theory building and empirical research needs to consider the utility of the experience-process model across work as well as leisure settings. The social and cultural aspects structuring these experiences in specific everyday contexts, and in extra-everyday contexts, still remains an unexplored issue. It is anticipated that future research regarding the contextual frames of flow experience in different institutional settings will contribute new and even provocative dimensions to our already evolving understanding of how people experience flow.

9.10 Concluding Remarks

This research has sought neither to dismiss nor to diminish the contributions of Csikszentmihalyi's original flow framework. Rather, it has attempted to reconsider and reassess its assumptions by drawing attention to its ambiguities and incorporating significant findings, in relation to pre- and post-flow experience, obtained through phenomenological inquiry. From the researcher's personal perspective, a key aspect of my engaging with phenomenological research and its doctrine of truth and meaning has been coming to understand the importance of critiquing the assumptions not just of the theoretical frameworks used in my research but concurrently the assumptions that underscore my own ideas and research practice. This has involved testing my own ideas against theories in the literature: 'what do I know?'; 'how have I come to

know it?'; 'how do I validate my own knowledge?'; 'how can I best share my knowledge?'; and 'what can I use my knowledge for?'. The same has held true in the processes of trying to understand the assumptions underlying the development of my own ideas and emergent theory (of pre- and post-flow) so that I might come to understand how and why to critique and improve it.

Subsequently, I have come to recognise the importance of live evidence to demonstrate how and why theory has affected the quality of experience. In contrast, flow researchers tend to comply with traditional systems of knowledge and associated conceptual and theoretical models which seem to have become more important than the reality they profess to represent. During my early involvement in this research process, I was caught up in my own traditional system of knowledge regarding conducting research which I had internalised from my experiences as both undergraduate and postgraduate student and later as a researcher and teacher. However, as I have engaged with phenomenological methodology and learned about its research principles and practice, and become deeply involved in learning about my own, I have come to recognise that generating theory about experience must begin with the experience itself as opposed to using preconceived ideas of how practice will emerge from current knowledge of that experience. Whilst it is important to critique one's own theory against the wider theories in the literature, it now seems self-evident that the kind of theory which will help improve our understanding of flow has to arise from returning to and re-learning about the practice of the experience itself. This view is quite contrary to the dominant opinion of flow research that an empirical body of knowledge exists which can be applied to practice without question. What is ironic is that by deviating from the prescriptive content of the contemporary flow framework and getting back to the flow phenomenon as it is lived-out, this research has enabled a

fuller conceptual understanding, definition, and constitution of flow that not only opens out whole new vistas for future flow research, but recaptures some of the original essence of Csikszentmihalyi's flow phenomenon.

It is on the basis of this research that an alternative experience-process definition of flow is made possible, depicting flow as the focal state of mind in a broader, more expansive, multi-phased, and multi-dimensional experiential process comprising of three distinct, intricate, and highly-personalised phases of experience, identified as: pre-flow experience; flow-in-action; and post-flow experience. Further to this, an experience-process definition of flow, when applied to the serious forms of leisure, is key to nurturing optimal leisure experience and with it achievement of perhaps the greatest sense of personal growth and well-being available through leisure participation.

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