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Going with the flow: autism and 'flow states'

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- “Have you ever decided to spend half an hour on an activity, such as reading e-mails, doing some gardening, or even shopping, only to find out that you have been doing the activity for a number of hours? Then you may well have experienced what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as a ‘flow state’.” (McDonnell and Milton, 2014).

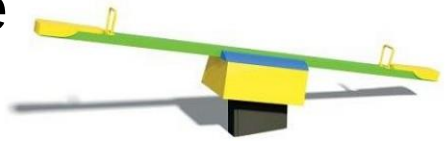
The concept of ‘flow states’

- ‘Going with the flow’ and being ‘in the zone’.
- A form of optimal experience that can be beneficial to feelings of happiness and wellbeing.
- Described as being so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.
- Flow experiences require complete immersion in an activity, whether playing a musical instrument, completing a complex technical task, or reading a book.

- Flow can also happen within social interactions, for example: when one is talking to a good friend (see later).
- Activities that lead to a flow experience can be called autotelic (from Greek: auto=self, telos=goal), as such activity is often seen as an ‘end-in-itself’ for the individual experiencing it, with end rewards often being just an excuse to participate in the activity.

Flow states and challenging experiences

- A flow state can be achieved when the skills and resources available to an individual are fully engaged in managing an activity.
- If an activity is not challenging enough it can lead to boredom, yet flow can return if the level of challenge increases.
- Equally, if an activity is too difficult it can quickly lead to frustration, and returning to flow would require a reduction in the difficulty of the challenge presented.



Key aspects of flow states

- Clear goals and immediate feedback on progress.
- Total focus on what one is doing in the present moment (with no room for attention on anything else).
- Actions and awareness become merged: skilled activities can become seemingly automatic and effortless.

- Losing awareness of sense of oneself.
- A sense of control over one's actions and a reduction in anxiety about possible failure.
- Time dilation: time seems to pass faster and go by unnoticed – however, the reverse can also be true, where people feel that their awareness is somehow working in 'slow motion'.
- The activity is experienced as intrinsically rewarding.

Autistic flow states

- DSM-V (2013) diagnostic criteria: autism in part defined by ‘restricted and repetitive’ patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities.
- From this psychiatric viewpoint, such activity is deemed as dysfunctional and a pathologised abnormality.

- People on the autism spectrum are often said to be ‘tuned out’ from the social world operating around them.
- Sometimes this is a large mischaracterisation, at times it is because the individual in question is fully engaged in a given activity and could be said to have achieved a state of flow.

Flow and the relieving of stress

- Many people on the autism spectrum experience high levels of stress for a number of reasons (Caldwell, 2014).
- By engaging with passion in their interests, all people can become absorbed in an activity that gives them a sense of achievement.
- In addition, certain repetitive tasks can help people achieve a flow-like state of mind. These tasks can become absorbing and can become areas of meaning.

The interest model of autism (monotropism)

- Core feature in autism refers to an atypical strategy being employed in the distribution of attention (Murray et al, 2005; Lawson, 2010; Milton, 2012a).
- The shaping of many cognitive processes depends upon a competition between mental processes for this scarce resource.
- Polytropism and monotropism.
- Indicates how individuals on the autism spectrum show a tendency toward either being passionately interested in a task or phenomena, or not interested at all.

- When autism is also often characterised by sensitivity to external stimuli and difficulties in processing multiple sources of information, such a strategy in one's use of attention is rendered rational, rather than dysfunctional.
- By entering into a 'monotropic' flow state, people on the autism spectrum can gain predictability and control over their immediate environment, a sense of achievement, and in-the-moment fun.

- “We suggest that the uneven skills profile in autism depends on which interests have been fired into monotropic superdrive and which have been left unstimulated by any felt experience.” (Murray et al. 2005: 143).

Monotropism and social context

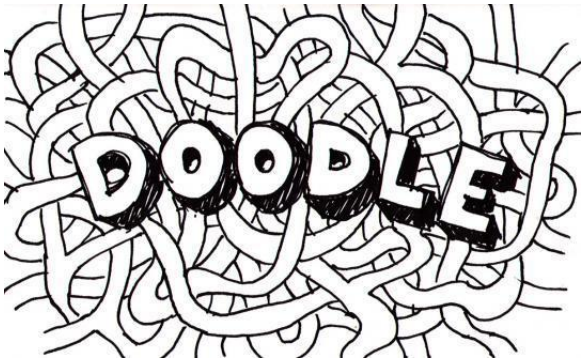
- Experiences of ‘failure’ or the condemnation and mocking of others, can be devastating.
- This can be highly influential on which interests are followed through, and which are stopped through feelings of fear and anxiety.

Disruptions to flow and sensory overload

- Disruptions to this flow, however, can lead to a fragmented perception of incoming stimuli, feelings of an unwanted invasion, and reactions of meltdown, shutdown, and panic attacks.

Microflow

- The monotropism model of autism would also suggest that excess attention can be used up by small repetitive actions such as ‘doodling’. Another way to describe such actions would be: ‘microflow’.



Interests and wellbeing

- When looking at the accounts of people on the autism spectrum, ‘special interests’ are rarely framed as troublesome obsessions (although this is on occasion remarked upon).
- More often than not, such interests are regarded as essential to the wellbeing and sense of fulfilment that people on the autism spectrum experience.

Slow and fast thinking

- Kahneman (2011), theorises that there are two systems in the brain that require differing levels of attentional input and divides these systems into what he describes as ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking.
- System one or ‘fast thinking’ is characterised as being instinctive and emotional, frequently used and automated, and can operate unconsciously.
- System two, or slow thinking, is characterised as logical and time consuming, requiring effort and conscious calculation.

Fast thinking

- One can attend to an array of information and find what is relevant to oneself quickly.
- Can also lead to jumping to conclusions and rushed and illogical solutions.
- Such thinking involves associating new information with existing mental schemas, rather than creating new patterns from the new experience.
- One of the psychological effects to this way of thinking being predominant for Kahneman (2011) is that it generates an illusion of control over one's own life, an 'optimistic bias'.

Slow thinking

- Kahneman (2011) suggests that slow logical thinking is used far less frequently, and requires much more cognitive effort.
- An autistic perception could be regarded as a form of slow processing, often exacting and precise in nature, and not relying on previous biases and schemas (Milton, 2013a).

Flow states – fast or slow?

- The conscious brain switches all attention to being ‘in-the-moment’, yet instinctive and automated, operating on an unconscious level – fast thinking?
- Yet sometimes requires a challenge, something slightly beyond previous experience and requiring effort – slow thinking?
- An action that was once largely effortful and difficult has now become mastered and largely automated; the moment of mastering a plateau in one’s learning – the space between?
- An example: playing table tennis.

A case in point: table tennis

Social flow

- One way in which many people can experience flow-like states is from having social interactions with well acquainted others, such as a close friend.
- This often taken-for-granted flow-like state experienced by non-autistic people on a frequent basis is but a rarity in the lives of many people on the autism spectrum.

The ‘double empathy problem’

- Building bridges between people of autistic and non-autistic dispositions is not always an easy process.
- The different perceptual worlds of the differently socially (dis)positioned (Milton, 2012b, 2014, Chown, 2014).
- Empathy problems as a ‘two-way street’ (Sinclair, 1993).

- In this theory, it is not only the autistic person who struggles to read the intentions and motivations of non-autistic people, but the same can also be said in reverse.
- Theory of autistic mind can often leave a great deal to be desired.
- ‘Fork ‘andles’!

Non-verbal social flow

- Not all sources of shared flow states rely on verbal communication – e.g. the ‘jam session’.
- The importance of engaging with individuals without recourse to the over use of language has long been acknowledged in building rapport (Caldwell, 2014).

The downside: one-way tracks, clumps and blockages

- Gambling on horse races or card games have all the necessary parameters with regard to producing a flow state in those who participate in them.
- More morally neutral activities such as playing non-gambling games can also become addictive.

- The opposite of flow-like states: such as when flows become entangled and ‘clumped’ (Milton, 2013b).
- Blockages may account for high levels of stress and resultant ‘challenging behaviours’ (McDonnell, 2010).

Conclusion

- “According to the accounts of people on the autism spectrum, the flow-like states brought about by the pursuit of ‘special interests’ or the repetition of actions can be seen as a necessary coping strategy for people and not ‘behaviours’ to be controlled or regulated.” (McDonnell and Milton, 2014).

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