

**Flow***Fluidez**Fluxo*

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**ABSTRACT:** Within the study of the positive aspects is the flow concept. This term was coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), to name the psychological state that people experience when they perform intrinsic motivating activities and in which the challenges of the situation equals the skills that the person has -or believes to have- to perform such activities. With respect to these flow experiences, there have been numerous studies to describe, understand their characteristics and their relationship with other variables in different contexts. Most of these investigations have included samples of young adult groups, and only a few of the elderly. Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to present the results of different works, which studied the flow in the senior citizen group, and then reflect on the possibilities offered by this stage of life to achieve optimal flow experiences.

**Keywords:** Flow experience; Differences by Age; Gender.

**RESUMEN:** Dentro del estudio de los aspectos positivos se encuentra el concepto de fluidez. Este término fue acuñado por Csikszentmihalyi (1975), para nombrar el estado psicológico que experimentan las personas cuando realizan actividades motivadas intrínsecamente y en las cuales los desafíos de la situación igualan a las habilidades que la persona dispone o cree disponer para desempeñarse en ella. Con respecto a estas experiencias se han hallado numerosos estudios que permiten describirla, conocer sus características y su relación con otras variables en diferentes contextos.

*Estas investigaciones han incluido mayormente en sus muestras a grupos de adultos jóvenes, siendo escasos los estudios realizados que tuvieron en cuenta a adultos mayores. Por lo tanto, es el objetivo de este artículo exponer los resultados de diferentes investigaciones que han tenido como propósito estudiar la fluidez en la vejez, para luego reflexionar acerca de las posibilidades que brinda esta etapa de la vida para el logro de experiencias óptimas.*

**Palabras clave:** *Experiencias de fluidez; Diferencias por Edad; Género.*

**RESUMO:** *Dentro do estudo dos aspectos positivos está o conceito de fluxo. Este termo foi cunhado por Csikszentmihalyi (1975), para citar o estado psicológico que as pessoas experimentam quando realizam atividades de motivação intrínseca e em que os desafios da situação é igual às habilidades que a pessoa tem - ou acredita ter - para executar tais atividades. Com relação a essas experiências de fluxo, tem havido numerosos estudos para descrever, entender suas características e sua relação com outras variáveis nos diferentes contextos. A maioria dessas investigações incluíram amostras de grupos de adultos jovens, e apenas alguns dos idosos. Portanto, é objetivo deste artigo apresentar os resultados de diferentes obras, que estudaram o fluxo no grupo idoso, e depois refletir sobre as possibilidades oferecidas por esta fase da vida para alcançar experiências de fluxo ideais.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Experiência de fluxo; Diferenças por idade; Gênero.*

## **Introduction**

Positive Psychology has made valuable contributions to the understanding of positive emotions. It has emphasized the distinction between pleasure and gratification, stating that while pleasure has a clear sensory and emotional component; it is at the same time ephemeral and implies little or no thought. On the other hand, gratification is described as a lasting emotional state that is obtained from the activity and situation engagement where strengths and virtues are launched (Seligman, 2003).

The same distinction is found in studies in well-being, which have differentiated between the hedonistic approach, understood as pleasure acquisition and pain avoidance and the eudemonic approach which explains well-being from self-realization, human potential development and full psychological functioning.

The term flow arises from this distinction as the concept was coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999) to describe the psychological state that people experience when they engage in rewarding activities, i.e. those activities in which they develop their strengths and resources. This author spent many years of his work as a researcher studying this flow experience and through his studies; he managed to produce an exhaustive description of the key features of this state setting, which enabled him to determine favorable conditions for it to develop. According to his observations on the flow experiences, people seek to achieve this state in their activities, as it implies an optimal level of experience, away from anxiety and boredom.

We will describe the "flow" state, the conditions that must converge to reach it and the main research findings on the topic. Then we will thoroughly analyze some research results that allowed a description of this psychological state and its peculiarities in old age. These findings correspond to research conducted in Mar del Plata, Argentina from 2009 to 2011. In all studies, the data were collected through the application of standardized questionnaires such as: 1) Flow questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998 ); 2) Psychological well-being scale (Casullo, 2002); and 3) Psychic Capital scale (Casullo, 2006) - the last two scales were included in the background case studies. The construction of a sociodemographic profile of the people who participated in the different studies was done by a questionnaire. In some of them, in-depth interview tools were incorporated in order to increase awareness of this experience in the elderly. These instruments were applied to young adults and/or seniors; in all cases, the selection was a non-probabilistic sample.

## **Characterization**

Flow experiences are so named for the way that people relate to that state after having experienced it. Therefore, its name is the result of the description made by people who were interviewed by Csikszentmihalyi, who referred to achieving that particular mental and bodily experience. They used the word "flow" often in their explanations, when they described what they felt and they said: "it's like if the situation flows," emphasizing different aspects of the experience. Therefore, the flow experiences can be defined as a special psychological state characterized by the concentration or complete internalization in an activity or situation (Csikszentmihalyi, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1998).

Some of the features mentioned by those who experience the flow are the following: 1) focus on those stimuli that are essential for carrying out the activity, leaving out reflective self-consciousness; 2) intense concentration during the activity; 3) a feeling that the activity or situation is executed automatically, in a challenging way, without unsightly efforts; 4) distortion of temporal experience; 5) a feeling of clarity about the objectives of the activity or situation; 6) immediate feedback on the consistency between these objectives and what the person is doing to achieve them; 7) a feeling that one can control one's actions; and finally, 8) the feeling of having achieved a satisfying and rewarding experience that can be repeated (Jackson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

It must be stressed that the flow state may experience changes; firstly because of its dynamic rather than a static state, and secondly, because the experience can have different degrees of intensity. In relation to the latter aspect, when a person describes the experience alluding to all the above-mentioned features this is called a *macro flow experience*, but if one refers just to some of the characteristics it is described as a *micro flow experience*. The micro flow experience may occur in enjoyable activities but which pose few challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### **Conditions for achieving this status**

The first thing to say is that the ability to experience this state of "flow" varies among people, due to innate conditions as well as to how this experience can be achieved and maintained through accomplished learning. In addition, there are components of the activity or situation that can make a person feel that way.

These experiences can occur under any circumstances as long as the capabilities of people and opportunities for environmental action properly match. This optimal interaction is typical in conditions where people voluntarily engage in activities designed to be enjoyable, such as sports, games, shows and artistic or religious activities. However, what the author says is that the activity and experience are independent of each other; so the best entertainment can be boring whereas a routine work can be fun.

Thus, it is impossible to explain the quality of the flow experience taking into account only one of these factors objectively. Only their interaction produces a type of experience that can cause boredom, anxiety or fluency, according to how it occurs.

One of the contributions of the flow theory has been to shift the attention of researchers who are interested in motivational processes, from the aspects of causality to factors involved in the consequences. It is not so important to understand what justifies a certain behavior but rather to know what psychic reward it adds. We can mention first motivational arousal as an intrinsic condition, that is, the interest of the person for the activity or situation which he/she finds rewarding. This must overcome the motivational component of extrinsic motivation, which refers to interest in external rewards, such as money or recognition of others. The satisfaction is not in the results, but in the process of the activity as a whole (Salanova, 2005).

However, the achievement and maintenance of this experience not only depends on the novelty or the intrinsic interest of the activity in question, but also in the optimal combination between the level of challenge and skill. To do so, a balance between the demanded skills and the ones the individual thinks he has or really has to fulfill the activity will be required.

Conversely, when the personal skills outweigh the required ones, people try to make the activity more complex not to experience boredom or quit it. Nevertheless, when the skills required by the situation far exceed or do not match those available by an individual he/she may experience anxiety, so he/she may be unable to achieve the flow. This is directly linked to the feeling of control over the activity. That is why immediate feedback on the implementation and clarity of purpose are essential characteristics to achieve optimal experiences.

Understanding the activity implies knowing the level of implementation of what is being performed. Therefore, it is not enough that the activity be new or interesting in itself, but it also requires coordination between the type of activity, motivation and skills available to the individual.

The flow and the factors that influence this state were studied in different contexts. Studies have focused on recognizing the flow state during the execution of physical and sports activities in young people, especially in the search for its relationship with the motivational climate and the teacher or coach's treatment in the activity (González-Cutre Sicily, & Moreno, 2006; Moreno, Cervello, Martinez Galindo, & Alonso, 2007). Records were also found in relation to school learning (Calderon Sanchez, 2003) and work (Salanova,

Martínez, Cifre, & Schaufeli, 2005). Most of these studies were conducted on young people; there are few records that describe these experiences in old age. Next, some research on seniors is outlined.

The first record on the flow experiences in older people corresponds to an investigation of a small group (36 seniors) of Korean interviewees. This research found that although all subjects agreed on the possible existence of this kind of experience, only 33% recognized having experienced it in their personal life. The author concludes that the low percentage may be due to cultural factors, due to the possible literal interpretation of the quotes that make up the instrument. In this study, fifteen different flow activities, which belonged to three broad categories, were collected; for example, productive activities (such as work activities and housework), leisure and religious-educational activities. The main difference between genders was that men mentioned leisure activities most often, while women mentioned housework as generating a flow experience. A significant relationship between life satisfaction and frequency of flow experiences was found especially in the women's group (Han, 1988).

Voelkl (1990) was interested in studying the relationship between challenges and skills in everyday activities developed by 12 US seniors living in long-stay homes. The results indicated that the relationship between challenges and skills are best explained by the subjective experience than by an objective activity.

Hereafter, we will deal with the results of studies conducted in Mar del Plata, Argentina, which were aimed at deepening the understanding of this experience in old age.

### **Is the flow experienced at different times in a lifespan?**

To answer this question several studies were carried out in which the presence/absence of flow experiences in people of different age groups were compared. After these studies, it was shown that the flow experiences are both experienced in similar proportions by young adults as well as by seniors. Thus, a preliminary and initial study showed that these experiences were presented in similar proportions in both age groups (Sabatini, & Arias, 2009). This first result was important because it challenges one of the most widespread prejudices about aging, characterizing this life stage as passive, devoid of meaningful and rewarding activities.

As opposed to this idea, the elderly characterized this experience as pleasurable and entertaining, while young adults highlighted the concentration that this activity required. As for the type of activity that helped them reach this special psychological state, both groups mentioned a wide variety, including physical, artistic, recreational, social and religious activities as well as sports, housework, studying and working. The differences between these groups were found mainly in the fact that older people mentioned "working" sparingly, which could be explained in part for being retired, compared to young people who mentioned this activity most frequently. However, although sparingly, other tasks such as housework and religious activities were only mentioned by the older group.

These findings were thoroughly researched in subsequent studies- with numerous samples- that also found that both age groups largely considered that the flow experience finished when the activity was over; young people, more than seniors, said that the flow experience was interrupted frequently due to other mandatory activities. This allowed us to think that in old age not only the levels of gratification do not diminish but also that these positive experiences could be sustained longer without being interrupted by mandatory activities (Sabatini, & Arias, 2010).

### **Differences by age group**

Other studies searched whether there were differences in flow experiences in two older adults groups, aged 60 to 69 and 70-79. Again, they found that flow experiences occurred in similar proportions in both age groups, but with the senior group experiencing macro flow more frequently. In addition, both agreed about the reasons that enable and facilitate this type of experience. Doing the activity for pleasure was mentioned as a priority; concentration – though less frequent - appears in a second place. Free choice, the activity management and creativity were rarely mentioned.

Most interviewees expressed that the reason the flow experience ended was that they finished the activity that produced such flow. However, making a comparison by age group, it was found that adults 70 to 79 refer to this more frequently. The start of a mandatory activity as the end of the flow experience was higher in the group of 60-69 years old. The absent-mindedness appeared very rarely in both and there were no differences between the groups (Sabatini, & Zariello, 2010)

These data allow us to point out that not only do the flow experiences remain in effect during old age but they also seem to deepen with advancing age, as a number of conditions including individual and social aspects favor the experience.

### **Gender differences**

Further analysis focused on a comparison by gender allowed to observe similarities and differences in the way men and women experience the flow. While the number of people who reported experiencing this state was similar in proportions, the men referred largely to all the features of these experiences.

Among the reasons that led to the flow experience in both women and men, pleasure for the activity was primarily mentioned. In a decreasing order of frequency, concentration followed in much lower frequency than the first one. Free choice, the management of the activity and creativity were scarcely mentioned. Men reported largely than women the importance of concentration to achieve the flow, while women emphasized the pleasure for the activity. The main reason for the interruption of the flow state was the culmination of the activity. However, a large number of women, unlike men, mentioned that the reason for the flow experience ending was the beginning of another mandatory activity. Distraction was mentioned very rarely in both women and men (Arias, & Sabatini, 2010).

### **How do the elderly describe the flow experience?**

Another study aimed to explore the subjective experience of the flow in young adults and older adults (Sabatini, 2011). The data analysis showed that people of both age groups describe this experience in a similar way, describing the following emerging categories.

Those interviewed refer to the "disconnection" that occurs during these flow experiences of all that is external to the activity, leading them to experience a state of complete union with the activity that is being carried out. Both age groups agree to describe this experience referring to feelings of "happiness", "pleasure", "tranquility", "joy" and "completeness". Some examples are the following:



*"It's great, because you seem to forget everything, everything, it is like being disconnected from the world, it's happiness ... it's inexplicable, it's like when you have a headache, you take an aspirin and feel relief. Well, it's the same ... it calms me down, it gives me joy." (Oscar, 73 years old)*

*"It is very pleasant ... as having a feeling of plenitude ... nothing is lacking in that moment ... a very high well-being state ... it is a feeling of being right there where one has to be ..." (Susana, 36 years old)*

*"It makes me happy ... I feel complete ... it gives me great pleasure..." (Isabel, 69 years old)*

*"It's not something that is voluntary, i.e. it just happens. At the end of the activity, I realize that I did not pay attention to what surrounded me, I focus ... it's like being there, only there. I can have many personal problems but at that moment I have all my attention there ... It's weird because it's like being concentrated but it is not forced. It's like letting go ... a very relaxed and enjoyable concentration. It's a feeling of being fully there but also letting myself be ... It is something that I love doing and I do my best to get it right ... I put a lot of energy on it ... there are times it happens more frequently ... when a difficulty arises ... it is a total focus ..." (Sabina, 30 years)*

They also refer to the "well-being" and the feeling of "belonging" that the activity gives them, usually related to some important aspect of their "identity" and "transcendence":

*"I identify myself with it, since I was a young girl they taught me how to draw ... it is what I'm good at ... It's exciting." (Isabel, 69 years old)*

*"I feel my spirit rising ... complete relax ... I ... I feel better ... I sleep better ... I found a way to know and heal myself without medication. I conveyed this to my children." (Helena, 70 years old)*

*"One feels happiness, and that transcends what you do ... there are things that one inherits, my mother used to write too ... I find great pleasure in it... a reason to live. That flame, helps even if you're not a singer, a writer, a painter, it helps you survive ... it is part of oneself, it's essential." (Maria Laura, 66 years old)*

*"It always gave me pleasure ... I move and get into a world that is half mine ... painting makes me fly ... I'm able to transmit and create things ... it takes you out of the gray zone and routine." (Mario, 71 years old)*

*"I isolate myself from the world, I focus on me, on that experience and do it with passion, with love and I let myself go ... I love doing it and it's like I transmit, I communicate through it ... It is what gives me more pleasure. It's everything, the head, thoughts, feelings. At that moment I'm out of the system and I become myself with that ... it's like tele-transportation, like traveling in paradise ... There are feelings that come inside, one lets oneself go, that have to do with pleasure, with feeling good, an experience that is beautiful." (Lisandro, 42 years old)*

Another aspect that was pointed out in both age groups was the "energy increase" that is experienced in the activity as opposed to the fatigue that other activities may produce:

*"I forget everything and I only feel that ... It charges my batteries for the rest of the stuff, It gives me pleasure ... I feel happy, with a mental freedom, as if my head were empty... it's like a ground wire." (Gisela, 32 years old)*

*"I do not feel tired or exhausted ... It has to do with the pleasure that one gets after ... the search makes me focus. It is very rewarding, I can forget about ugly or distressing things. It's like self-fulfillment." (Sabina, 30 years old)*

### **Relationship with other positive variables: mental capital and psychological well-being**

Csikszentmihalyi (1998) highlights the importance of achieving "Flow Experiences" daily, contributing to a significant improvement in life quality; he/she who has gone through an optimal experience feels more capable and able. At the same time, it has a significant integration experience, as thoughts, intentions, feelings and senses are focused on the same goal. After a "Flow" episode, the person feels better about her/himself.

Previous studies have explored on the relationship between flow experiences and other positive variables, such as psychic capital and psychological well-being showing that those with "Flow Experiences" regularly obtained higher scores in the overall score on Psychic Capital and on its emotional, cognitive and psychological dimensions (Sabatini, & Arias, 2009a).

As for psychological well-being (Sabatini, & Arias, 2009b; Sabatini, 2011), the data analysis indicated that those older people experiencing flow had significantly higher scores in overall scores and in dimension "projects", which refers to the person's assessment about the existence of goals and projects in his/her own life.

In addition, both in the "bonds" and "autonomy" dimension there was an increase in the group averages referring to flow experiences, although this difference was not significant. Note that these results were present only in the elderly group, but not in the younger one, in which that relationship was not found.

Flow is, then, a phenomenon that contributes to a full and satisfying old age, generating positive feelings in those who experience it.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the studies presented indicate that the elderly, like young people maintain their interest in achieving and maintaining flow experiences through their activities.

They also pointed out old age as being a propitious life stage for the development of activities in which people can apply their resources, whether in activities that have been significant in their lives and which they may identify themselves with or in new activities that may arise from the change of roles or from an intentional search to discover new challenges.

Older people seek and manage to optimize their experience; this, added to the major changes taking place in social and cultural level at this stage, allows people to maximize their experience in different situations and in many cases they can do it more deeply than in other stages of life.

For professionals, the study of positive variables can extend the set of interventions, to enable a different point of view from which to work in. Flow Experiences, in particular, depend on the interaction between subjective and objective factors; they give us the

possibility of intervening on creating environments to facilitate the achievement of this cognitive and mainly emotional state.

This will require knowledge of the individuals' skills and abilities, and about their interaction with others. Through the application of these skills in situations or activities, the flow experience aforementioned may arise.

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