IDENTITY FLUIDITY:
A NOVEL EXPLANATORY CONSTRUCT FOR FLOW AND DISSOCIATION

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By
Jed Forman

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The thesis of Jed Forman is approved:

_________________________________________  ____________
Dr. Victoria Jaque                        Date

_________________________________________  ____________
Dr. Belinda Stillwell                    Date

_________________________________________  ____________
Dr. Paula Thomson, Chair                Date
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Dedication

Dedicated to my parents, whose love and support is unyielding. And most especially to my wife, my muse and daily inspiration.
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The paper discusses a novel construct, “identity fluidity,” as an explanatory paradigm for both flow and dissociation, particularly in the context of dance. The author argues that flow and dissociation may be the result of a shared psychological phenomena in different degrees and in opposite directions. Both may involve and be the result of a change in self-conception, where the border between self and other is malleable. The author proposes that flow may be the result of an expanding subjectivity that includes objects of focus. Dissociation may be the result of a contracting subjectivity which objectifies parts normally included in self. Both extremes require a malleable sense of self and this malleability the author calls “identity fluidity.” Using questionnaires and Giorgi's phenomenological approach, the author uses a mix methods design, yielding several plausible hypotheses. Each suggests identity fluidity may have both explanatory power and therapeutic relevance.
Section 1: Introduction

Personal pleasure, ironically, seems inexorably linked to self-transcendence. Happiness itself may be derivative of the ability to forget oneself in an activity, entering a state of flow wherein self-awareness is lost (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982). Flow involves “effortless concentration and enjoyment,” where one has “complete immersion in an experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 46). Flow, which, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is more fundamental to an excellent life than happiness (1997), necessitates that one lose preoccupation with self-awareness in order to become immersed in experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982).

Not all alterations in self-awareness are pleasurable, however. “Dissociation” includes, but is not limited to, a psychological state wherein emotions, memories, or real-time experiences that would normally be attributed to the self are experienced as something wholly other (Naso, 2007). In the extreme, these mental events are repressed and not experienced at all (Rafieian & Hosier, 2011). While there exist normative forms of dissociation (ND), such as dreaming, when extreme and pathological (PD), this experience can be thoroughly disorienting and frightening (Butler, 2006). While some researchers argue that PD is a more extreme version of ND (Butler, 2006), others argue that they are distinct phenomenon (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005; Thomson & Jaque, 2012). In either case, however, dissociation involves a separation between mental processes (Thomson & Jaque, 2012).

While ND is not mutually exclusive with flow, PD and flow inhibit each other (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Thus PD would seem to be an impediment to happiness. But as altered states, flow and dissociation share similar altered states of consciousness,
including disengagement from self and time, depersonalization, and derealization (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Furthermore, flow and pathological dissociation are opposites on a shared dimension, flow as inherently integrative of mental processes, and pathological dissociation as fragmentation of mental processes (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Both also mark extremes on the dimension of self-awareness, flow as its loss (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982) and pathological dissociation as hyper self-awareness in the experience of a multiplicity of self (Naso, 2007). Being thoroughly fragmented, the dissociator may be considered hyper self-aware. She is highly focused on herself even though her object of focus is not experienced as self, even to the point where these multiple selves are in conflict (Naso, 2007). Because integration and fragmentation both have an effect on self-awareness, perhaps both flow and pathological dissociation are manifested changes in self-concept.

If it is the case that both flow and pathological dissociation relate to a change in self-concept, what allows this change of self-concept to occur? Does everyone have a changing sense of self where self-awareness ebbs and flows? Or do flow-ers and dissociators share a unique trait that makes either experience possible? Might flow and pathological dissociation then be two sides of the same coin? And, most significantly, could dissociators flip their tendency to have an altered sense of self into flow? Thomson and Jaque found, for example, dancers were in toto prone to both high levels of flow and significantly more occurrences of clinical levels of PD than the general population (2012). The authors even comment that perhaps the “ability to dissociate is transformed into flow experiences” in some participants, although this possibility is not yet substantiated by any research (Thomson & Jaque, 2012, p. 486).
This study explores where a relationship between PD and flow may lie, particularly in dancers. Perhaps PD and flow share some common precursor that depending on other factors induces either state. It is proposed herein that this commonality may lie in having a fluid sense of identity, where the experience of self involves a dynamic versus static boundary. The term “identity fluidity” thus refers to the tendency to have malleable conceptions of self, sometimes contradicting to exclude other mental processes, or expanding to include objects of subjective focus. Because the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how even extreme dissociation may share a corollary with flow, “dissociation” will refer to the pathological type in the following discussion. Furthermore, it should be noted that “dissociation” here is not making reference to the term as used in the sports psychology literature, which is closer to the meaning of “distraction” (Thomson & Jaque, 2012), though the discussion may have ramifications for that domain as well.

**Reflexivity**

The chosen methodology for the current study is phenomenological. Because phenomenological inquiry requires a type of intersubjective exploration between researcher and participant (Giorgi, 2009), qualification of the researcher's subjectivity becomes equally important as the participants'. It is important for I, the researcher, to reflect and convey my own history and biases in exploring this subject. My own background as a dancer began in college as a street dancer, primarily Popping. My arena of dance was less often the proscenium and more commonly the battle, street dance competitions in inner city Boston. While there was an emphasis among my teachers on the importance of flow states – albeit not articulated as such – their pedagogy used
competitiveness and aggression to advance dancers and motivate growth. Under the perceived pressure of competition, however, I was constantly frustrated by an inability to “let go” and felt too “in my head” as a dancer.

Upon graduating college I moved to New York City and was exposed to many different styles of dance. Here, I discovered House dance, whose culture was very different from the confrontational world of Popping. For House dancers, the paradigm was not domination, but communication. The emphasis was on community rather than supremacy. Dancing at House dance clubs, the feeling of personal abandonment to a higher force, what I would later call flow, was the telos of dance. I found this objective a much stronger motivator than competition. Still, however, I was frustrated that I could not fully let go. It seemed my narrative about the need to be the “best” dancer was ingrained. Even in these more conducive environments, I was constantly seeking affirmation for my status as a dancer. This need inhibited my ability to enter the flow states that I saw potential in the House club environment.

My articulations of these past events are really derived from my studies on flow and dissociation at CSUN. I may have not described them in the same manner at the time, but through the lens of the present moment, I no longer have access to what that articulation would have been. Flow and dissociation gave name both to what I wanted to cultivate in dance and what I felt like inhibited me in dance. Reviewing the literature, I recognized in myself dissociative patterns as a way to cope with self-consciousness. It was these patterns that seemed to block me from enjoying dance.

Coming to California also brought me connection with a newfound spirituality in Buddhism, studying intensely with a teacher and at the Mahasukha Center in Los
Angeles. Immersed in Buddhism, which bases its soteriology on understanding the self, I became fascinated with how conceptions of self shaped not only my interaction with dance, but with my lifeworld in general. One of the most formative Buddhist concepts that shifted my relationship to both my theoretical and lived world was emptiness. Emptiness describes an ontology wherein no phenomena has any intrinsic quality at all, save the quality granted to that phenomena by the viewpoint of a perceiver (Hopkins, 1996).

Synthesizing Buddhist philosophy with my studies at CSUN was an automatic result of this immersion, including my questioning of the presupposition of statistics (is there really some finite reality beyond statistical probability?) as well as my chosen methodology for this paper. In particular, there was a conversation with my wife about flow states that, with these integrated perspectives, became the impetus for this research. Much to my chagrin, my wife, also a dancer, commonly described the freedom and joy of flow states in dance. Recounting a major, high pressure audition, however, her memory of the experience was anything but joyous. She remarked how she felt like she was not present in her body, how she felt like she was watching the experience from afar and not in control. I immediately recognized this response as dissociative, but also was struck by how similar it sounded, as an experience, to flow state. Both her flow and dissociative states seemed to engender a loss of control, change in perceptions of time, and hyper-awareness.

From a Buddhist perspective of emptiness, I wondered if her flow and dissociation were in fact the same phenomena, but had been ascribed different meanings based on perspective. Furthermore, also from a Buddhist perspective, it seemed that the
united phenomena being deemed either flow or dissociation might be described as a changing sense of self. The raw phenomena of both flow and dissociation were a change in the self-construct, but deeming the phenomena as flow or dissociation was the result of an interpretation of that experience as either pleasant or frightening. Perhaps flow and dissociation were not intrinsic to the phenomena of the experience, but to the interpretation of that experience. Here then is both the anecdotal and experiential components that inform my bias on the notion of identity fluidity in relation to flow and dissociation.
Section 2: Literature Review

It is not unprecedented in the literature that a single psychological state can be pathological or beneficial depending on its interpretation by the subject. Reversal theory, for example, explains that heightened arousal can function as either excitement or anxiety depending on the individual’s interpretations (Kerr, 1987). While it may not be possible to reinterpret dissociation as flow (as opposite extremes) (Thomson & Jaque, 2012), perhaps there is a precursor to dissociation that could be trained into flow. Thomson and Jaque cite suggestion of this possibility: 18% of participants marked with dissociation were also able to induce high flow states. Furthermore, out of 13 participants, 2 dancers moved into the dissociation group while another 2 moved out after a 6-month follow-up, though it is not mentioned whether these individuals also had high flow states (2012). They do suggest, however, that both flow and dissociation may co-exist as distinct mental processes (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). The possibility of this co-existence, as well as that participants had both higher levels of flow and dissociation than the general population (Thomson & Jaque, 2012) gives further credence to a shared antecedent in flow and dissociation.

This shared antecedent may be related to a change in self-conception. In flow, self-awareness is dropped through integration with an object of focus (Csikszentmihayi & Figurski, 1982). In dissociation, specifically depersonalization, the self becomes fragmented, objectifying its own parts (Naso, 2007). In fact, depersonalization may have the highest negative correlation with flow of all of the markers of dissociation (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). This finding would make sense if one sees dissociation and flow as the two possible results of a malleable self-conception: the malleability is shared but the
direction is opposite, dissociation moving toward fragmentation and flow toward integration.

Shared qualities between flow and dissociation are not unprecedented in the literature. Although flow state and dissociation may correlate negatively, Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, and Vitaro found that flow and dissociation among gamblers and athletes shared experienced transformation of time and merging of action and awareness, such that volitional actions seemed to happen automatically (2006). The differentiator as to whether these experiences lent participants toward flow or dissociation concerned the presence of either negative or positive affect. When participants used gambling or sport in effort to avoid some negative emotional factor, dissociation was common, whereas flow was consistent in those who gambled or played sports for positive enjoyment (Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006). In this case, the motivation to either avoid pain or pursue pleasure was responsible for the conversion of these altered states into either flow or dissociation.

While Wanner et al. do not cite a fluid self-concept as a quality of either flow or dissociation, Naso does examine dissociation through the lens of identity formation (2007). He argues that dissociation occurs because the subjective self can be experienced as a unity or a multiple. In extreme dissociation, mental functions become compartmentalized to the point that they lose awareness of each other completely, as when repeated abuse victims consistently have no memory of abusive episodes (Naso, 2007). Dissociation on this framework involves fluidity of self-concept. Parts of the psyche are experienced as other and hence multiple, or at the extreme not experienced at all. The experience of this multiplicity could therefore be described in degrees as a
change in the border between self and object: as dissociation increases, the subjective self becomes smaller, while the objective parts of oneself multiply.

Flow states are similarly characterized by a change in phenomenological self-concept, albeit in the other direction. While dissociation involves a hyper-awareness of normally integrated parts of the psyche, flow involves an integration of the self to the point where self-awareness is dropped all together. Csikszentmihalyi and Figurski found that self-awareness is thus antithetical to flow states and therefore negatively predicts overall happiness and intrinsic motivation in an activity (1982). One of the major components of flow, including loss of self-awareness, is the “intense concentration that produces a merging of action and awareness” (Csikszentmihaiyi & Figurski, 1982, p. 27). In contrast to dissociation, namely depersonalization, flow then could be understood as a broadening of self to include the object on which the subject is focused, effectively merging the actor and the action.

One may contend that it is inappropriate to describe “merging action and awareness” as a broadening of self to include an object of focus, which is more aptly, “merging the subject and object.” Losing subject-object dichotomy is traditionally labeled “absorption” (Teng, 2011). If absorption and “merging action and awareness” are not conceptually similar, it may be incorrect to describe flow as an expansion of the border of the self. Whether or not merging action and awareness and absorption are similar, it is nonetheless the case that absorption also exists in flow. While absorption is not necessarily synonymous with flow (Teng, 2011), it is appropriate to say, that flow is a type of absorption that entails pleasure and peak performance (Agarwal & Karahanna,
2000; Hoffman & Novak, 2009). Because flow then is a type of absorption, it seems fair to describe it in terms of merging with an object.

However, it is interestingly the case that absorption and merging action awareness are also qualities of dissociation. While in dissociation these function to escape from reality (Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006; Watson, 2003; Harrison & Watson, 1992; P. Thomson, personal communication, May 9, 2013), in flow, they serve to integrate the subject with positive enjoyment (Csikszentmihayi & Figurski, 1982; P. Thomson, personal communication, May 9, 2013; Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006). The discussion thus far has only focused on the dissociator’s ability to depersonalize, as it relates to identity fluidity, resulting in a fragmented self. If dissociators can also broaden the sense of self to become absorbed in objects of focus, it may not be appropriate to describe dissociation as fragmentation. Does the fact that dissociation also involves absorption threaten the validity of the identity fluidity construct?

The contention at this juncture is not with identity fluidity per se but with the proposed relationship between identity fluidity and flow and dissociation. On a continuum between self-fragmentation and integration, pathological dissociation has been placed on one extreme as a depersonalized state, and flow on the other as an absorptive state. If absorption exists in flow and dissociation, perhaps it is inappropriate to describe flow and dissociation as opposite extremes of identity boundary. The continuum expresses degrees of change in identity fluidity. If flow and dissociation cannot be mapped onto this continuum, identity fluidity appears to fail to model flow and dissociation.
However, it may be that pathological dissociative absorption is very different than flow absorption. The former is exclusionary (Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006; Watson, 2003; Harrison & Watson, 1992; P. Thomson, personal communication, May 9, 2013) and the latter, inclusive (Csikszentmihaiyi & Figurski, 1982). Both may result in extreme fixation on some object, but in the case of dissociation, focus is accomplished by excluding other phenomena, and in flow, by merging with all phenomena in the sense field. On this understanding, the continuum model still holds. Perhaps dissociative absorption is distinctly different from flow absorption. In dissociation, separation of mental processes may achieve focus by losing awareness of other mental processes.

There may be a similarity here to the sports psychology literature on dissociation which describes it as “distraction” (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Perhaps the coping mechanism to deal with the distraction of disparate mental processes is to exclude all processes except one, yielding both absorption but more extreme fragmentation. In flow absorption, on the other hand, focus is achieved through a unification of mental processes on one task (Teng, 2011), not by excluding distracting processes. Again, however, this is only a speculative account of how identity fluidity may describe the presence of absorption in both flow and dissociation.

Thomson and Jacque might disagree that flow and dissociation involve different forms of absorption. Absorption, they say, is part of normative dissociation which explains how it can co-exist in both flow and dissociation, since only pathological dissociation precludes flow (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Normative dissociation is not mutually exclusive with flow (Thomson & Jaque, 2012) and Thomson and Jacque agree
that low-levels of normative dissociation may be interpretable as flow (P. Thomson & V. Jaque, personal communication, May 2, 2014). If dissociative absorption is of the normative type, then pathological dissociation could still be described as an opposite extreme of flow. On Thomson and Jacque, absorption in both flow and dissociation does not necessarily threaten the explanatory power of identity fluidity because absorption is not found at both extremes (personal communication, May 2, 2014). Again, normative and pathological dissociation may exist on a continuum (Butler, 2006). Perhaps absorption exist in both flow and normative dissociation on one end of the identity fluidity continuum, where pathological dissociation represents the other extreme.

While the discussion thus far has been negative in dismissing arguments against identity fluidity as an explanatory construct, positive arguments for its viability, as well as evidence that identity fluidity is prevalent in dancers, has been lacking. There is, however, some research on perceptions of agency to support these associations. Freeman explains that self-conception neurologically originates with perceptions of control: the self is defined by the perceptual origin of control, even though the self as an autonomous agent is ultimately illusory (Freeman, 1997). Thus, fluctuations in perception of agency necessarily have ramifications on definitions of self.

It is no surprise, therefore, both dissociation and flow also involve changes in perceptions of control. Looking at PTSD participants, Frewen and Lanius found inhibition of the areas of the brain that produce perceptions of controlled, volitional interaction with the external environment during dissociative states (2006). Because Freeman (1997) argues that sense of self and sense of control are intimately linked, that sense of control is severely altered in dissociative states suggests that sense of self would
also be affected. Thus, describing dissociation in terms of a shift in self-concept may be tenable.

Flow states involve their own modifications of perceived control. De Prycker argues that one needs to tease out a more subtle definition of “control” before it is applied to flow (2011). He contends that two dimensions of control have been conflated which do not necessitate each other: (1) control as competency and (2) control as awareness of an agent enacting action. According to De Prycker, while flow involves the first, it does not connote the second, exactly because awareness of the agent has dropped (2011). This reworking of “control” is also in line with Csikszentmihalyi and Figurski’s seemingly paradoxical statement that “the person [in flow] is not concerned over his control of the situation, feeling quite competent within the interaction” (1982, p. 27). Again, an altered sense of control in flow might warrant that it can be explained as a shift in self-concept.

As with dissociation, it seems that the awareness of oneself as an agent is equally diminished in flow, yet in flow this loss is perceived as competence. In other words, loss of self-awareness as an agent in dissociation may compromise agency, whereas in flow the same experience results in heightened agency. Again, reversal theory (Kerr, 1987) may provide an explanation as to why the loss of self-awareness as an agent is seen as debilitative in dissociation yet functional in flow. In any case, given the relationship between perceived agency and self-concept, the fact that both flow and dissociation involve a loss of control (in the sense of losing the agent-object dichotomy) gives positive support to the notion that both dissociation and flow are made possible by a fluid sense of self.
Dance as a discipline also involves a sense of loss of control. In the aforementioned study by Thomson and Jaque, the authors posit that loss of self-awareness is part of the appeal of dance (2012). Furthermore, in relation to control specifically, the American Psychiatric Association defines dance that induces altered states of consciousness as “movements that are experienced as being beyond one’s control” (1994, p. 729). Vaitl et al. even theorize that there is something inherent about dance in which the coordination of breath and movement affects carotid baroreceptors, inducing these altered states (2005). If dance physiologically creates altered perceptions of control, which is related to self-conception, the framework proposed in the preceding discussion may explain findings by Thomson and Jaque that dancers are more prone to both dissociation and flow (2012). Dance may create changes in perceptions of control, changing perceptions of self, making both flow and dissociation possible.

While the theory that both flow and dissociation are made possible by a fluid sense of self is not proven thus far, there is at least some credible evidence to warrant investigation into the hypothesized connection. If identity fluidity is found to be a true psychological domain that relates to dissociation and flow, in dancers in particular, therapies may be possible to help convert a tendency for painful dissociative experiences into a regular enjoyment of flow. Identity fluidity may therefore offer much more than explanatory power; it may provide a method for sufferers of dissociation to turn a debilitation into an asset.

This literature review also narrates the refinement of identity fluidity in the mind of the researcher. While originally, as described in the reflexivity section, he believed that perhaps flow and dissociation are different interpretations of the same phenomena, the
work of Thomson and Jaque (2012) suggests that they are phenomenologically very different. Analysis of the literature does, however, give (at the best) some circumstantial evidence for the continuum model of identity fluidity, or (at worst) does not seem to dismiss it outright. Perhaps, then, pathological dissociation and flow mark opposing ends on the spectrum fragmentation and integration. “Fragmentation” here refers specifically to the separation of mental processes described in dissociation, where integration involves the unity of these processes (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Fig. 1 thus illustrates the paradigm for identity flow that is mentioned throughout the paper. Flow involves an integration of oneself with parts that may normally be considered other: an expanding subjectivity. Pathological dissociation involves a fragmentation of oneself, separating from parts that are normally considered self: a contracting subjectivity.

![Diagram showing Flow and dissociation as polar opposites on the spectrum of fragmentation to integration]

Figure 1: Flow and dissociation as polar opposites on the spectrum of fragmentation to integration

The following research is thus two fold in its objective: (1) the exploratory component: investigating the nature of identity fluidity among dancers and (2) the
relational component: relating the findings of this exploration to more salient markers of flow and dissociation. Because the thrust of qualitative research is hypothesis generation and not hypothesis validation (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2011), the researcher refrains from presupposing theories as to how this construct may relate to flow and dissociation. Hypotheses form the outcome of the investigation.
Section 3: Methodology

A mixed methods approach for the given research topic gives the most comprehensive investigation. While identity fluidity may share some similarities in measurements on identity formation, it is not prima facie evident to the researcher what these connections are. The researcher chose to use a qualitative component to more thoroughly describe identity fluidity before trying to find its home in the wider literature. Emerging patterns in a phenomenological approach can both suggest the presence of and serve as the fodder for a theory on identity fluidity.

Qualitative

For the qualitative component, the researcher employed the phenomenological method. The roots of this method in western philosophy can be traced back to Immanuel Kant. The German idealist distinguished between human perception of the world, informed by a priori intuitions about space and time, for example, and the world as it is independent from perception, in and of itself. These he contrasted as phenomena and noumena respectively (Kant, 2013).

The philosophical movement of phenomenology grew out of Edmund Husserl's investigation into phenomena. While Kant differentiated between subjective and objective reality, Husserl rejected this dichotomy. Husserl's ontology posited that any existing object must be accessible in experience (Luft, 2007). While for Kant the distinction between noumena and phenomena was ontological, Husserl saw it as epistemological: phenomena comprising human experience, and noumena, the belief that objects exist independent of that experience (Luft, 2007). For Husserl, the theory-laden view of the world as external to experience is the human “natural attitude,” one to which
people are oblivious but operate within. The philosophical attitude, conversely, suspends this dichotomy and investigates human experience as such (Luft, 2007).

The phenomenological reduction, therefore, sifts human experience of objects from the ontological positing of those objects as independent of experience. While Kant, according to Husserl, was invested in phenomenological reduction in this sense, Husserl's rejection of Kant's dichotomy allowed him to go a step further (Luft, 2007). Again, for Husserl the notion of an object as independent from experience was untenable, so he does not despair, as does Kant, into an investigation of objects in and of themselves (Luft, 2007). Objects as an act of consciousness necessarily entail the meaning associated with that object relative to that viewpoint. While human consciousness may garner an anthropomorphic view of objects, consciousness as such will always make meaning of objects relative to its experience. The truth about on object, or the object in itself, is therefore all the possible meanings that consciousness may ascribe to it. This second step toward the meaning essence of objects is the eidetic reduction (Luft, 2007).

For example, consider an object that a consciousness deemed “chair” (adapted from Giorgi, 2008). The natural attitude is to see the chair as it is from its own side, an object with four legs, a base, and back. The philosophical view, and hence the phenomenological reduction, recognizes the “chair” as an experience of that object, “the thing I use to support my weight when I prefer not to stand.” Through the eidetic reduction, a more complete meaning of chair arises through the use of Husserlian free imaginative variation (Froese & Gallagher, 2010). By the use of counterexamples, the investigator can further refine the meaning of “chair.” For example, a bed is something
that supports weight when someone prefer not stand, but it is not a chair. Perhaps then “chair” is refined to mean “that thing that supports my weight when I sit,” and so on.

One could therefore contrast the phenomenological to the naturalistic discipline in terms of their object of investigation: while the former seeks to clarify external objects, the latter seeks to clarify the meaning that consciousness validly places on objects. On this view, the mysterious Kantian objects-in-and-of-themselves, or noumena, are simply all the possible meanings that consciousness as such may ascribe to a given object (Luft, 2007). The chair, for example, may also be given the meaning of “stool” if it is stood upon to fix a lightbulb. By bringing the meaning of phenomena to the forefront of the investigative project, Husserl effectively bridges the gap created by Kant between noumena and phenomena.

Amedeo Giorgi saw the potential for Husserl's philosophy as a method. As a psychological researcher, Giorgi found the naturalistic viewpoint unsatisfactory in his research. Defining the realm of psychology as the investigation of subjective experience, he found the requirement to obviate subjectivity in the traditional scientific method antithetical to his discipline (Giorgi, 2012). Giorgi therefore developed a novel approach to research which would honor and investigate human experience as such. It would let aside the naturalistic theories which described the mechanism of subjectivity, and instead focus on the experience of subjectivity.

While Giorgi's method employs the Husserlian tools of phenomenological reduction, eidetic reduction, and free imaginative variation (Giorgi, 2012), he makes clear his aim is not transcendental in the same vein as Husserl (Giorgi, 2010). While Husserl is concerned with consciousness as such as a transcendental account of reality, Giorgi is
specifically concerned with psychology, and thus is relegated to human consciousness (Giorgi, 2012).

The phenomenological researcher commits to two attitudes before employing Giorgi's method: phenomenological reduction and a sensitivity to the phenomena investigated. While Husserl expounded on phenomenological reduction, sensitivity to the domain of investigation is novel to Giorgi's approach. There is no *a priori* definition of this sensitivity, nor is it required that it be clarified pre or post data collection. All that is required is an acknowledged shift of perception on the part of the researcher toward the particular phenomena investigated (Giorgi, 2008). Perhaps Giorgi here is simply attuning the researcher to remain focused on the topic of inquiry without systematizing this focus to the point of adopting a naturalistic attitude toward the phenomena.

After the researcher, upholding these commitments, interviews a participant on her experience of the phenomena in question, Giorgi's methodology proceeds in five steps (Giorgi, 2012):

1. The researcher reads the dialogue between researcher and participant in whole to develop a holistic understanding of the material. In having an impression of the generalized meaning of the experience for the participant, the researcher is acquainted with the lifeworld of the participant and has a context from which to understand more nuanced meanings (Giorgi, 2008).

2. The researcher rereads the dialogue and, maintaining the phenomenological commitments of reduction and sensitivity, begins to parse out units of meaning where she has an impression that the participant's ascribed meaning to the account
has shifted. These need not be theoretically salient and meaning units will differ
on the same account from researcher to researcher (Giorgi, 2012).

3. The researcher then transform these meaning units, using phenomenological
reduction, from the natural attitude of the participant into the philosophical
attitude of meaning. Furthermore, through eidetic reduction, the meaning of each
unit is clarified and refined (Giorgi, 2008). An example of this process (adapted
from Giorgi, 2012) helps to illustrate. Consider the following hypothetical
description from a participant: “I saw the car next to me moving and I thought,
’Oh my God, my car is rolling backward!’ but I was relieved when I realized it
was the car next to me pulling forward.” Through the phenomenological
reduction, the researcher suspends any inquiry within the naturalistic attitude of
the participant: in other words, she does not investigate whether the car was
“actually” moving or not, nor whether the participant was “correct” in her
perception of the car. Rather, she limits herself only to the experience as given to
the participant. From here, free imaginative variation, or eidetic reduction, is
performed: what is the meaning of the experience as mapped onto the event by the
participant? After honing her analysis through imagination, counterexample, and
only working with what is given by the participant, the researcher might arrive at,
“Participant X was alarmed when she perceived her car was rolling backward, but
then was relieved when she saw that perception as a distortion.” This process of
distilling meaning units makes the meat of the five step process (Giorgi, 2012).
4. Once all the meaning units are reduced, the totality of these reductions are considered and reduced again, garnering an essential description of the participant's experience (Giorgi, 2012).

5. The derived structure of the experience is used as a framework to interpret the original meaning units and dialogue, as well as compare and contrast it to the larger literature (Giorgi, 2008).

There is a valid contention herein, however, that there is an incongruity between the proposal of the literature and the chosen methodology. Research under some preconceived notion of how observed phenomenon may be functioning is by definition non-phenomenological in method (Giorgi, 2012). However, the researcher has an agenda to substantiate the validity of identity fluidity. Giorgi makes clear that qualitative research is descriptive and not interpretive: data collection involves the direct conscious experience of both the researcher and participant, unmitigated by theoretical overlay (Giorgi, 2012).

The researcher who wants to employ the descriptive phenomenological psychological method has to begin by assuming the correct attitude… she refrains from bringing in non-given past knowledge to help account for whatever she is present to. (Giorgi, 2012, pg. 4)

If the researcher is using a theoretical lens to apply meaning to an experience as lived, the phenomenon is more appropriately being interpreted then described. Does the hypothesis of identity fluidity necessitate the impossibility of having the correct phenomenological attitude?
Although it may seem that musings on identity fluidity threaten the feasibility of a qualitative approach herein, it would be incorrect to assume that just because one has a suspicion of a connection between phenomena that such an observer is necessarily an interpreter. Identity fluidity is not (yet) a theory. An interpretive framework uses a theory to make predictions about phenomena not directly accessible to observation (Giorgi, 2009). While there may exist theories on identity that work as interpretive frameworks, the researcher is unclear how identity fluidity may relate to these, so he simply does not have the perquisite expertise to bias his conception of identity fluidity into a predictive construct. Identity fluidity, for the researcher, is not yet fully defined as a phenomena, let alone a theory, so it is the predisposition of the researcher to clarify it rather than interpret through it.

Furthermore, a qualitative study is not predicated on the absence of theory on the part of the researcher. Indeed, completely devoid of preconceptions, even observation would not be possible, for how would one make sense of language without a theoretical understanding of semantics and linguistic reference? Words themselves are theoretically tainted and can only have meaning through the biased experience of the listener. The phenomenological method, in contrast to quantitative analysis, seeks to bring these biases into the fold and thereby create context for the description created by the researcher. Giorgi makes clear that the intentionality of the researcher is not to be extricated from the method (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher’s intentionality merely becomes another component in the description of the phenomena.

An objective description would not only be impossible, but antithetical to the phenomenological pursuit. Instead, the intentionality of both the interviewee and the
interviewer inform the totality of the phenomena as lived, creating an intersubjective investigation (Giorgi, 2009). The methodology is meant to draw directly on experience rather than theoretical inference, but this does not mean that description is expected to be devoid of bias. Experience is in fact made possible by bias (Kant, 2013) and the inclusion of bias is thus what distinguishes the phenomenological method from other quantitative methods.

Although possessing a hypothesis does not preclude a researcher from phenomenological investigation, it is clear however, that the phenomenological method is not intended for hypothesis testing. Having a hypothesis may incur an acceptable bias, but it is the researcher’s onus to treat this preconception as a bias, just another phenomena to describe, and not use that bias as a platform for description (Giorgi, 2009). In the present context, therefore, the concept of identity fluidity as bias is permissible, but the hypothesis of identity fluidity is not. At the same time, the impetus of this paper is to investigate the relationship between identity construct with flow and dissociation, so it is not appropriate either to abandon questions of identity entirely. Giorgi, however, does not intend his method to be a “come what may” enterprise: while interpretation is excluded, guided investigation is not. This distinction becomes most clear in his differentiation between leading the interviewee and directing the interviewee. While the former is intended to provoke the interviewee to corroborate a preconception, the latter is meant to garner a more full explanation of the particular phenomenon which interests the researcher (Giorgi, 2009).

Giorgi's method thus makes possible the investigation of identity fluidity without the phenomenological pitfall of hypothesis testing. A hypothesis for identity fluidity
might be, “identity fluidity is a necessary precursor for both flow and dissociation.” But looking at identity fluidity as a phenomena to which the researcher directs his investigation, the question arises, “how does the experience of self change in flow and dissociation?” An answer to this question is necessarily descriptive in that it requires qualification of a lived phenomenon rather than the affirmation of some statement. More simply put, this question cannot be answered by a simple “yes” or “no” as in the quantitative paradigm of either rejecting or affirming the null hypothesis. This question is appropriately qualitative and phenomenological in that it searches for qualification rather than verification. Thus, the teleology for the phenomenological portion of this study is not directed at theories about the relationship between identity fluidity and flow and dissociative states, but investigates the phenomenon of self concept in the context of these states, keen to see what patterns emerge.

Quantitative

The quantitative portion of the research serves to give another viewpoint on the patterns emerging from the qualitative portion. For example, hypothetically consider that a pattern emerges from the interviews where some participants report that they are unable to feel self-conscious during flow states. Other participants, however, say that their flow states are volatile and easily broken when they start to become self-conscious. Looking at quantitative data, the researcher might find that the group immune to self-consciousness during flow show few dissociative episodes. The group susceptible to self-consciousness during flow, however, shows a much higher occurrence of dissociation. Such a finding might suggest a link between self-consciousness and dissociation.
The advantage of a mixed method approach is a more powerful hypothesis genesis. The phenomenological portion reveals patterns in self-concept within flow and dissociation. The quantitative portion gives a method to interpret those patterns through both a theoretical framework and quantitative data, yielding credence to extrapolations on these patterns. The use of quantitative data in this fashion can be correlated with Giorgi's fifth step of relating interpretation back to the literature (Giorgi, 2012).

Verification of these extrapolations is outside the scope of this research, as the participant pool for the phenomenological portion does not allow for necessary power in the quantitative analysis. However, the quantitative portion does provide valuable guidance in theory development. Considering the hypothetical example again, if those who were susceptible to self-consciousness showed no higher degree of dissociation, the researcher may have less reason to explore the connection between self-consciousness and dissociation. On the other hand, he may positively hypothesize that self-consciousness and dissociation share no correlation and desire to test this hypothesis in a future study.

Another important reason for the quantitative portion of the study concerns the tripartite nature of the phenomena investigated. The research subject concerns the relationship between identity fluidity, flow, and dissociation. The latter two are established phenomena within the literature and quantifiably verifiable. The former is novel and is as yet not aptly described. Identity fluidity requires qualitative expansion where flow and dissociation do not necessarily, nor would it be prudent to use participant description to identify their presence when quantitative methods to do so already exist. If the researcher were to rely on qualitative methods only, there is no explicit way to know
if what the participants deem “flow” or “dissociation” connect with these phenomena as described in the literature. Any larger ramification from the investigation would be questionable. Therefore, the researcher will also use the following instruments in assessing both flow and dissociation.

**Multiscale Dissociation Inventory MDI**

The Multiscale Dissociation Inventory contains thirty items inquiring about the participants experience over the preceding month. Each question relates to one of six sub-components of dissociative experience: Disengagement, Depersonalization, Derealization, Emotional Constriction, Memory Disturbance, and Identity Dissociation (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005). On a likert scale from 1 to 5, the participant gives a self report on each item on the frequency of having had that experience, 1 denoting *never*, 5 denoting *very often* (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005). The MDI has been normalized and standardized ($n = 444$) and demonstrates good validity and reliability (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005).

**Cambridge Depersonalization Scale CDS**

The Cambridge Depersonalization scale is a self-reported 29 item questionnaire. Each question concerns the occurrence of a depersonalized experience for a participant within the last 6 months. Responses to each question involves two likert scales, one about the frequency of the experience (0 denoting never, 4, all the time) and the other, the duration of the experience (1, *a few seconds*, 6, *more than a week*) (Sierra & Berrios, 2000). The CDS has good validity against both clinical diagnosis of depersonalization and the depersonalization sub-scale of the Dissociation Experience Scale (DES). The
CDS also differentiates between depersonalization and other dissociative components, as well as having good test re-test reliability (Sierra & Berrios, 2000).

**Dispositional Flow Scale DFS-2**

The Dispositional Flow State Scale-2 is a self-reported instrument which includes modifications and additions to the original Dispositional Flow State Scale (Jackson & Eklund, 2002). The DFS-2 measures the propensity for flow in general, in contrast to the Flow State Scale-2, which was developed to measure flow states in reference to a particular event. The DFS-2 also concerns flow states specifically within the domain of physical activity, be it athletics, dance, or some other movement discipline (Jackson & Eklund, 2002). The DFS-2 is a 36 item questionnaire on a likert scale from 1 to 5 denoting frequency of occurrence (1, never, through 5, always). Each item describes flow experiences for which the participant rates the frequency of occurrence. Participants also cite the particular physical activity that is the context for those experiences (Jackson, 2001).

**Inventory of Childhood Memories and Imaginings ICMI**

The Inventory of Childhood Memories and Imaginings is a 52 item inventory which measures fantasy proneness. Each item describes childhood or adult experience. The participant checks next to each experience to affirm whether or not she experienced that event as a child or adult. Fantasy proneness is assessed in proportion to the amount of items checked (Wilson & Barber, 2003). While correlations between the ICMI and other psychopathology may be dubious, it correlates well with two crucial components of dissociation: moderately with absorption and significantly, though weakly, with
depersonalization on the Curious Experiences Scale (CES) (Klinger, Henning & Janssen, 2009).

**Dissociative Experiences scale DES-II**

The Dissociative Experiences Scale - II is a self-reported questionnaire consisting of 28 items describing dissociative experiences and asking how often these happen to the participant. Answers are given as a percentage of time (0% being never, 100%, all of the time). Percentages are giving in increments of 10% for ten choices per item (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986). In a non-clinical setting, the DES-II predicted dissociation as well as the classical markers of involvement (the ability to re-live traumatic experiences) and amnesia (an inability to remember previous descriptions of the same event). Exactly because these experiences are not integrated, it seems that they remain vivid but outside the purview of retainable language (Holtgraves & Stockdale, 1997). The DES-II also differentiates well between dissociators and repressors: the former correlating to both anxiety and neuroticism, where repressors do not (Holtgraves & Stockdale, 1997).

**Research Design**

**Participants**

Seven participants are included in the study. The only inclusion criteria was self-reported experiences of flow during dance. Aside from this, participants were diverse across several dimensions. The age range is from 18-34. Participants were also ethnically diverse, including but not limited to African, Asian, and European decent. Participants were approximately evenly divided across gender: 4 females and 3 males. Dance styles included freeform, Salsa, Hip-Hop, and Contemporary. Some dancers were stronger improvisers, and others stronger at choreography. Level of education was also diverse,
from not yet completing high school to completed graduate degrees. Skill range was also
diverse, from dancing for one year, to professional, dancing for several decades.

The study is not delimited by level of dance ability nor training in so much as they
contribute to the experience of flow. It may be the case, for example, that naïve dancers
have greater access to flow states then those thoroughly trained. Furthermore, the study is
investigating flow as a lived phenomena rather than as verifiable through questionnaire.
If a participant purports to have flow experiences but does not show flow disposition on a
quantitative measure, this discrepancy can only prove fruitful in the phenomenological
exploration of flow.

While dissociation is also a component in the investigation, it was not an
inclusion criteria. The rationale behind this decision is layered. Firstly, a prominence of
flow states is antithetical to dissociation (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Participants who both
report flow and dissociation would be difficult to find. This fact doesn't undermine the
proposed endeavor. The phenomena under investigation is identity fluidity in both flow-
ers and dissociators. Again, flow and dissociation may have a common precursor, even
though once that antecedent manifests as flow or dissociation it precludes the other. Thus,
even if only flow-ers are included, the researcher can still examine their shared
antecedent.

Secondly, the structure of the interview questions, particularly question 3 (below),
served to direct the participant to any dissociative connections within experiences
normally deemed as “flow.” Again, the investigation herein is less focused on whether
dancers have dissociative experiences and more so on whether there is a common
antecedent between flow and dissociation. Therefore, the researcher is interested in
asking flow-ers about dissociation, not dissociators about dissociation. The study could as easily included dissociators and asked these participants about flow, but it is the researchers suspicion that self-reported instances of dissociation would be less readily identifiable to participants than flow. Thirdly, the quantitative section of the study also provides dissociative data on participants, which, again, is more valuable as it applies to self-reported flow-ers than self-reported dissociators.

There was no exclusion criteria based on socio-economic status, ethnicity, education, or livelihood. Non-english speakers were excluded simply because of the language limits of the researcher. Participants were recruited from the researcher's personal contacts. Having spent many years in different strata of the dance world, the researcher was able to recruit several willing participants.

**Procedures**

All participants were screened in person or via phone simply by the researcher describing flow states and asking if those had occurred for the prospective participant while dancing. Qualifying participants were given informed consent in person or by mail, outlining the purpose of the study, a statement on participant confidentiality and how participant privacy is protected, procedures of the study, and the bill of rights of the participant. The researcher offered to and did answer any questions the participant had about the study. He also reiterated to the participant that involvement was non-compulsory. The participant signed the informed consent only when she agreed to participate. She was not given a time limit in reviewing the necessary information before agreeing. All participants had the researcher’s personal email and cell phone number and
were instructed not to hesitate to get in touch with any questions they had about the study. The researcher was prompt in responding to questions that did arise.

The participant engaged in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. All were in person except one, which was over the phone. No pre-determined length was assigned to the interview. They were conducted in an environment that was private and free from concerns of breeched confidentiality. The researcher made sure the environment was agreeable to the participant before proceeding.

At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher thanked the participant for her time and asked if the participant had any remaining questions. The participant's confidentiality and the purpose of the study were reiterated. The researcher then presented the participant with the aforementioned questionnaires, again explaining participant confidentiality around the quantitative portion. The participant participating by phone was mailed the necessary materials. Participants were allowed to take questionnaires home to review and complete within a week's time. The researcher provided the participant who participated by phone a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope to return the questionnaires.

Once transcription was completed, all participants were emailed a copy of the transcription and were offered a chance to amend corrections to the transcript where they were misquoted. All participants approved the initial transcript without correction. All participants were also given an opportunity to withdraw from the study after reviewing the transcript. No participant decided to withdraw.
**Data Collection**

All interviews were recorded using the standard “Voice Memo” utility on an Apple iPhone 4. The interview was semi-structured, involving some pre-meditated questions concerning the experience of self during flow and the pleasantness of these experiences. These included:

1. Describe what it's like to have a flow experience.
2. How would you describe your sense of self during flow?
3. Does your self-awareness change during flow? Has that experience ever been unpleasant?
4. Are you aware of an inner monologue and does it change during flow?
5. Why do you think that people seek flow experiences? Does it help in everyday life?

For the sake of consistency between interviews, questions were asked in the same order and all participants were asked all questions. However, questions were not restricted to these alone. Under Giorgi's instruction of directed inquiry (2009), the researcher asked follow up questions directed toward the phenomena of self in the context of flow states. Being especially cognizant of Giorgi's distinction between leading the participant and directing her (Giorgi, 2009), the researcher directed the participant to expound on the particular nature of experiences of self during flow, rather than attempt to draw out any corroboration of his hypothesis. As a general method to this end, the researcher directed the participant toward answering the question “How does your sense of self change during flow?” as delineated in the preceding discussion.
The transcription process of each interview were outsourced to friends of the researcher who agreed to transcribe interviews for financial compensation. Before proceeding with the transcription process, transcribers were thoroughly acquainted with the purpose of the study as well as the expectations for maintaining confidentiality of participants. Only upon agreeing to these expectations were any audio files for transcription sent to a prospective transcriber. Transcribers also reviewed instructions on transcription according to the protocol for the Adult Attachment Interview (Main, 1996). Though the AAI analysis was not applied to these interviews, the format is useful in standardizing transcriptions among transcribers. Prospective transcribers reviewed and then confirmed that they understood the procedure fully before proceeding to transcribe.

Data Analysis

In accord with Giorgi's method, the researcher analyzed each transcript through his five steps (Giorgi, 2012):

1. The dialogue between researcher and participant was read in whole to develop a holistic understanding of the material.

2. The researcher reread the dialogue and to parsed out meaning units.

3. The researcher transformed these meaning units, using phenomenological reduction and eidetic reduction (free imaginative variation).

4. Once all the meaning units were reduced, the totality of these reductions were considered and reduced again, garnering an essential structure to the participant's experience.
5. The derived structure of the experience was used as a framework to interpret the original meaning units and dialogue, as well as to compare and contrast to the larger literature.

The researcher, looking for commonality between all participants experience, found five shared aggregate themes. These themes were then compared against the quantitative data. These comparisons are discussed in the context of identity fluidity, as well the greater literature on flow and dissociation as part of step 5.

Only after completion of the qualitative portion was the quantitative data reviewed. The quantitative data was used to help enrich and find wider implications for the patterns found in the qualitative data. If the quantitative results were to run contrary to the patterns found in the qualitative portion, the result would still be fruitful: perhaps there is a discrepancy between phenomena as lived and as quantified. In this case, either the participant is deeming an experience something different than it actually is, or the quantitative assessments fail to capture the phenomena as lived. Thus even contradictory findings would be useful.

Upon analysis of the quantitative measures, the researcher did not, however, re-interpret the qualitative data in relation to the quantitative data, for two reasons. Firstly, this runs counter to the phenomenological method: expecting a different outcome of the qualitative data based on the quantitative portion is to taint the descriptive process with interpretation. Secondly, with the participant size, the quantitative portion did not have the requisite power for any significant hypothesis derivation. It may suggest the legitimacy of derived hypotheses from qualitative data, but it is illegitimate as a source of hypothesis genesis in its own right. In other words, the quantitative portion is useful only
in relation to findings in the qualitative section, but not the other way around. In this sense, the relationship between qualitative and quantitative analysis herein is one-way and not bi-directional. The researcher therefore preemptively committed to not using statistical modeling in the quantitative data post-facto to construct patterns in the qualitative data not derived from the phenomenological method.

The researcher owes a big thank you to Dr. Thomson who voluntarily scored questionnaires for all participants. These were sent to the researcher in an excel file and, again, not reviewed until qualitative analysis was complete.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in this study center around three components: the actual interview process, handling of interview records, and handling of questionnaires. It was important for the researcher that no one walk away from the interview process having had a negative experience. While there was no predetermined length to the interview, the researcher assured participants that interviews would not last longer than 1 hour. None did. After a brief discussion about the nature of the interview, and procedure, the researcher asked for permission to begin, unless there were any other questions. The researcher made sure the participant was aware when audio recording began. All participants were given informed consent with this information in writing. During the interview, the researcher remained diligent not to probe about areas that might make the participant uncomfortable, as well as stay aware of time. The topic of research was not, by nature, highly emotional. Therefore any additional information that the researcher may obtain by asking about painful areas was forgone for the sake of the participant's experience.
Recorded media of the interview was immediately transferred from iPhone to the researcher’s computer. Both were password protected. Recorded media was also backed up online through ZipCloud, which was also password protected. Participants who were especially concerned about the confidentiality of their interviews were given the option to have the researcher transcript the interview personally. Audio files were distributed to transcribers one of two ways: via email or Google Drive. Both systems were password protected and the audio file was not accessible by anyone other than the researcher and the transcriber. Transcribers were only sent one file at a time. Once the transcription was completed, the transcriber sent the transcription to the researcher via email or Google Drive. She then immediately destroyed the audio file and transcription from her local computer. No transcriber received any files that she was not responsible for transcribing.

Thesis advisor Dr. Thomson also received transcriptions via email to review, however with identifiable information of the participant omitted following the AAI protocol (Main, 1996). The transcriber was instructed to replace all names, places, and references to ethnicity with a generic code (Person 1, Country 1, Ethnicity 1, etc.) and provide a map between the code and its actual referent at the document end. This map was omitted in transcripts sent to Dr. Thomson. In the final paper, quotes from the interview are used, but also with all identifiable information omitted.

Questionnaires were collected in person or, in one case, mailed directly to the researcher. Those mailed to the researcher were stored in the researcher’s own home, otherwise they were under lock and key at CSUN's Kinesiology Department lab. The participants were assured that only the researcher and Dr. Thomson were privy to the identity associated with each set of completed questionnaires. To ensure confidentiality,
the researcher also whited out participant names on questionnaires and replaced it with a four digit number. This number also replaced the participants name on her corresponding transcript. The researcher created a computer file mapping numbers to actual participants. This file also included the mapping of names, places, and ethnicities for each transcript, which were removed from the transcript document proper. This file resided on the same password protected computer. Neither transcripts nor questionnaires are provided in full with the final paper. Each participant reviewed the transcript of her interview and was given the option to withdraw from the study upon its review. No participant opted out of the study.

In the quantitative data included, all scores are listed in descending order, from greatest to least, and it is not possible to identify to which participant a score belongs. For example, the first score listed on one sub-scale does not belong necessarily to the same participant who has the first score on another sub-scale within the same table. Because there was some concern among participants about confidentiality of scores, and because the themes are aggregated and not individual, the researcher thought it best to randomize the scores in this way. Also, no biographical context is supplied in the essential descriptions, the rational for which is included in the proceeding section.
Section 4: Essential Descriptions

Because qualitative research is appropriately descriptive and does not involve interpretation (Giorgi, 2012) and out of some participant's concern about confidentiality, biographical or demographic information is not included in the essential descriptions. While this not only protects the identity of participants, adding such information can only incur bias or an unnecessary theoretical overlay on the part of the reader. Again, qualitative research and analysis is an investigation into the subjective phenomena as experienced by the participant (Giorgi, 2009). Objective information about a participant's background can only form a context by which to interpret a subjective experience; it is not given in that participant's experience. Therefore, as a qualitative study, that information is appropriately omitted. The demographic diversity of participants given in the methodology section, however, only serve to demonstrate that the applications of this analysis may be far reaching and not some idiosyncrasy of a highly delimited population. Gender distinction is also obviated and all pronouns put in the feminine.

As a description of the participant experience, it should be understood that all assertions in the description are phenomenological reductions (Giorgi, 2008) and as such are relative to the participant. For example, in the phrase “flow involves a linking of movements without end,” the researcher is not attempting to theoretically define flow. She is expressing the point of view of the participant. Writing participant phenomenological experience as assertions is mostly practical, lest every sentence of the description would have to be couched with “participant x believes” followed by the assertion. The reader should assume that any assertion in the essential descriptions has this meta-description implied.
Furthermore, in some instances the description entails an incomplete idea, or an assertion which is vague and unclear. In these instances, the assertion made by the participant was also vague and unclear to the researcher. However, in best effort to present the description of experience of the participant as given (Giorgi, 2012), the researcher refrained from adding an interpretation of these assertions, despite what clarity that might provide. Thus, the researcher desired to preserve a truthful account over a clearer, but potentially false, description. There are also instances where participants equivocate and contradict themselves in their descriptions. Again, these are preserved in an effort to keep the description accurate.

**Participant 1**

For participant 1, flow experiences are rare, but when they happen they are magical and mysterious, but their surprise arrival can be uncomfortable. This nervousness around flow arises for two reasons, (1) the experience is unfamiliar and (2) one has a desire to hold on to a flow experience, but realizes it is fleeting. Therefore, one must learn to appreciate flow experiences for the time they persist because they cannot be prolonged. In flow, when with others, she loses care about others' judgment. When alone, she loses a sense of her surroundings. It is as if she enters her own, internal, sacred space. These experiences are very rewarding and help her mature as a dancer and person. The participant thinks that dancers who have experienced a flow state always remember when it happened. It is like blanking out, but more spiritual rather than mental or physical.

The participant also explains that it can be uncomfortable emerging from a flow state in dance. Though the experience feels good, one questions other's judgments of her movement. The dancer wants to know if it looked as good as it felt. Sometimes, others'
reactions confirm that it does, and other times it does not. For this reason, participant 1 avoids seeking out praise from onlookers, preferring to listen to feedback as it arises, although the lack of affirmation can sometimes be disconcerting. She believes that questioning the quality of one's performance post-flow is a product of the ego or mind resurfacing. This uncomfortable feeling is not the result, however, of a feeling of loss of control in flow proper. Rather, it only occurs once one emerges from flow.

Participant 1 says that flow experiences have lasted, at most, about twenty seconds. She remarks that it is difficult to experience flow in front of an audience with set movement and predetermined music. The majority of these experiences have occurred when she was performing a solo and could move extemporaneously. However, in these situations, she is still limited by the time length of her solo, which she must complete on queue. This limitation becomes frustrating because she must abandon her flow prematurely before reaching its depth. This is another factor as to why flow experiences are rare.

He also explains that flow states are the product of being emotionally and physically exhausted. In extended improvisation sessions, once one has exhausted her premeditated concepts and limits of the body, a dancer continues on energy only. Accessing this energy provokes flow states. Even these states are ephemeral, she says, lasting only about twenty seconds. It is easy to fall out of this state figuratively and literally, by losing the state itself or losing physical balance and coming back to reality.

In the context of a dance battle, flow happens even less often. In this case, knowing the music that one is dancing to and trying to anticipate the music is antithetical to flow. Rather, flow occurs when one doesn't know the music, but is so deeply connected
to the music that it informs her movements. In these instances, movement is spontaneous, an unmitigated response to music. Music, for participant 1, is an important facilitator to flow. It also provides an emotional component in which one can immerse herself and enter flow states. It is possible to enter flow without music, but it is much rarer.

Participant 1 describes flow like a natural high, one that she would prefer to be in constantly. It is devoid of anxiety, daily preoccupations, and other's judgments that cause stress, which have a cumulative effect on people. Markedly, flow states allow one to be self-aware, rather than distracted by her environment. The ego, by contrast, is the antithesis of flow, consumed with these daily stressors, she says.

Reflecting on why flow experiences are rare, the participant says that they cannot be forced, but are spontaneous occurrences. She describes a universal energy, beyond anyone's individual mind, of which all people are a part and one can tap into by “letting go.” All people, as part of this energy, are actually constantly in flow; they just fail to recognize it because of social conditioning. A newborn, for example, is constantly in flow: she does not need to be taught how to crawl or walk. The social context, however, slowly brings one out of this natural state of flow.

He also says that flow is denoted by a lack of internal monologue. The lack of narration contributes to the ineffability of flow states: they must be experienced and describing them conveys them poorly. The habit of internal narration often actually interferes with flow. Flow states are, again, one's natural and true state. The narrative mind is uncomfortable in this space and so reasserts itself in an effort to overcome flow.

Participant 1 is also concerned that recent technology is making it increasingly difficult for the current generation to access flow. While flow requires access to an
internal space, YouTube, text messaging, etc., cause one to rely on external stimulus, making an internal space difficult to cultivate. Participant 1 believes that it is the charge of the artist to continually cultivate these internal spaces and share them with others.

People who have experienced flow states often seek them out again. Having a prior experience of flow is, therefore, one of the biggest impetuses for pursuing them. People also use substances to the same end, but the effects are qualitatively different from flow. Rather than promoting self-awareness, they create a numbing effect and make one dependent on an external substance. Furthermore, over time, one needs to constantly increase consumption of the substance in order to create the same effect. Participant 1 concedes, however, that pursuing flow experiences can be negative if one becomes obsessive. Again, flow cannot be forced, so better to let them arise spontaneously without developing an expectation that they occur. More important then pursuing flow proper is to genuinely enjoy the dance one is doing. With this in place, flow states will follow naturally.

The importance of letting flow states occur naturally also applies to dance training. Participant 1 says that sometimes she falls victim to trying to push her art to the point where it becomes less enjoyable. Keeping dance an art means keeping self-criticism in moderation. In fact, it is when she is not self-critical, just enjoying her dance rather than trying to push, where flow states are more frequent. These flow states are also beneficial outside the context of the experience proper: they lighten and brighten one up, they create more love inside someone, and they boost self-esteem without puffing up the ego.
Flow states are also beneficial for those who witness them in others, or for the audience watching a dancer in flow. Not only is the experience inspirational for the audience, but it can also help the dancer recognize a flow state of which she might not have otherwise been cognizant. Participant 1 even says that there is a distinct type of flow that happens as a non-verbal connection between observer and dancer. Even if a dancer, doing a performance by rote, does not find her performance enthralling, it may provoke an onlooker, naïve to the performance, to enter flow.

**Participant 2**

Participant 2 describes flow experiences as a type of possession, something that both seems to come from within her and from an outside influence at the same time. This experience also includes a shutting down of the analytical and discriminating mind. It is the feeling of being guided by some other force that gives flow the feeling of being possessed, being commanded to move by another agent. One is not fully possessed in flow, however. If she were, participant 2 theorizes, there would be no self to come back to once flow had ended. Therefore, there is a piece of oneself that remains in tact during flow that allows one to recognize that she is in a flow state. As an actor, participant 2 gives the example that when she is playing a character, there is a piece of her mind that is cognizant that she is playing a character and not just that character herself. If someone were to lose themselves completely in flow, there would be no self to which to come back: one would become the character she was playing. She theorizes that in dance, however, it may be possible to lose one's self entirely and still be able to return to oneself afterward. Recalling a time when she was filming herself dancing, she had no recollection of the movements she did when watching the tape later.
It is, therefore, possible both to only recognize a flow state in retrospect and to recognize a flow state when one is in it. The latter, however, she says is more fun. The recognition of being in flow does not dissolve flow. A conducive environment can maintain the flow state. She recounts one experience of dancing for hours on end. She attributes the ability to maintain her flow state to the fact others around her were in the same state. She says that it was as if the room was filled with honey, holding the state for everyone, and it would take a lot of effort to pull anyone out of it. She imagines that other group settings can provide a similar sustaining factor for flow, recounting watching a video of Hip Hop dancers in a dance class setting. She says she perceived something raw in that environment that also held the space for flow states.

In the context of movement, participant 2 describes the feeling of flow state as if there were a thickness in the air. There are differing levels of flow, some deeper than others: when in deep flow, the self-reflexive self is gone entirely, but on more superficial levels, one can be cognizant of one's actions. Participant 2 also says that flow is characterized by fixation on what one is doing and deep concentration. She likens this aspect to meditation. Dance, particularly recreational and freeform, is more conducive to this level of fixation than acting, wherein one must consider the external environment more readily, such as hitting one's marks. Though participant 2 admits she has experienced flow states during contact improv, which requires a high degree of external consideration. Even during acting, she says, she has acquired non-volitional movement habits while portraying a character that were indicative of flow.

Participant 2 says her first experience of flow was in dance class as a child. Perhaps, she says, this is why flow is most accessible for her through movement.
Structured movement is not necessarily an impediment to flow: she recounts an experience during a theater exercise that required repetitive movement, which lead to flow. The participant describes a type of information that is present in the body that is accessible in flow state. Accessing these memories of the body can bring up a range of emotion, including grief. However, the experience isn't painful or suffering, but actually brings a state of deep joy.

Flow states are never unpleasant, but there is a moment of feeling self-conscious, dancing in front of observers before the flow state begins. For her friend's band, she is often asked to be first on the dance floor to entice others to dance. This can be awkward at first, but at some point, something shifts and she is able to enter a flow state, as if there were a chemical release. This self-consciousness is not present during flow proper, even when one is experiencing an intense emotion: one feels liberated. The reason that this vulnerable state does not make one self-conscious during flow is because there is a censoring part of the mind that is inhibited during flow, allowing one to yield and surrender.

Participant 2 says that her inner monologue does not shut down completely during flow: she can still make internal remarks as to what she is doing. However, the judgmental and evaluative aspect of the inner monologue is not present. Even positive evaluation of movement is undesirable during flow. If one is self-congratulatory in flow, one can revert to self-consciousness, dirtying the flow experience. The experience of flow is like being drunk, in the sense of loss of inhibitions, but it is not a type of numbing out. Flow, in fact, involves a heightened awareness, being lead from another place. The joy in flow state, therefore, comes in forgetting about oneself, as is the joy also found in being
in love. It is the forgetting about oneself and being present with others that create the aforementioned feeling of thickness. Ideally, one could be in this space constantly.

According to participant 2, the benefit of flow is it allows one to be more present with others. It is also inspiring for others to witness someone in flow. Flow, by nature joyful, is also helpful in coping with anxiety and depression. While one may feel the emotions associated with depression or anxiety in flow, one's relation to them is different. They are experienced as energies that one can work with rather than a source of suffering. The feature of experiencing oneself as energy is indicative of flow states: all facets of oneself become workable, which she compares to the process of alchemy.

For this reason, participant 2 differentiates flow from some type of escape. One is working with deep-seated emotion in flow rather than escaping it. Though, she does concede that if one pursued flow as a type of avoidance, rather than a method of alchemy, it may become escapism. On the whole, however, she believes that flow is not a type of escape. Exercising helps with anxiety by counteracting it, where drugs and alcohol merely mask anxiety. Flow is more appropriately like the former. She also contrasts flow states to listening to music to distract herself: the two are phenomenologically very different. In the former, she is attempting to explore an emotional wound and in the latter, ignore it. In flow, these wounds aren't inherently bad, but opportunities for inner exploration.

Flow states may also help with depression by taking one's attention off oneself: self-obsession, she argues, helps to maintain depression. Again, contrasting flow to alcohol, she says substances are a type of self-indulgence, whereas flow is abandonment of self. If, however, one becomes possessive of the pleasure felt in flow, it could also
become a type of escape. Then again, trying to own the pleasure felt in flow lessens its enjoyment anyway. Another marked difference between flow and distraction is their origin. Distractive forms are external while flow is internal, characterized by deep concentration, rather appeasing a flighty mind. Distraction, in contrast to flow, is concerned with feeling good at the coast of self-awareness.

**Participant 3**

Participant 3 describes flow as loosing oneself in some activity. One is only conscious of this freedom in retrospect. Therefore, she says that it is best to define flow in terms of a memory. This memory points to a space where one is not aware of her internal chatter, and the normal relationship to the world – constituted by a constant need to judge and evaluate – has changed. One recognizes flow by remembering a freedom from those habitual patterns. Flow in non-physical activities and flow in dance are both similar mentally, including an absence of awareness of body, mind, and self-analysis. Flow in dance, however, has the unique quality of restful ease and joyful movement in the body. Flow can also be described as an expression of joy through one's body, mind, and emotions. This joy is very sensual, and manifests through all of one's facilities: it is all encompassing. People strive in general to use their body, mind, and emotional complex to express joy.

While joy in these flow states is the same, different people resonate with different ways to find or express the joy in flow. Participant 3 says that because she is attracted to music, and in response to music, physical movement, she expresses joy and flow through dance. Others, however, may not resonate with dance. The participant says that she was able to foresee that she would find joy in dance even before she had mastered it. This
type of instant connection is rare, she says. Participant 3 says that the way she enjoys
dance has also changed over time. Initially, the enjoyment of dance was derivative of the
sense of accomplishment and the arising self-confidence, bolstering her sense of self.
Later, dance became enjoyable as a means to its own end: dance for the sake of dance.
She says that this is a natural progression as one advances in their dance ability. “Dance
as an end in itself” is defined by the intrinsic enjoyment of the expression of dance, both
as self-expression and the expression of music through the dancer.

While participant 3 originally defined flow as loosing oneself, she decides to
modify that description. She says that perhaps it is more accurate to describe flow as
identifying with a different self, a non-self-conscious self. The habitual, non-flow self, is
discontent and characterized by the constant desire to be somewhere other than where it
is. The self in flow, by contrast, has no desire to be anywhere else than where it is. This
contentment describes how one can continue an activity for several hours without fatigue
in flow, because she is not concerned with any moment but the present. Focusing on the
present, this self is relieved and unburdened, while the other self is burdened by planning
and analyzing.

In further contrast, the self not in flow is constantly comparing itself to others,
while the self in flow is not, and instead is focused on dancing. The participant describes
an experience at a club, which is very popular and crowded with a wide array of skill
levels. This packed environment helps one to stop comparing oneself to others. There are
so many different levels of dancers in the room that, after the first 15 to 20 minutes, the
mind becomes exhausted with the abundance of comparison and gives up. Larger groups
also are more conducive to flow. In smaller groups, one is more likely to compare oneself
to others. In larger groups, what would normally be a basis of comparison, such as someone else's skill or enjoyment, feeds into one's own joy. Again, the self in flow takes what's positive and exudes more positivity, which in the structure of the environment creates a feedback loop of building positivity. While out of flow one may judge dancers who are less skilled than oneself, in flow one celebrates them: the mind in flow is just happy to see people dance, at any level.

Participant 3 says that flow is an inherently positive experience, and so discounts the possibility of flow being unpleasant. However, sometimes the evaluative self resurfaces in flow and co-opts the experience toward its own aims, bolstering its own threatened sense of individuality. If co-opted by this self, the joy is used as a means to feel superior to dancers by whom it may have previously felt intimidated. Once this previous self resurfaces, it is unclear whether one can remain in flow at all. Participant 3 theorizes that perhaps one is still in flow, but this re-emerging self represents a force trying to pull one out of flow.

Thus, while the self in flow is not scared by a perceived loss of control, a feeling of fear can arise if the habitual, judgmental self resurfaces. This judgmental self can emerge within flow states merely as the result of habit, as everyone is conditioned to make comparisons. In fact, flow states are always available whenever this habitual self, flow's main obscuration, is absent. She believes that the habit to judge may be a product of society, upbringing, or perhaps inherent in human beings. It is the function of judgment to tear down joy and flow. Perhaps artists can be defined as those who counteract this habitual view. Furthermore, the degree to which one enjoys dance is not based on skill level, but on the tendency to judge. The more one can forgo judgment of
oneself, her teacher, or others dancers, the more one will enjoy dancing. Letting go of judgment does not connote, however, abandoning the ability to learn or be self-aware as a dancer. One can facilitate learning without judgment.

Participant 3 says dance, as an art, has no objective standard. Evaluation of someone's dance must be done comparatively. In an attempt to formalize her dance style, competitions have become increasingly popular. Bringing a competitive aspect to her dance style is ruining its essence and making flow within it more difficult. For her, her dance is a social phenomenon that does not discriminate. Turning that style into a type of competition has destroyed the joy of dance for many dancers she knows.

There are two types of flow which participant 3 differentiates, one found in dance proper and the other in performing. Dance alone she likens to snowboarding in thick powder, where there is minimal risk of injury. This is a purely joyful type of flow. Performing, however, involves fear and an adrenaline rush. The participant says that it was this fear-induced high that initially attracted her to dance. For her, performance created a type of fear that galvanized her, forcing her to focus, and shutting up the chaotic mind. However, this experience is like a high, or a hit of a drug. It has a quality that is less aware and it is difficult to be mindful in it, or use it constructively. Flow in social dancing, by contrast, is like snowboarding on a pleasant terrain, or participating in a fighting class without sparring, where there is no fear of being hurt.

Joyful flow is more sustainable. It constitutes a loss of the discontented self and has broader implications to the rest of one's life. Fear-induced flow is not sustainable. Participant 3 says that those who rely on high-adrenaline situations become depressed because its high cannot be maintained. Contrasting the longevity between joyful flow and
fear-induced flow, participant 3 likens the former to an athlete who trains regularly to maintain her skill level, and the latter who relies on performance enhancing drugs. The issue of sustainability revolves on the after effects of either state. Joyful flow, even infrequently, creates more joy and contentment in one's life. Fear-based flow, on the other hand, may create a stronger initial high, but creates a waning of contentment once it subsides, almost as if one is slammed back into reality. She theorizes that while fear rejects everything superfluous, joy uses everything in experience in a positive way, instead of excluding it. The joyful approach transforms experience in a positive way, but the fearful one still has negativities one must return to once the flow state subsides.

Participant 3 also says that fear-induced flow states are easier to get into because the fear leaves one with no other option, like if someone were to point a gun at you. However, these states are so different from normative experience that they are not integrable or transferable. The enjoyment is derivative from pushing away what's negative, but once that negativity reasserts itself post flow, it is felt even more poignantly. Joyful flow is more difficult to arouse, but it is all encompassing, and therefore not contradictory with experience outside of it, and thus is sustainable and cultivatable. Both fear-induced and joyful flow are available to anyone, though some may have a higher tolerance for fear than others. Fear-based flow is simply more immediate. However, fear-based flow is actually not useful at all. It creates a delusion that makes one feel worse about reality once one returns to it. However, fear may be an important part of initial phase of self-development, to overcome the paralysis of analysis, but it is not sustainable long term. Relationships are similar: complaining and manipulating may keep the relationship together initially, but long term it will fail. Joy, on the other hand – focusing
on positivity and wisdom – is sustainable because it does not reject: it includes all facets of one's experience.

**Participant 4**

Participant 4 says that flow is like daydreaming in that it takes one out of the habitual, present narration and is pleasurable. Dance without flow involves a feeling of being watched, comparing oneself to other dancers, or concern with how one appears to viewers. Flow, by contrast, is a pure state of happiness where the consideration of others is forgotten. Participant 4 believes that one can cultivate an ability to get into a flow state, just as one cultivate an ability to lucid dream. Once it has been cultivated, one can also teach others how to flow. Physical competency as a dancer aids flow in dance because it allows someone to move without inhibition. She believes that without experience, naïve dancers are hindered from flow because they are self-narrating, and thereby second-guessing their movements. The hindrance is not truly physical, but mental, as it is the narration of second-guessing one's movement that is blocking flow.

Growing up, she explains that she developed her ability to enter flow states as a way to escape emotional stress. She likens this pursuit to addiction, saying that it brought her reprieve, but was a form of avoidance. This avoidance is not always beneficial. She expresses concern that her dance students are forgoing solid technical training in favor of pursuing flow states through improvisation. Furthermore, from her own experience, she believes that dancers can be willing to disrespect and be inconsiderate of others in order to get the pleasure of flow. For example, in being preoccupied with flow experiences, her discipline and punctuality diminished. She believes this was the result of preferring feeling good in flow over doing what may be difficult, but necessary, in non-flow states.
Thus, while she garnered increased creativity, it was at the cost of disciplining herself to other tasks. Dance training in a more regimented fashion when younger, she saw how favoring flow in her later high school years had wider ramifications on her social and academic life.

Participant 4 describes flow during dance like a runner's high. She cites parallels between the two, including endurance for several hours without food or drink, being intimate with one's own emotions, and losing oneself. Some of the benefits of flow include improved creativity, the ability to create extemporaneously, confidence, artistry, choreographic ability, and better auditioning. She also says that it is difficult to recall the movements one did in flow post facto. She often videotapes herself so that she can recreate the movements she did in flow.

She also describes flow as experiencing raw data without conceptual thought. This experience is also emotionally provocative, likened to spaciousness, beauty, wonder, and play. She differentiates between semi-flow states, where occasionally there is cognitive thought in the form of volitional decisions, and absolute flow states where all conceptual thought is abandoned. The absence of self-narration is a key differentiator between flow and non-flow states. Self-narration is also coupled with self-consciousness in relation to an onlooker. Flow involves a loss of this narration.

She cites closing one's eyes as a method to forget about others and have greater access to flow. Music also helps one access flow. She suggests that both visual and auditory stimulus can serve to make one aware of a division between herself and her environment, thus inhibiting flow. Closing the eyes and hearing music can blur these boundaries, aiding flow. Thus, participant 4 says that flow itself is a negative thing, not
qualitatively, but in the sense that it is the absence of some mental obscurations. It is a loss of internal narrative, for example. However this narrative is not unequivocally absent in flow. Its presence is intermittent.

Participant 4 makes a distinction between the high of performing and flow states. Both are a type of high, but the high in flow is categorically different. The former involves an increased sense of self, while the latter, a loss of self. She further clarifies that there are actually two types of performers, those who improvise on stage and those who do choreography. As a performer, flow is accessible in performed improvisation, but not performed choreography. Performance creates a pressure situation that can either induce a joyful flow state or fearful loss of control. She recounts a high pressure, nationally televised audition with minimal sleep and a prominent judge panel. She says that it was the fact she had to perform choreography and set movement that prevented her from turning this situation into a flow experience, instead resulting in dissociation. Had she been asked to improvise under the same stress, she would have been able to convert the situation into a flow experience.

She theorizes that it is the demand to use one side of the brain over the other that contributes to stressful situations being experienced as pleasurable or fearful. She describes the right side as being involved in narrative, defining things, and recall. The left side is responsible for extemporaneous movement. She says that under pressure, if forced to use the right side, like performing choreography, she blanks out and performs poorly. If asked to use the left side, the situation plunges her deeper into flow. Participant 4 believes that some people are more comfortable on the right side of their brain and need their performance to be set in order to feel comfortable in fearful situations on stage. She
theorizes that these right-brained dancers are more attracted to performance, while left-brainers are more attracted to creativity and artistry. There are also people who are a mix of both. Right-brainers, based on her experience, are less likely to enter flow states.

Participant 4 believes that it is possible from observation of a performer to tell whether or not she is in a flow state or on a performer's high. The former, she believes, is working extemporaneously, while the other is precise and pre-meditated. There is something qualitatively different about each performance that indicates the presence of flow or a performer's high. Both, however, are compelling to watch. She recounts an experience of one of her students, who was wrestling with depression, enter a flow state during an improvisational session in class. That this student had entered flow was not only apparent to herself, but to everyone else watching. Participant 4 theorizes that the student was able to drop her depressive narration and have a new relation to herself. The participant believes that other students witnessing this experience were thereafter able to more readily access flow themselves, again speaking to the teachability of flow states.

Flow proper is never itself unpleasant. Participant 4 describes having to quell the excitement she feels in flow, especially in discovering novel movement, in order to prolong her flow state. However the transition into and out of flow can be unpleasant. Failed expectations around flow – it not happening, or being brief – can be disappointing. Others' reaction to her flow state can also cause unpleasantness. If onlookers seem impressed, she feels reluctant about taking credit for the performance because it was not under her conscious control. Feeling proud of the performance, on the other hand, seems to defile something sacred. Compliments diminish her experience. However, if the audience seems emotionally touched by the performance, rather than impressed, the
experience is rewarding. Flow states are essentially ineffable. With students, therefore, making value judgments on someone else's flow experience is an impediment to growth.

**Participant 5**

Participant 5 says flow involves a linking of movements without end, and can happen in response to music, to the feeling of one's own heart, or in silence. While non-flow states are more presentational, the feeling of flow is internal. In flow, the mental processes that involve self-consciousness shut down, and the body takes over. Participant 5 says aside from when she is in school studying subjects she does not enjoy, she is constantly moving and constantly in flow. Flow states feel natural. In flow, in contrast to acting from premeditation, one is non-cognitive. In this regard, it is like meditation. It is also natural in the sense that her ability to flow was not developed; she was born with the ability to move in flow. Natural, she says, also connotes not paying attention to others, but focusing on oneself. She says that her life is consumed and focused on pursuing flow experiences. For her, flow states comprise the majority of her experience in general.

Participant 5 states that there are degrees in intensity of flow. In the least extreme, one is aware of their joy of moving. In the most extreme, mental cognition is fully absent and the body moves on its own. Both, however, involve a lack of judgment or pre-occupation with what others are thinking, habits which are a waste of one's energy. She says the presence of pressure while dancing and the process of learning choreography can be inhibitors of flow. If she is lenient about mastering choreography, flow comes easier, but if she wants to replicate choreography perfectly, flow is less accessible. However, being a perfectionist in mastering choreography does not disallow someone form having flow experiences in general. One can recruit either skill when appropriate. While one may
need to forgo flow to learn choreography, once the need to be precise abates, like a sigh of relief, flow is more readily available. After one has mastered choreography, flow is also then accessible when performing choreography. It is also possible to enter flow states when learning choreography, but only if one really enjoys the combination. She also says that flow experiences can mar her concentration if she is supposed to be learning choreography. She often cannot focus on someone else if she is in a flow state.

Despite the comparison of flow to meditation, while participant 5 has had a frightening experience while meditating, she never has had anything similar during flow. She describes a meditation where she perceived herself as being outside of her own body and watching it shrink. Here, it was as if she was deep in her thoughts, or perhaps not thinking at all. Once she saw herself as very small, she popped out of the experience and felt in a trance. She theorizes that the meditative experience was scary because it was a loss of control, where flow states garner a feeling of control and being more physically awake. This scary feeling doesn't always happen when she meditates, neither is it dependent on the length of time she meditates.

Although the experience of flow is not always a feeling of moving automatically, it is like a natural instinct, as if the body were moving without the intervention of the mind. She also rarely has an internal monologue in general. Again, when studying a scholastic subject she does not prefer, such internal narration arises. It can also happen when she feels frustrated if failing to pick up choreography. However, in general, she does not have internal narration. She does, on the other hand, often internally hear music instead of a monologue. In flow as well, this monologue is not present and closing the eyes further aids the dissipation of any internal narration.
Though some people may not seek flow experiences because they do not like a perceived loss of control, participant 5 theorizes that people who seek flow experiences do so because they enjoy them. In flow, the body is in control and the mind is not. It is the loss of the mind's control that makes flow pleasurable. This loss of control engenders a loss of self-consciousness and being preoccupied with others’ opinions of oneself. The movement is for the sake of oneself. Meditation is also a loss of the mind's control, which can, however, be frightening. She suggests several possible reasons why dance is not ever frightening where meditation can be, including her passion, the presence of movement, the eyes being closed. She then concedes, however, that aside from movement, that these do not differentiate meditation from dance.

Participant 5 says flow can be a refuge for her from others' jealousy of her. This refuge, however, can also be a form of escape, which she likens to a drug. She recants this comparison and differentiates flow from drug use: flow states are a natural occurrence while drug use is a willful avoidance. She pursues flow states for her own sake, and not in relation to how other people may perceive it, or in relation to others in general.

**Participant 6**

Participant 6 describes a flow experience as a perceived stopping of time, a loss of awareness of one's surroundings, and movement without conscious control, where the body initiates movement independent of the mind. She describes the experience as being relaxing and likens it to sleep. She says mental functions in this state are at a minimal, only to protect the body from being physically hurt. In flow, and in its recollection, she experiences herself from a third person perspective. While she loses self-consciousness in
flow, it is not that she loses awareness entirely. She says that she still is aware of others and objects, but as shapes. She likens this experience to when walking while having a conversation: one might not remember the content of the conversation, but she does have a memory of the event.

Participant 6 says her lack of formal training may contribute to her ability to have flow experiences. While trained dancers have pre-conceived notions of how dance should look, as a novice dancer, the participant does not. She therefore has greater freedom to dance off of instinct, garnering more frequent experiences of flow. She likens her sense of control during flow to a dream. During the dream, the experience is cogent, but afterward the logic of the dream is piecemeal, if not gone altogether. So too, she says, flow states are comprehensible in the moment, but vague in retrospect. When in flow, the body can very easily do something that was not originally intended by the dancer. This unexpectedness can throw one out of a flow state. This possibility for “messing up” is not anxiety provoking, however. The participant theorizes that perhaps it is only in retrospect that the possibility of “messing up” seems imminent. Perhaps, actually, during flow, one is in full control. Furthermore, participant 6 says she has a greater access to flow states when dancing to music, because it is the music that instructs her movement.

She contrasts her experience of an inner monologue during flow to how it exists in a conversation. In a conversation, one's inner narration is processing what one should say next. In flow, there is no premeditation; the body acts without direction from the mind. When she has some premeditated movement she feels the need to incorporate, flow is inhibited. As soon as that movement is performed, however, and the urgency to incorporate it gone, she can enter back into flow. The participant says that the need to
premeditate in conversation is understandable, but can be oppressive, and a reprieve from it is pleasant. This inner voice of planning and analyzing is constant, even when one is sleeping. The opportunity to let that voice rest and be quiet is peaceful and pleasant.

Emerging from flow states offer a sense of relief. She theorizes that most people are not even aware how stressed they are, consumed with cognitive processes, from which flow provides reprieve and relaxation. Another benefit of flow is the physical relaxation of the body, which can be especially useful in situations where a stiff body could cause injury. Flow states also allow the body to express its own ideas. While the mind may be at rest during sleep, the body has no means of expression then because it is immobile. While cultivating the body’s ideas is extremely useful for choreography, it also is an important end in and of itself.

Although flow states provide a release from daily stressors, it is not a state in which to live one's life. To do so would engender an inability to remember events of the day and a loss of productivity. Like drugs, which may also be used to relax, the participant says that flow states must be pursued in moderation.

**Participant 7**

Participant 7 explains that it's difficult to describe flow from a first person perspective, because it is difficult to recognize it in one's self. An observer needs to point it out to the person in flow, describing how free and “in the moment” the performer seemed. Once someone else points out the experience, the performer can recall what it felt like in retrospect. Recalling a flow state is not like a memory of an even that one can reconstruct and track. Rather, it's a feeling, a feeling of something opening up and of surrender. In the context of a performance, this feeling is also a lack of preconceived
notions of what's going to happen during the performance itself, including the
choreography and the music. This feeling also includes genuine happiness, even ecstasy,
and freedom. As a performer, it is an opportunity to let go of control of one's experience
on stage and to let the experience occur. The feeling of flow, however, is fleeting. It
cannot be described as a sequenced order of events, nor in some other tangible way.
Rather, it is a feeling as if everything is happening simultaneously.

Participant 7 says that although flow has never been frightening for her, she
understands that it could be if one is not prepared to feel a lack of control. While
performance is normally connoted by extensive planning, there is something that changes
in the experience of dance when one decides to surrender and let the music move the
performer. There is no sense of self in flow. The experience is transpersonal, and extends
out; it is something to be shared. It is not something that can be possessed. At the same
time, she says, the experience is very personal. She says that one cannot share a moment
of freedom, but at the same time one cannot keep it to oneself. The liberation felt in flow
connects one with others. It does not make one feel alone. Rather, it is an opening that
makes it difficult to not connect with what's immediately happening.

Though flow proper is not frightening for participant 7, there is a transitional
moment into flow that can be. One can anticipate the arrival of flow and surrender to it,
but there is a hesitation that often arises, a resistance to being free. If someone goes for
peak performance without surrendering, however, the experience can be scary. Looking
back on instances of this transition, she recognizes that if she hadn't surrendered in that
moment, if she had tried to control it, it could have been scary. If one cannot trust the
rehearsal and training she has put in before a performance and surrender to what's
happening, one's inner monologue becomes apparent as a voice of doubt. The voice that does not trust letting go can make the experience scary.

There is, however, a slight inner monologue within flow, but the relation to it is different. It takes the form of pondering how one wants to be with the experience of flow. However, once one decides to fully let go, the inner monologue drops away entirely. One must be willing to let go completely in order to surrender to flow. In fact, surrendering the inner monologue creates the deepest flow states.

Flow experiences are not achievable by seeking them. One can be open to them, but they cannot be forced. Pre-meditated flow is a contradiction. Participant 7’s motivation to dance is thus not to pursue flow experiences. She dances because she loves it. While flow experiences feel good, they are not her impetus to dance. Someone who dances with the goal of achieving flow excludes themselves from the possibility of experiencing flow.

The benefits of flow are not isolated to the experience of flow proper. It helps one be more open and aware at the same time, and also shows how one's identity can change in being more open. After a flow state, a dancer's next performance would necessarily be different, not in the sense of expecting the experience again, but it would add a new sense of purpose and purity to subsequent performances. It is a reaffirmation of one's passion for dance and being where one is supposed to be. It also transforms how one trains and discusses dance.

Participant 7 says that if someone found the feeling of flow unpleasant, she may not want to talk about the experience, or may deny that it happened. Even those who do enjoy it, however, do not often talk about the experience, or advertise it. If someone were
to find flow unpleasant, it could cause one to doubt her love of dance. One's interpretation of flow is based on how well someone is able to be with freedom.
Section 5: Aggregate Themes

It is useful at this point to reiterate the procedural methodology in combining the qualitative and quantitative data. Four of the following five aggregate themes involved dividing participants into two groups based on a qualitative analysis along a certain dimension. For example, on the theme of an experienced mind-body dichotomy in flow among participants, some participants reported transcending the body, while others saw flow as becoming more in touch with the body. Quantitative data was then compared between each group to see if any patterns in the questionnaires corroborated the distinctions found qualitatively.

There are two important points that deserve stress here: first, grouping was created on the qualitative analysis only and before examining the quantitative data. Analysis of qualitative data is much more easily biased, so it was important that the researcher did not re-interpret the interviews in light of the quantitative data. Thus, the identified themes and the groupings themselves in the following discussion were in no way influenced by quantitative data.

Secondly, while the researcher identifies patterns in the quantitative data, these patterns are by no means to be taken as statistically salient. The quantitative data itself is analyzed qualitatively as a means to enrich the comparison of participants along each theme. The aim of qualitative research is primarily hypothesis generation, rather than hypothesis validation (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2011). In that vein, the following discussions are not definitive conclusions. Rather, they present tenable hypotheses about the connection between flow, dissociation, and other phenomena, particularly in relation to identity fluidity.
The format for the presentation of each theme is relatively consistent. The theme is introduced generally and then made clearer in discussing each participant's relation to it. Direct quotes serve to give specific articulations of each theme, which are more targeted than the essential descriptions. These quotes are also used to support the qualitative assessment of a participant belonging to a certain group. Using the quotes to support the qualitative analysis fits in Giorgi's 5th step of using the essential descriptions to interpret the original interview (2008). It is not the case, however, that just because a participant is assigned to a certain group, that their interview was necessarily absent of the quality expressed by the other group. Again, group assignment is qualitative, based on a gestalt understanding of each participant. The quotes provide instances of the theme to which that participant belongs. The essential descriptions are important in painting the general picture of that participant and why she may belong to a certain group within the theme.

After the theme and groupings are fully explained, the quantitative data is introduced. The researcher theorizes on the quantitative data's possible relationship to the identified groups, as well as supports the possibility of these connections through existing literature. The quantitative data pertinent to the theme and the discussion is also included at the end of the theme in a table. As central subjects of this study, scores on the DFS-II for flow and DES-II for dissociation are also always included at that top of the table for the reader's reference.

All scores are listed in descending order and not by participant number. This is meant to obscure, for confidentiality, mapping individual scores to individual
participants. Finally, the final segment of the theme relates the discussion to the identity fluidity paradigm and how it may serve to explain the illustrated connections.

All generated hypotheses from the discussion are also listed at the section's end. There are two hypotheses that were consistent throughout all themes, which also unify the themes with each other and with the ideas proposed in the literature review. These hypotheses are the essential product of this study and are cited here for convenience, as well as to put them in the forefront of the reader's mind in the following discussion: 

(H₁) Both flow-ers and dissociators share trait identity fluidity and (H₂) this trait can manifest both as dissociative (fragmented) tendencies in flow-ers as well as integrative tendencies in dissociators. All developed hypotheses are available on page 109 in the conclusion section for quick reference.

**Theme 1: Flow as Avoidance**

Perhaps the most interesting theme in relation to the identity fluidity continuum was differing views on whether or not flow could be used as a method of emotional avoidance. The seven participants evenly divided between those who both had used and saw dangers in using flow as a type of escape (group 1: participants 3, 4, 5, and 6) and those who either felt flow was emotionally integrative or made no mention of the need to moderate flow states (group 2: participants 1, 2, and 7). Consistent through group 1 was a concern that flow could become addicting at a cost. Throughout both groups, the comparison of flow to a drug is recurrent. Participant 4 in group 1 explains:

> Once I clicked into improvisation, to get me to flow state, I, was addicted.

> It became an addiction because it was one of the only ways that I could get away from, like, my parents' divorce, my break up with my boyfriend. You
know, it was like, it was, not an emotional release but emotional like, um
retreat, from what was happening... So, although it [flow] brings you to a
state of happiness do I always think it's beneficial? No I think it, it, can be
an avoidance, sometimes.

It is not surprising, therefore, that participant 4 concludes excessive flow “becomes an
addiction after the escape, which is probably like a drug.”

Participant 5 also describes a similar type of emotional avoidance within flow. “It
[flow] helped me when I was younger. I got a lot of jealousy, there’s a lot of jealousy out
there towards me and, um, when I’m in flow state it blocks, everything out and it’s so
blissful and peaceful...” In response to a question if flow could be a type of escape, she
replied, “Yes. A little bit.” She later equivocates on this point, saying that drugs, for
example, are a willful avoidance, where flow is not. Later, however, it seems for
participant 5, that what differentiates flow and drugs are not the presence of avoidance,
but that drugs have the quality of “checking out,” where flow does not. Though flow is
not a type of emotional numbing for her, it offers separation from negative emotions. This
is an important distinction to note in the forthcoming discussion on emotional numbing.
Numbing is a diminished capacity to feel, where avoidance is escaping some feeling in
particular.

Participant 3 actually distinguishes between two types of flow, one that is fear-
induced, and another joyful, which is integrative. “Fear is easier to bring about because
there’s not really any option... a flow state will automatically come up with fear.”
However, “with love, with joy, with openness… its harder to get there. But once you get
there... it is more sustainable because you’re encompassing more fully your...
experience... there will be less periods in your life which are contradictory to that experience.” Participant 3 also recognizes her attraction to using fear as a method to achieve flow. “That’s why I sought it [fear-induced flow], because you want everything else to shut up... all the like other stuff that that nags you for the rest of your life shuts up.” Here, again, is the desire to use flow as a way to separate from negative emotion.

But she also realizes the danger in pursuing fear based flow.

I suppose you can use that experience [of fear-induced flow], but... you’re mo-… so unaware of what’s going on during it... just like a flash that passes by, you get like a high and then you usually fall by law and then people keep seeking it.

Again, the comparison of flow to an addictive drug is poignant. Like a drug, this fear-induced flow requires increasing dependency to maintain the high.

Participant 6 also describes the danger of excessive flow. Again, flow states make one separate from one's daily life. When asked why she said that being in flow constantly would be a “horrible experience,” she responded, “Because, I personally, I don’t think I’d remember what I did the whole day and a lot, like the doing drugs, and stuff like after that, you’re like 'whoa,' 'cause I mean everything has to be in moderation.” Furthermore, “If you were in flow state all day... you’d have no idea where you were or what you were doing... Being productive is also good so I think just like with a drug it should be used in moderation.” Participant 6 also then describes flow in excess as an avoidance of daily life, citing remembering events and productivity.

Moving to group 2, participant 1 says, however, that flow is not like a drug. “It's [drugs are] ultimately, it's numbing them, you know what I mean? I feel you're not totally,
in tune, with yourself.” A drug induced flow is not true flow because “if you have to depend on something to get you... in that kind of, that, that frame... it's not entirely... genuine.” Rather than see flow as a type of avoidance, flow helps her “tap into an emotion that I've-- I've been dealing with you know I've been trying to work out.” In this arena, flow is not an escape from emotion, but a therapy. However, like others in group 1, participant 1 recognizes that there is a type of negative flow that she *does* liken to drugs.

You know that's why people like to get high or drink so they can just kinda like,, a.k.a. not feel. I mean that's their reason. And I think through that, sometimes, flow can happen. Personally for me, that's not a positive flow that's a negative flow because you are depending on something... another physical substance to basically take hold of your body... flow, dancing is a physical... source, of going through flow, however...

Although participant 1 here is making a similar comparison to flow as a potential drug, the comparison is distinct from group 1 in that she is citing drugs as a method of numbing rather than avoidance. Again, group 1 and 2 are not necessarily distinguished by emotional numbing. Participant 1 is describing the quality of drugs to diminish feeling, which is distinct from avoidance. Participant 6 compared drugs to flow in the quality of being removed from daily activity. Participant 1 is not identifying certain types of flow with avoidance, but with numbing.

Participant 5 distinguishes flow states from drug states similarly to participant 1, saying drugs are a way to “check out.” However, she still talks about flow as a way to “block out” negativity, albeit by feeling something “blissful and peaceful.” Participant 1, by contrast, talks about flow as being “in tune” with oneself or “going through flow,” in
contrast to drugs “taking hold” of oneself. Participant 5 may recant that flow is like drugs on the account of emotional numbness, but she retains the comparison in relation to a blissful feeling that dismisses negative emotion. Participant 1, like participant 5, also rejects flow as emotionally numbing, but uses integrative language to describe flow. Thus, participant 1 is more appropriately part of group 2.

Participant 2 talks about flow explicitly as an integrative experience. For her, the pleasure of flow is not an emotional reprieve from something negative.

When you, when you go to take drugs, or alcohol... you are having the, the pleasurable experience. And there’s a grasping to I’m having this experience... I feel like... in the flow state... there, I’m not thinking of it as, I am having this pleasurable experience because I, as soon as I do, it feels dirty, and I’m like “oh, I’m out of it”... I don’t like when I have the judgment... I can still feel pleasure from it [flow], but as soon as I go “I am liking this experience, for me,” I think that can turn into escapism.

Like other participants, her comparison to drug use illustrates her view of flow within this theme. Drugs involve a type of self-conscious pleasure that can lead to escapism or avoidance. Flow, on the other hand, is defined as an absence of self-consciousness and escapism. Furthermore, like participant 1, participant 2 sees flow as a way to work through negative emotion, rather gain relief from them.

When I’m in, in flow states... I have no anxiety, or depression. Or, I mean, or what can happen is like, [the] feeling of anxiety or depression arise[s], and you relate to them differently. And you can maybe see them as flow states. Because when you're in flow states and you’re moving and dancing,
you can tap into different, like, kind of flow with different emotions, like when you're dancing, like there could be maybe a more dramatic dance, or a a, you know, one with like a different you know, anxious energy... so I think it’s a practice in riding the energies and working with energy

What also generally distinguishes group 1 and 2, therefore, is the tendency to use flow states as an escape from versus as a method to work through negative emotions. It is important to note here, however, that it is not the case that every participant in group 1 uses flow as an escape exclusively. Participants in group 1 also report instances of using flow to work through undesirable emotions. The groups are thus distinguished on the dominance of either tendency on the qualitative analysis. This caveat should be remembered in subsequent themes as well.

Participant 7 is unique in that she is the only participant not to compare flow states to the effects of substances. While she makes no specific mention of using flow as a method to integrate negative emotions, she also makes no allusion to flow as a type of avoidance. While “generally” group 2 is marked by using flow as a method to work with negative emotions, the real demarcation between these groups is the presence or absence of flow as avoidance. Because participant 7 does not describe a tendency to use flow as avoidance, she was included in group 2.

The quantitative data reveals some interesting distinctions between these two groups. Neither group shows a markedly different amount of flow (group 1 mean: 3.75 vs. group 2 mean: 3.77) on the DFS2. Though, without sufficient power for t-tests, it is not possible to know. However, on the MID sub-scale of depersonalization, there is a median split between the two groups (19, 10, 10, 8 vs. 8, 7, 5). Averages on the DES-II
depersonalization sub-scale show a difference in means (18.33 vs. 8.33), but again without sufficient power, it is not possible to know whether or not this is significant. There are seemingly stark differences in these means on the CDS total and emotional numbing sub-scale (num) as well (CDS-tot: 60.75, vs. 17.5, CDS-num: 14 vs. 0), but only if the high score in group 2 is removed as an outlier. However, if the outlier is included, these differences are negated, especially in the case of emotional numbing.

Again, although none of these differences are statistically salient, they provide some interesting hypotheses around the relation between flow as avoidance and identity-fluidity. If the differences herein prove consistent at high powers, the data seems to suggest a link between emotional avoidance and depersonalization. On identity-fluidity, flow, like dissociation, entails an ability to change ones self-boundaries. Perhaps this ability can either be used to integrate negative emotions by working through them, or to avoid negative emotions by depersonalizing them. As participant 3,(group 2) said ,flow for her is “identifying with another self... with a self that is not this self-conscious... needy… discontent self...” In this sense, avoidance as a type of depersonalization becomes clear. Avoidance becomes a method to identify with the parts of oneself that she prefers, at the coast the undesirable parts of oneself.

Those with a tendency to use malleable self-boundaries to work through negative emotions, however, show less depersonalization, as they are attempting to integrate with these parts by working with them. These two strategies again reflect identity fluidity on a continuum, in one direction using this ability to exclude parts of oneself, and in the other, to integrate those parts.
Furthermore, if the data remains consistent, avoidance and depersonalization do not preclude someone from experiencing flow. Both groups have seemingly comparable levels of flow on the DFS2. Perhaps, then, even flow-ers in group 1 sometimes use an ability to change their self-boundary as a way to employ dissociative coping mechanisms, namely avoidance. This hypothesis is aligned with Thomson and Jaque's suspicion that the “ability to dissociate is transformed into flow experiences” (2012, p. 486) in some individuals, albeit in the other direction. In this case, participants might be using a common precursor between flow and dissociation to dissociate. Using the identity fluidity nomenclature, participants may be using their trait identity fluidity, which provides access to flow, as a coping mechanism to dissociate. The notion of using an ability to flow toward avoidance also finds parallels with Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, and Vitaro's work (2006). They found that gamblers who gambled to avoid unwanted emotion dissociated, while those who gambled for enjoyment entered flow. Likewise, perhaps the identity fluidity that allows flow-ers to flow can also be used to avoid and depersonalize.

Around the CDS, it is difficult to generate even a hypothesis, both because there is no definitive reason, besides convenience, to either include or exclude the outlier, and because the qualitative information around emotional numbing is limited. However, the MDI sub-scale on emotional restriction (emc) did show a discernible difference, with only one score on group 1 being lower than group 2, and only by 1 point (12, 11, 8, 6 vs. 7, 5, 5). The literature also shows disagreement about whether emotional numbness always correlates with dissociation (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005).

Perhaps numbing is not distinctly dissociative where avoidance is a form of numbing. Under the identity fluidity paradigm, perhaps avoidance involves fragmentation
where numbness does not. Fragmentation in this discussion specifically refers to the separation of normally integrated mental processes (Thomson & Jacque, 2012; Naso, 2007). Numbing and avoidance are both strategies aimed at the same problem: negative emotion. It may be that flow-ers who use their identity fluidity as avoidance also sometimes adopt numbing. Flow-ers who integrate with negative emotion, on the other hand, may not need to either separate from or dampen negative emotion. They may be able to experience that emotion fully without the need to mitigate it. If this were true, it would explain the scores on the MDI-emc: group 1 may use emotional numbing in addition to avoidance to mitigate negative emotion. Group 2, without this need to mitigate, may have no need to adopt either strategy.

Furthermore, all those who dissociate may not necessarily numb, and therefore there is a weak correlation between the two in the literature (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005). Those who need to mitigate unpleasant emotion may adopt an array of strategies, including numbing and dissociation, but one may not necessitate the other. The next theme, however, explores a different form of avoidance that could potentially have a stronger correlation with numbing.

Returning to the present theme, however, one can summarize preceding discussion with the following hypotheses: (H1A) emotional avoidance and integration map onto the identity fluidity continuum as opposite extremes. (H1B) Identity fluidity may permit fragmentation and avoidance of negative emotions. Furthermore (H1C) identity fluidity may also permit integration with negative emotions. Finally, (H1D) while those with identity fluidity may also emotionally numb, avoidance, and not numbing, relates to identity fluidity. Again, it should be reiterated that throughout the paper, the
proposed hypotheses are in no way substantiated by the proceeding discussion. They are offered as ways to summarize the patterns explored in the discussion, as well as serve as a starting point for further research in which they could be tested.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flow as Avoidance</th>
<th>Flow as Integration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Flow as Avoidance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Group 2: Flow as Integration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants 3, 4, 5, 6</td>
<td>Participants 1, 2, 7</td>
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<td>33.21, 11.79, 6.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>12, 11, 8, 6</td>
<td>7, 5, 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDI-dep</td>
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<td>19, 10, 10, 8</td>
<td>8, 7, 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>DES-dep</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13.33, 3.33, 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDS-tot</td>
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<td>89, 62, 59, 33</td>
<td>158, 28, 7</td>
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Table 1: Quantitative comparison of flow as avoidance vs. flow as integration

**Theme 2: The Mind-Body Dichotomy**

Most participants described some type of change in relationship between body and mind during flow. This change in perception took two distinct forms: group 1 described flow as the body becoming its own agent with its own expression, while group 2 described flow as a transcendence of the body. Group 1 consists of participants 2, 5, and 6, and group 2, participants 1, 3, and 4. Participant 7 was excluded, making no mention of this dichotomy. She does not even use the word “body” in the entire interview.

As part of group 1, participant 6 describes flow “like my body takes over and my mind is kinda relaxed and I go.” For participant 6, the body “taking over” not only defines flow but is part of what makes it beneficial.

I don't think I get to listen to my body's ideas at all during the day. Unless, I’m in flow state 'cause you’re body is in control... most of the time you’re
mind is always in control and... like your body doesn't get to do what it
wants to do... when I’m in that flow state I feel like my limbs and stuff
almost have minds of their own.

Participant 5 shares similar sentiments. “I think that's another flow like how you can
describe it when your brain just shuts off and your body just moves you don’t think about
it.” Again, flow is described as the agency of the mind being reduced and the body's
volition as taking over. She also contrasts flow in dance from “out of body experiences” –
such experiences, explained forthcoming, are more indicative of group 2 – that happened
to her in meditation. In the meditative experience, she saw her body get smaller and
smaller from a third person perspective. While this experience was frightening, flow in
dance is categorically different. Explaining why flow in dance is never scary where
meditation can be, participant 5 explains that in dance “you’re still active, you're moving
and in mediation you’re not, at least not for me I’m not moving.” Like participant 6, part
of what makes flow enjoyable is a being situated in the body. Flow is a visceral feeling of
the body, not the body's transcendence.

Participant 2 perhaps gives the most comprehensive analysis of flow as
connecting with the body. Similar to her analysis of flow as integration, as a way to work
with emotions, Participant 2 sees working with the body as an important gateway to
accessing emotion.

[Teacher] talks about the body having information and memory and, and
wisdom, and I think there’s something to that, of like, why, why is my body
wanting to move these certain ways, and when I’m actually le- letting it do
the work, it awakens these things... the flow state can also—bring up grief.
And, I mean, I’ve gotten done with [dance] sessions and—I’ve like, had emotion come out... it wasn’t painful, it wasn’t, you know, suffering... it just, it felt like what it was suppose to be, or that’s, that’s what came out of it.

Here, again, the body is described as having its own masked agency that is revealed in flow, its own “wisdom and memory.” She also makes this allusion when she discusses the body as energy. “[In flow] you're very aware of your body as energy... when you're in the flow state, it really feels like you’re, you're riding and working with energies, but with your, with your body.” In the language of participant 2, it is the energy of the body, not the mind, which one “rides” in flow.

Those in group 2, however, describe the body as something that is transcended rather than revealed in flow. Participant 3, for example, says flow “by definition for me... means you’re not much aware of your body or your mind.” While one uses the body, mental, and emotional “complex” to express joy, this joy has a transcendent quality which transports the dancer beyond any member of this complex individually.

I think you could also say flow is an expression of joy... a joyful state of being... the facilities that we have like our body, and our mind, and our emotions... joy can express itself through them... joy can be expressed emotionally... as an intellectual thing, it it can be an overall encompassing expression...

Although the body may be an instrument of joy, it is a method secondary to joy proper. Here, the body is seen as a means to transcendence, but not as an end in itself, to let the body “do what it wants to,” à la participant 6.
Participant 4 also defines flow in dance as transcendence of the body. Recounting a dancer's performance, she says “You can tell she's in a flow state... she's outside of her body. She's acting with the energy that's happening for her.” Whereas for participant 2 this energy is something within the body, “acting with the energy” is something found outside the body for participant 4. Furthermore, she says flow is a type of high that “takes over your body. And um-- kind of dismisses the... cognitive like narrative.” This description echoes that of participant 3, where flow is a joy that causes one to identify with “another self.” In both these descriptions the body is being controlled by some other force. However, in group 1, there is a sense that there is an inherent agency in the body that is revealed once the mental agent is quieted.

In the same vein, participant 1 describes flow as a transcendence of the body. Particularly, she cites physical exhaustion as a helpful impetus to flow.

[After] two, three hours, the body is becoming a little tired. So now it's becoming an outer body experience... the body is tired your mind is telling you keep going, keep going, keep going. You might feel like your mind is tired and now it's just straight energy that's just moving you and I feel like, that's when flow is happening. It's when the body is done, the mind is fried because you are just trying to be pushing, pushing.

This description is reminiscent of participant 3 who sees flow as losing awareness of both body and mind. Only once the mind and body are tired out can one enter into a flow state. Participant 1 again describes flow as energy. Unlike participant 2, but like participant 4, this energy is not located in the body, but is something that transcends both body and mind.
It should be noted that the defining characteristics of either group 1 or 2 are not the exclusive description of the body for participants in each group. Participant 2 in group 1, for example, describes flow as a type of possession of the body, which is similar to participant 4’s (group 2) description of flow as “taking over” the body. Likewise, participant 1 (group 2) contrasts flow to drugs in that drugs “take over” the body where flow is “natural.” Again, the researcher looked for the dominant theme in each participant based on the qualitative analysis.

Comparing the quantitative difference between these two groups, there is a possible differences on the CDS sub-scale of emotional numbing (num) (group 1: 4, 0, and 0 vs. group 2: 32, 14, and 12). Not only was this a median split, but the highest score in group 1 was 4, while the lowest in group 2 was 12. However, there was not a discernible pattern on the MDI sub-scale of emotional constriction. While some use the terms emotional numbing and constriction interchangeably (Briere, Weathers, & Runtz, 2005), other researchers describe numbing as a broader category than constriction, including, diminished interest in significant activities, detachment or estrangement from others, and restricted range of affect (Litz & Gray, 2002). Emotional constriction, on the other hand, involves capping the range of emotion, preventing both highs and lows (Layton & Muraven, 2014). It may be that emotional constriction is analogous to restricted range of affect and thus a subset of emotional numbing. While emotional numbing may be definitively amorphous (Litz & Gray, 2002), considering emotional constriction in this manner may explain the discrepancy between the CDS-num and MDI-emc in the present study.
Those who see flow as transcending the body (group 2) may also have high scores specifically on the detachment component of emotional numbing, hence the possible correlation on the CDS-num, but not MDI-emc. In other words, the attempt to transcend the body is more specifically a form of detachment rather than constriction. The study of embodiment may offer why such a relationship exists. Research on embodiment shows that emotion is informed by and felt through one's experience of the body (Craig, 2002; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005). Participant 2 also corroborates this relationship between emotion and the body, describing, for example, how working with the “wisdom and information” in the body can “bring up grief.” She also discusses working with the body's energies as a method of emotional therapy.

If the body is the seat of emotion, it would make sense that those with detachment patterns might seek to transcend the body, whereas those without detachment may want to engage with it. This tendency may be subtly different, though most likely related, to avoidance. Avoidance, described earlier, is a strategy to escape from an emotional stressor (Kelly & Forsyth, 2009) while detachment is a strategy to mitigate the emotion itself through derealization and depersonalization (Naso, 2007). Neither strategy necessarily entails the other. For example, someone may avoid an emotionally difficult situation because she cannot detach in the presence of it, while someone else has no need to avoid because she is able to be emotionally detached. Nor is it that these strategies necessarily preclude each other. Someone could easily both detach and avoid. Comparing quantitative data in this theme to those in Flow as Avoidance also suggest the independence of numbing and avoidance, since avoiders were not consistently numb-ers.
The Mind-Body Dichotomy theme also fits in the paradigm of identity fluidity. Flow as an expression of the body may be a type of integration with the body, while flow as transcending the body, a type of dissociation. Those who wish to dissociate from upsetting emotion may also separate from their body, and those who want to explore these emotions may feel more integrated with the body. Someone may object, however, that both tendencies sound dissociative, albeit, to borrow Butler's terms, one normative and the other pathological (2006). In group 1, the body is being experienced as its own agent (normative), while in group 2, the body is being transcended, or escaped entirely (pathological). Transcending the body may not be pathologically dissociative in the sense of being unpleasant. Seeing dissociation as a continuum between normative and pathological (Thomson & Jaque, 2012), it may be pathological in the sense of being a more extreme separation between mind and body. In transcending the body, the body is not even experienced at all.

One possible hypothesis in retort is that the normal baseline (fig. 1) in relation to one's body is already dissociative. Most people, arguably, are not even aware of their body. To use participant 6's language, people don't “listen” to their “body's ideas.” From this perspective, flow is one of the few times one even has a relationship with the body, even if as something other, which is to step toward integration in comparison to the normal non-awareness of it. Another possible hypothesis concedes that both are types of dissociation, but argues that does not undermine the identity-fluidity paradigm. There may be a normative dissociative component of flow that includes feeling the body as something other. This hypothesis would be consistent with Thomson and Jacque's research that found that only pathological dissociation was an inhibitor of flow (2012).
Perhaps, then, when someone uses identity fluidity to transcend the body, she is approaching a more extreme dissociation toward emotional detachment, fragmenting, and more generally pathological dissociation. Again, by “pathological” the researcher is referring to the continuum model of dissociation (Butler, 2006) where PD is a more extreme occurrence of ND.

In summary: (H2_A) expressing the body and transcending the body map onto the identity fluidity continuum as opposite extremes. (H2_B) Expressing the body relates to emotional integration, whereas (H2_C) the desire to transcend the body relates to emotional detachment. Finally, (H2_D) there is a relationship between one's interaction with the body and one's interaction with her emotions (in general).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mind-Body Dichotomy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Flow as Body Expression</strong></td>
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<td>DFS-tot</td>
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<td>DES-tot</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDS-num</td>
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<td>MDI-emc</td>
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Table 2: Quantitative comparison of flow as body expression vs. flow as body transcendence

**Theme 3: The Ego and Flow**

Another dominant theme across the qualitative data describes a tension between what participants called the ego in relation to flow states. The ego is self-interested, judgmental, and constantly comparing itself to others. Flow is defined by the disappearance of this ego. Group 1 (participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7) make specific mention of this ego-self, whereas group 2 (participants 5 and 6) does not. Though group 2 may also describe flow as a cessation of judgment and evaluation, group 1 specifically
personifies these qualities as a separate self. Some participants in group 1 say this tension arises when transitioning in or out of flow. Participant 1, for example, explains:

There's a moment when you come back [out of flow], it's kind of like “what did I just do? Was it actually ok? Was it cool? But it felt great but...” ...You know 'cause then now our consciousness is coming– or like our mind and our ego comes back with like, “Well did it look good?” I guess that's what's part of nerve-wrecking in a sense... “Well was it cool? You know did it look good?... “Did it,” you know, “did people appreciate it?” You know so I guess that's the part that's kind of nerve-wrecking to me.

The ego is not only concerned with other's perspective of oneself. It is also in tension with the self that is in flow:

[The ego's] voice is like banging on the door [when one is in flow] like. “ah nah I don't feel comfortable... something's wrong. Let me get back to judging let me get back to,” you know... “what did somebody think about it?” For me that's the voice, a.k.a. the ego, you know what I mean? So I feel in a sense when flow happens that's, like, that's oneself. That's the true, that's your true self, your true consciousness...

For participant 1, then, this ego is essentially uncomfortable with flow and desires to return to normal judgmental habits.

Participant 4 also describes a similar tension between this ego self and flow self when emerging from flow.

You come back [from flow]... looking at people's faces... we look a people's faces and socially try to figure out what they are thinking... “Did they think
it was good?” You know it's those judgments again. And that transition is probably the worst... it's even worse, if people are looking at you in amazement because you feel, you feel like, “Well I wasn't there. Should I be proud of that? I wasn't creating that.” Like, “is that... even something to be proud about?” And then you feel icky 'cause that's a really sacred space that you just opened up.

Here, again, the participant feels that there is a tension between the self that emerges from flow with the space of flow itself. Even to attribute agency within flow to the self which emerges from flow is to sully flow. It is not some particular feeling or thought post-flow that makes participant 4 feel “icky.” Any attribution of flow to the “I” undermines the experience. The “I” by nature seems in conflict with flow.

Participant 2 shares this same feeling of attribution of flow to the “I” as dirting the experience. She explains, “In the moments... of flow... I’m not thinking of it a–, as, I am having this pleasurable experience because I–, as soon as I do, it feels dirty and I’m like 'oh, I’m out of it.'” Participant 2 also describes a tension when transitioning into flow as well. She recounts moments of awkwardness before entering flow when asked by her friend's band to be the first person on the dance floor to entice others to join.

So sometimes she [my friend] goes, “Oh, I want you, I want you to come out and be the dance captain and get get people dancing.” I would notice the process of, “Okay, I gotta be the first one out there dancing. It’s gonna feel awkward really quick,” ...and then, I get out there dancing, and there’s been times where like, nobody’s out there for a little while. But, the more I keep dancing, the less and less I care... something where just like my mind
is completely affected and you just, abandon all outside, inside judgments...

it just feels good. And that dominates.

While participant 2 discusses “feeling awkward” before entering flow, it is not clear however that this awkwardness is a product of tension between the ego and flow state, as she described when exiting flow. As aforementioned, even group 2 may describe a withdrawing in judgment in flow, which is not the same as tension with the ego.

Participant 7, on the other hand, makes a more explicit reference to ego tension when entering flow. Like participant 1, she describes the tension as a type of doubting voice. However, in her case, the doubt concerns entering the flow state, rather than questioning it post facto. Participant 7 describes the initial hesitation that may occur just before entering flow.

It’s a slight moment of ... “I can really go for it... Oh wait no, I, I don’t wanna be free, I don’t wanna be free. ... I’m a go for it, and surrender, and let it, take me completely,” or, “I’m a go for it and try to control it.” And the scary part comes in if instead of letting it take you completely... you tryin’ to control it... I saw how if, if I didn’t surrender, it would’ve been...

This description of entering flow shows more markedly the tension between the self that wants to control flow and the desire to surrender. The ego's resistance to surrendering creates hesitanty and even fear.

Participant 3 is unique in group 1 in that she identifies the tension with the ego as occurring within flow, rather than entering or emerging from flow. Specifically, she mentions the ego's resurgence in the tendency to compare oneself to others. “You’re dancing... And then that whole judgment thing… 'oh hey hey remember, that guy is better
than you are.' Like like 'let's evaluate now.' And you think... 'I’m pretty good… maybe he’s not better than me, like I thought.'” She goes on to describe how this judgmental self seeks to usurp the joy of flow. “That self kind of try, try [sic] to take that experience of joy, that experience of flow, and tries to like use it for its own benefit... tries to manipulate it to, to create another level of judgment.” For participant 3, the tension arises when the ego attempts to co-opt the feeling of joy in order to bolster itself. In fact, the main function of this ego is to destroy the joy of flow. “I mean the the only job of the other self, is to destroy this joy.” Not only is there tension between flow and the ego, the ego is defined by its effort to tear down the joy of flow in order to reassert itself.

Participant 6, part of group 2, also describes a type of evaluation that can arise during flow, threatening to undermine it. She describes an experience improvising where a thought to incorporate a certain movement disrupted her flow experience.

I feel like I got outta flow state almost just because I wanted to incorporate that [move]... and my head was saying, “we have to incorporate this,” so I did it and then when I rolled up out of it I feel like I got back into it [flow] because, uh, my brain was no longer saying, like, “Do this!” It was, like, from then on do whatever you want.

Although this description is similar to participant 3’s in terms of there being some agency disturbing the flow state, it is different in a few ways which illustrate well the difference between group 1 and 2. Though the “head” is personified in participant 6’s description, it is not described as being its own distinct self. The “head” may have a wish to incorporate a move, but it is not described as a self-aware agent that is self-interested in perpetuating its presence. For all the participants in group 1, the entity in conflict with flow is self-
cognizant and its tension with flow in some way lies in recognition of itself in relation to
flow. Whether wondering how people appear to others, comparing someone's skill level
to others, taking credit for the product of flow, etc., some element of being self-conscious
is involved in the tension. For participant 6, the “head” is not concerned about itself per
se; it just has a desire to interject a pre-meditated movement.

Furthermore, in group 1, it is the nature of the agent, not some desire held by that
agent, that conflicts with flow, creating tension. It is the essence of the ego to resist flow.
For participant 6, the “head” is not by essence in conflict with flow, only in that it has a
desire that happens to interfere with flow. This distinction is further illustrated by the fact
that once the desire of the head has been fulfilled, the conflict dissipates. It thereafter
gives permission to let the dancer “do whatever you want” and enter back into flow.

Participant 5 shows the least degree of tension between flow state and some other
cognitive process, be it pre-meditation (like participant 6) or the ego (group 1). The only
variance in flow for participant 5 involves the degree to which the flow-er is consciously
enjoying the experience. Less deep flow is “half and half” being aware of the enjoyment
of flow and being in flow, while deep flow is a complete loss of self-awareness. However,
even in this less deep flow there is no tension between the mind and flow. She also
describes the transition of entering flow, but makes no mention of the hesitation or
tension described in group 1. She recounts her process just before a performance:

I was thinking about me perform—, I was thinking about me not messing up
like all these different things and then my muscle kinda just kick [sic] in
and I shut of my brain and I just flowed. You know that's, I think that's
another flow like how you can describe it when your brain just shuts off and
your body just moves you don’t think about it.

For participant 5, then, there is no tension in the transition between flow and non-flow states either. It almost turns on like a light switch and is immediate. It is not surprising, therefore, that participant 5 had the highest overall score of dispositional flow among all participants. She seems to have the least obstructions to flow as marked by the ease of transition into flow.

There were two discernible divides, both median splits, between groups 1 and 2 on sub-scales of the DFS2: transformation of time (tt) and autotelic experience (ae). Group 2 scored higher on each of these sub-scales: on the DFS2-tt, group 1 scored 4.00, 3.50, 3.00, 2.25, and 1.75, whereas group 2 scored 4.50 and 4.50. Although transformation of time may not prima facie seem to correlate with the theme of tension with the ego, through the lens of identity fluidity, it may. The research of Karl Pribram suggests a connection between self-narration and perceived temporality. The fronto-limbic system is responsible for both episodic memory and thereby a sense of time, for without such memory there is no basis from which to quantify its passing (as cited in Gallagher, 2000). Episodic memory is also necessary in the construction of self-narrative, for those without it also lack a sense of time, and thus cannot construct linear narration (Gallagher, 2000). Self-narration specifically will be discussed in the next theme, but the tension between the ego and flow can also be seen as a type of inner dialogue. Several of the participants in fact describe the tension as a type of conversation. Participant 1 calls it a voice. Participant 7 actually describes the internal debate around the desire to be free. Participant 3 also describes the resurgence of the ego in flow as a voice bettering oneself over others.
If tension with the ego relates to self-narration, and narration with a sense of time, it isn't surprising then that those in group 2 without this tension had greater occurrences of transformation of time than those in group 1. Perhaps the narrative tension with the ego helps to maintain a normal sense of time, thereby inhibiting experiences of transformation of time. Again, these differences can be explained on the identity fluidity continuum. Those on the side of identity integration are not in tension with their ego. Thus there is a lack of self-narration, between dissociated parts of the self, and transformation of time can occur. Those who are on the more pathological dissociative side of the continuum may be fragmented between the self that desires flow and the ego. When this fragmentation exists, a narrative may function between them, thereby upholding the perceived passage of time.

If lack of narration involves higher integration, one may hypothesize that those in group 2 also had higher levels of merging action awareness (maa). From the literature review, maa related to merging with objects of focus. If one has less internal narration, it seems that maa would be more accessible. Group 2 did not, however have noticeably higher scores on the DFS2-maa (group 1: 4.50, 3.75, 3.75, 3.50, and 3.25 vs. group 2: 4.25 and 4.00).

Again, this discrepancy itself can be described in light of identity fluidity. While maa may correlate to integration with an object of focus, amelioration of the tension with the ego is integration with a dissociated component of one's own mind. It may be that integration with an object of focus is therefore independent from internal integration. The more integrated one is overall, the higher along the identity fluidity continuum she is toward integration, but that does not necessitate that internal integration must preceded
external integration. Thomson and Jacque suggest, for example, that normative
dissociation and flow may be able to co-exist as mental processes (Thomson & Jacque,
2012). If one considers flow and dissociation as forms of integration and fragmentation –
fragmentation again referring to a separation of mental processes – perhaps, then, some
sets of mental processes may be integrated with each other, but, as a set, still fragmented
from others. What creates overall integration or dissociation is not where the borders are
drawn, but their size. It is possible, perhaps, to merge subject and object while
dissociating from parts of one's own mind. Thus, both group 1 and 2 have comparable
scores on the DFS2-maa even though they differ on the DFS2-tt.

Finally, it is of note that one of the most apparent separators between these groups
involved the DFS2 sub-scale on autotelic experience (ae) (group 1: 4.50, 4.50, 4.00, 3.75,
and 3.75 vs. group 2: 5.00 and 4.75). The DFS2-ae, in the context of dispositional flow,
describes a personality trait that is able to engage in actions for an end in themselves,
rather than always being externally motivated by the outcome of one's actions (Ross &
Keiser, 2014). On the description of the participants, the ego self may be defined as the
antithesis of autotelic motivation. As participant 3 explained, the ego functions to co-opt
joy toward the end of bolstering itself. It takes what is intrinsically motivating and uses it
as a means to supplant others. Perhaps in those participants where this tension is absent, it
is easier to enter flow for its own sake because there is no ego present attempting to usurp
its benefits. One can see where this may correlate to notions of time. The ego in tension
with the self exists in time and so is pre-occupied with its future. The integrated self lacks
the internal narration with the ego and so remains present, not future oriented, and able to
engage in autotelic action.
If one examines this phenomenon from the point of view of identity fluidity, perhaps the fragmented self shows tension between its fragments, causing internal narration, creating a sense of time, and being motivated by future outcomes. Perhaps this internal strife within the fragmented self creates the displeasure that makes outcomes a primary concern. Because one is besought with conflicting desires, the need to negotiate among these agents becomes necessary. In a group, if each member did what it saw as an end in itself, cooperation would be difficult. To work as a unit, there must be a shared *telos* among the group, which is of overriding benefit to the autotelic benefit of the individual in the moment.

In game theory, this problem is best described by the stag hunt. In this scenario, each member of a group of hunters must forgo the immediate reward of catching a hare in order for the larger pay off of catching a stag, which requires group effort (Barss, 2001). Likewise, the fragmented self, like a conflicted group, may not be able to function autotelic-ly because the autotelic desires of each faction are in conflict with each other. Thus, one must plan and organize in order to appease each conflicting desire by the promise of a shared outcome in order to get the group to organize. Again, in participant 3’s description, one can see this type of negotiation at work. One self desires to dance for the feeling of joy, while the ego self desires to dance for the satisfaction of feeling superior to others. Perhaps the more either self feels its needs are threatened by the other, the more need to organize these needs becomes necessary, and the less that autotelic experience becomes possible. It may be that a fragmented self therefore struggles to achieve autotelic motivation because it must constantly micromanage it's internal constituents, where an integrated self does not have this impediment.
In summary: (H3a) the lack of the ego's resistance to flow and the presence of this resistance map onto the identity fluidity continuum as opposite extremes. (H3b) The absence of this resistance relates to higher transformation of time in flow and autotelic personality, whereas, (H3c) the ego's resistance to flow relates to lower occurrences of both transformation of time and autotelic personality. Finally, (H3d) autotelic tendencies are inhibited in a fragmented self due to conflicting desires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Ego's Resistance to Flow</th>
<th>Group 1: Ego Resistance</th>
<th>Group 2: No Tension</th>
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<td>Participants 5, 6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>DFS-tot</td>
<td>4.08, 3.78, 3.78, 3.75, 3.11</td>
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<td>44.29, 11.43</td>
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<td>4.50, 4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFS-ae</td>
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<td>5.00, 4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFS-maa</td>
<td>4.50, 3.75, 3.75, 3.50, 3.25</td>
<td>4.25, 4.00</td>
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Table 3: Quantitative comparison of ego resistance in flow vs. no ego tension in flow

**Theme 4: The inner Monologue and Flow**

This theme is an expansion of, though distinct from, the discussion of self-narration found in the previous theme. While the previous discussion on self-narration was specifically focused on dialogue between the ego and the self, this theme examines inner vocalization not necessarily in the context of tension or dialogue, but more generally as a monologue. All participants describe some type of cessation of inner monologue during flow. However, while some participants (1, 5, and 6) say that this voice disappears entirely in flow (group 1), others (2, 3, and 4) describe it as diminished, but not gone completely (group 2). Participant 7, however, equivocates whether the voice is partially present or entirely gone.
Participant 2 reports that the voice is completely absent in flow. “To me there is no voice at that moment [in flow]. There is no voice... there is nothing.” Although participant 2 discussed tension with this voice in the previous theme when exiting flow, during flow, the voice is gone entirely. Participant 5 gives similar sentiments. “I actually don’t hear myself in dance. I just hear the music.. I’ll just do the movements... I don’t have any voices with it.” For participant 5, inner monologue is actually a rare occurrence in general, whether in flow or not. When asked when she does hear an internal monologue, she responded, “Maybe if I’m being frustrated or if I’m not grasping something... so yeah maybe like sometimes I’ll come into it [the voice] then i’ll jump back out.” Again, participant 5 is describing her general state of being here. In flow, there is no voice whatsoever.

Participant 6 also says that inner vocalization is absent during flow:

R: The inner monologue shuts off completely, or the body just doesn’t listen to it, or its just not there?

6: ...from the parts that I remember while I was dancing... it wasn’t like I was saying, “Body do this,” and my body wasn't’ listening. It was just like I'm just gonna let me do me you know?... talking to someone most of the time... I’ll be thinking of what i’m gonna say before they ask the question... I guess that’s fine but that sense of not having to listen to yourself all the time [in flow] is really nice.

Participant 6, like others in group 1, therefore also defines flow as an absence of any internal voice. In contrast to participant 5, however, who said that she rarely has such a
voice, for participant 6, this internal monologue is always present except in flow. Flow offers a reprieve from the internal monologue, which is otherwise constant.

Group 2, however, while recognizing that the internal monologue diminishes in flow, do not say that it is completely absent. In the previous theme, participant 3 was identified as having a voice or ego that would often interrupt her flow, a “force” that would try to pull her out of it. She also speaks elsewhere of the intermittent presence of this voice during flow.

[In flow] I wasn’t aware of my normal, like, chatter you know... my normal way of relating to the world... if it’s like a prolonged period of time, maybe you kinda check in but that’s kind of when the flows interrupted, in a way. It may sound here that participant 3 is more appropriately in group 1, describing flow as “not being aware” of her normal “chatter.” However, she does admit the resurgence of this voice and how it interrupts flow. This is categorically different than group 1 in that she is attributing the return of the voice as throwing her out of flow rather than flow subsiding and the voice returning. It is as if the voice is not completely dormant and returns before flow has ended. Later in the interview, she actually includes the presence of this voice as something that works against but does not destroy flow:

And we could say when that sense of self [the ego narrative] shows up... are you in flow then? You know? I I guess in in a way you’re you’re still there but there is this like... there is this thing try to pull you down.

For participant 3, then, the voice makes an appearance during flow but does not negate it entirely.
Participant 4 also recognizes a diminishing of internal narration during flow. “Day dreaming [like flow]... it's an absence of your forefront consciousness that kind of narrates everything that's happening.” However, she, like participant 3, says that this voice intermittently returns even when in flow. “I mean what I said is during flow there is... those in between times where it's the narrative. And that might be frustrating... but it comes in and out.” Again, also like participant 3, the re-emergence of internal vocalization is an impediment to flow that's undesirable.

Participant 2 is unique from the others in her group in her characterization of the narration that arises during flow. While participants 3 and 4 see the narration as undesirable, participant 2 is not pejorative of narration and sees it as a natural component to flow. When asked about whether an inner monologue is present for her during flow, she responded:

Inner monologue... I think yes, but it’s more just noticing. Or sometimes images come up... I’ll be noticing I’m doing, repeating a certain movement over and over, and then it creates some sort of image or picture, and then that creates a narrative and you're like, “wow, that’s interesting there’s a narrative.” But not an inner monologue of like, again the, “why are you doing this?”... like, “that’s not good,” “ooh that’s really really good.” For participant 2, narration can be a positive or negative quality of flow depending on its content. If noticing, it is pleasant, but if judgmental, harmful.

Participant 2 also helps to distinguish this theme from the previous theme of ego resistance. While participants 3 and 4 describe the voice as in conflict with flow, participant 2 sees no direct incompatibility with internal narration and flow per se.
Although participant 2 was in the ego tension group in the previous theme, this tension is not the product of inner vocalization per se. Inner-monologuing and ego resistance do not necessarily supervene. It seems that narration comprises its own dimension, even though it can often be conflated with the ego.

Participant 7 had mixed descriptions of flow as both some presence of narration and the absence of narration. When the researcher first asks if flow is present at all during flow, participant 7 responds, “It’s there in some form, but it’s it’s, but it’s how you’re relating to it.” Later, when the researcher asked participant 7 to elaborate on what happens to the inner monologue during flow, she responds “It [the inner monologue] drops away.” She makes an analogy to dinning furniture, saying that trying to hold on to the inner monologue during flow would be like trying “to give away this dining table [and four chairs], but I’m only going to give away three chairs, and the table.” On this second description, therefore, it seems necessary to give up the inner monologue in order to enter flow. In the qualitative assessment, it therefore was unclear to the researcher whether participant 7 felt that internal voicing is definitively or partially absent in flow. For this reason, she was not placed in either group.

Interestingly, when looking at each group in relation to the quantitative data, there was a median split for scores on the loss of self-consciousness sub-scale (lsc) of the DFS2. Group 1, who reported partial narration in flow, had lower scores on the DFS2-lsc (3.50, 3.25, and 3.00) than group 2 (3.75, 3.75, and 3.50). Again, under the paradigm of identity fluidity, one can see a possible relationship between a lack of narration and increased loss of self-consciousness. Jerome Bruner, for example, argues that it is inner narration which gives rise to a sense of self (1997). Although his point more specifically
describes how a sense of self evolves through a personal history, perhaps this narration also sustains self-concept in the moment, such that without narration, a sense of self would dissipate.

Miller, Fung, and Mintz say for example that language "is the means by which selves are created and transformed through the dual capacity of language to be both reflective of and embedded in interpersonal experience" (1996, p. 238). Perhaps if it is self-reflective language that creates the self, an experience of lack of self, or loss of self-consciousness, is experienced when self-reflective language is absent. Thus, participants who have a greater absence of inner monologue in flow may experience a greater loss of self-consciousness when in a flow state in comparison to those for whom this narrative partially remains.

The degree to which someone internally narrates can perhaps be mapped onto the identity fluidity continuum. The greater the degree of narration, perhaps the higher the amount of self-consciousness. If the identity fluidity construct does explain flow and dissociation as opposite extremes, it may be that increased self-consciousness tends toward dissociation. While in the extreme dissociation is described as seeing parts of oneself as wholly other (Rafieian & Hosier, 2011), a less severe precursor to fragmentation on the identity fluidity continuum may be self-consciousness. In this sense, it may be the more one is self-conscious, the greater the division between the perceiving self and the self of which it is self-conscious. Language and narration make make self-consciousness and this division possible. It is self-reflective language that gives rise to the self of which one can be self-conscious (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996). Perhaps those who can silence narration reduce self-consciousness, reduce this division within the self,
and thus tend closer toward integration. Thus, the relationship between self-narration and self-consciousness may make sense when contrived on the identity fluidity continuum. Both may be manifestations of changing borders of self.

In summary: (H4_a) infrequent inner monologuing and excessive inner monologuing map onto the identity fluidity continuum as opposite extremes. (H4_b) Infrequent inner monologuing correlates to increased loss of self-consciousness in flow, whereas (H4_c) excessive inner monologuing relates to less loss of self-consciousness in flow. Finally, (H4_d) inner monologue and narration is an active process in the creation of self in the moment, without which the sense of self is lost.

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<tr>
<th>Inner Monologue and Flow</th>
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<td><strong>Group 1: Partial Narration in Flow</strong></td>
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<td>DFS-tot</td>
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<td>DFS-lsc</td>
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Table 4: Quantitative comparison of partial narration in flow vs. no narration in flow

**Theme 5: Flow as an Interpersonal Phenomenon**

While the preceding themes have all focused on flow as an individual phenomenon, an important emerging theme from the qualitative data suggests that other people are an important factor in one's flow experience. All participants described that flow was somehow modulated by or included those who surrounded the individual in flow. Participant 2, for example, says the environment can maintain a flow state so that dropping out of flow becomes difficult. She described attending a music performance and the environment putting her into a flow state. “The air thickened and... I was just witnessing all of these other people in the flow as well... the way that they were moving
their bodies and, just, just in it... it felt, unshakeable.” When asked what was it about seeing others in flow that maintained the flow state for her, she explained:

I don’t know... I think of it as like somebody filled the whole room up with honey and no matter what I did, I was still gonna be surrounded by honey. You know... when I talk about like the thickness of the air... it was like, yea, somebody just poured honey in the room, and I would have to, like, walk out of the room, or someone would... have to take a hose and go “shhhhhshsh” [in order to get out of flow]... it just felt that strong.

For participant 2, flow is not just the product of internal factors; the environment itself can induce flow.

Participant 3 agrees that flow is not only more easily accessible in a conducive environment, but the environment itself can be an impetus for flow. She described dancing at one of her favorite venues:

It’s a legendary like place... it gets insanely packed... with dancers of really high, you know, capability and caliber... the reason people resonate with that, is because in there, I mean, comparison is so useless there because, first of all there’s just so amazing dancers, you just gonna like get really tired [of comparing]... in the beginning you come in there and you’re like all self-conscious maybe... you’re gonna be here for a few hours, so... your mind just gives up... you just get overwhelmed with trying to compare... All the positive things that you see that you would normally compare, eventually it just starts feeding into your own joy... [the] material that you
were using to create your kind of insecurity now starts feeding your own joy.

This analysis of how an environment can create flow state is reminiscent of participant 1’s description of how mental and physical exhaustion can induce flow. For reference:

[After] two, three hours, the body is becoming a little tired. So now it's becoming an outer body experience... the body is tired your mind is telling you keep going keep going keep going. You might feel like your mind is tired and now it's just straight energy that's just moving you and I feel like, that's when flow is happening. It's when the body is done, the mind is fried because your are just trying to be pushing pushing.

If flow can be the product of mental exhaustion, such that the cognitive processes that inhibit flow are themselves inhibited, it makes sense that an environment which exhausts these systems would induce flow. Rather than try to subdue judgmental tendencies, the environment that participant 3 describes exploits them to the point where they are depleted, making flow available.

While the environment not only makes the experience of flow possible, some participants even argue that other people make even the recognition of flow possible. Participant 1 describes flow as not just individual, but a shared experience:

Maybe sometimes flow is naturally... happening, when I don't really expect it. Because... as a dancer, we're always dancing... so flow in a sense could happen. Flow might be experiencing it with somebody else... somebody saw me and they were in a constant, awe like, “Oh my god.”... I think that's a moment of flow with somebody else... And it's even more amazing if
you're at that flow moment, that person is experiencing the flow moment, if then there's a connection that is not really being talked about, or described. A feeling of, of energy, you know one energy['s] sense of the other['s] energy... so I feel like it's good for, for you as a person, and I feel like it's good, all around, 'cause I think it just creates more of a positive response.

So participant 1's analysis of flow in relation to another is two fold. First, flow is not just an isolated experience for the dancer, but also for the dancer's audience, manifest in the feelings of awe or amazement. Secondly, this flow is not isolated to either dancer or witness, but is a shared connection. The connection helps each member recognize the flow state within herself. As participant 1 said, flow may naturally be happening for the dancer, but it is only recognized in “one energy['s] sense of the other energy.” This connection is what she calls “a connection of a flow with two people.”

Participant 4 also expresses the importance of flow in inspiring others. “When the audience is like-- nodding their heads... taking deep breaths, that's awesome. Because you, you got into their heart, and you did something to their inner being with them, with them witnessing you.” Not only is this connection important, but it appears to be an important condition in generating flow. Improvising on stage, for her, constitutes “a loss of the boundaries” between herself and the audience. As a result, she says, “every time I've improv[is]ed on stage, I've definitely gone into flow state.”

Participant 7 also describes flow as a transpersonal experience. Describing flow, she says:

It’s not something that you hold on... it’s not something that’s yours. It’s not something that, I, I, I go, “I'm having this moment of liberation, I’m having
this moment of freedom. It’s mine.” But because it is a moment of freedom, a moment of liberation, it extends out. It’s something to be shared... the liberation commands that the experience connects you with others.

So for participant 7, it is not only possible to have a shared flow experience, but flow is in fact defined by a connection with others. The liberation of flow “commands” one to connect with others.

Participants 5 and 6 also discuss the influence of others on one's flow state, although from a different angle. While the previous participants discuss how the environment can aid flow, participants 5 and 6 discuss how others can hinder one's own flow. Participant 6 likens flow to a dream. When asked if flow could ever be a nightmare, she explains:

In a really bad situation I guess it could be a nightmare. If I was told to dance in a room of people that wanted to beat me, then maybe.. but I felt like in a comfortable space... like with people around that aren’t gonna like judge you, it’s just a nice feeling, letting go.

Participant 6 thus also alludes to the importance of a supportive environment in flow states. A threatening environment can turn the experience of “letting go” into something frightening, but in a non-judgmental environment, this experience is pleasant.

Participant 5 describes pressure as an inhibitor of flow. She says, “If I’m at an audition for class, then I'm on top of everything and I’m not usually in a flow state... if the pressure's more on me... I’m not going [to] be like the total... you know, flow state.” Like participant 6, the presence of judgment from others in an audition setting makes
flow less accessible. However, pressure is not necessarily a flow inhibitor for everyone. Expanding participant 4's earlier quote, “Every time I've improv[is]ed on stage, I've definitely gone into flow state. Because the pressure is, so great, it's so great to lose, yourself.” For participant 4, then, pressure is actually a flow inducer rather than inhibitor. These differing views of pressure can be understood within Csikszentmihalyi's component of flow deemed challenge-skill balance (Jackson & Eklund, 2002). For participant 4, external pressure matches her skill as an improviser and is conducive to flow states. For participant 5, external pressure may exceed her skill as a dancer, either because she is more sensitive to it or has not developed the necessary skill to match it, and so it is an inhibitor of flow.

In a broader sense, however, identity fluidity offers a more general explanation of how relations with others affects flow states, beyond their creation of challenge for the dancer. Again, referring to Miller, Fung, and Mintz, the creation of self is the result of “interpersonal experience” (1996, p. 238). Jerome Bruner, again, agrees that relation with others is definitive in self-formation, “I think most would agree that the Self is indeed constructed through interaction with the world rather than being just there immutably” (1997, p. 146). If self-conception is generated in relation to others and flow constitutes a change in sense of self, it is not surprising that interpersonal dynamics would affect flow.

Morrison and Wheeler's research also lend credibility to this relationship between the social environment and self-concept. They found that the degree to which someone feels that have a minority opinion, the greater the clarity of her self-concept (2010). In other words, feeling distinct from others reinforces self-concept. In the context of flow,
the transpersonal nature of flow may make dancers feel more unified with others, thus blurring the distinction between self and other, thereby inducing flow.

While identity fluidity has thus far been considered as integration within the individual or her perception, the analysis of flow as transpersonal shows that integration may be possible on the level of groups as well. On this understanding, flow is not only an integration within oneself, but among others. Thus the range of the identity fluidity construct is not limited to the extremes of self fragmentation and self integration. The range is broader, extending on the side of integration to group integration, so that one identifies with a group as opposed to an individual.

In summary: (H5\textsubscript{A}) feeling united with a group (integration) and feeling the minority in a group (fragmentation) map onto the identity fluidity continuum as opposite extremes. Also, (H5\textsubscript{B}) relationships with others inform where an individual may lie on the identity fluidity continuum.
Section 6: Limitations

An obvious limitation of this study is that nothing conclusive can be drawn from it. While hypotheses were not generated solely from conjecture, they are limited to one researcher's interpretation. Because identity fluidity is novel, the lack of differing viewpoints on it as a construct makes this paper vulnerable to bias or misinterpretation. Such, however, is the nature of any research introducing a new paradigm. This fact does not disparage the discussions herein. The first step of science is to generate plausible hypotheses, else much time would be wasted in testing hypotheses of which there is not even a suspicion that they are accurate.

Another limitation concerns the participant pool. Though highly diverse in other areas, four of the seven participants, like the researcher, were also practicing Buddhists. The Buddhist conception of the illusory nature of self is central to its soteriologic aim (Hopkins, 1996). Because understanding the self is a core concern in Buddhism, these participants may have articulated their understanding of flow in terms of the nature of self. Some of the proposed connections between flow and identity fluidity, therefore, may be the product of how these participants articulate flow rather than the nature of flow proper.
Section 7: Conclusion

Although the hypotheses proposed in this study are myriad and diverse, they are not unrelated. They serve to illustrate that if identity fluidity is in fact a salient construct, its explanatory power is far reaching. For reference, all hypotheses based on the analysis are in Table 5 in the proceeding page. These hypotheses show the potential of identity fluidity to offer not only a unified theory of flow and dissociation, but other psychological phenomena as well, including, but not limited to: approach and avoidance patterns, embodiment, self-conception, internal monologuing, and group dynamics.

Identity fluidity may not only have explanatory power, but therapeutic uses as well. If identity fluidity is found to be a true psychological domain that relates to dissociation and flow, in dancers in particular, therapies may be possible to help convert a tendency for painful dissociative experiences into a regular enjoyment of flow. Just as reversal theory provides a way to reinterpret the precursors for nervousness as excitement (Kerr, 1987), identity fluidity may also provide a method for sufferers of dissociation to turn a debilitation into an asset.

Testing the validity of these hypotheses in future research would need to proceed in 3 broad steps, (1) operationalizing identity fluidity, (2) developing quantitative measures of its operationalized definition, and (3) creating studies to compare quantified measures of identity fluidity against other such measures of phenomena to which identity fluidity is hypothesized to be related herein. A next step, albeit no small task, would be to develop an instrument with good test re-test reliability that measured identity fluidity. One would have to research if there are other, similar psychological phenomena discussed in the literature with quantitative instruments against which this novel
instrument could be validated. Developing such an instrument would be a worthwhile step if identity fluidity does indeed hold the potential proposed in this study.

There has also been a lot of quality research around the relevance of identity formation to happiness and healthy mental development (Smits, Lens, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2010; Duriez, Luyckx, Soenens, & Berzonsky, 2012; Hardy et al., 2013). Identity fluidity may offer new insights to this body of literature. Identity formation is commonly discussed as a static phenomenon which is the result of developmental processes (Smits, Lens, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2010; Duriez, Luyckx, Soenens, & Berzonsky, 2012; Bruner, 1997). Identity fluidity may show that personal identity is the result of ongoing processes and is in constant flux. Furthermore, a preliminary search of the literature by the researcher found no articles on identity formation in relation to flow specifically. The discussion herein might also offer a connection between two psychological phenomena that have otherwise been disparate.
### Developed Hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Related Theme</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
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| General                                | H1: Both flow-ers and dissociators share trait identity fluidity (IF)  
H2: IF can manifest both as dissociative tendencies in flow-ers as well as integrative tendencies in dissociators. |
| Theme 1: Flow as Avoidance             | H1A: Emotional avoidance and integration map onto the IF continuum as opposite extremes.  
H1B: IF may permit fragmentation and avoidance of negative emotions.  
H1C: IF may permit integration with negative emotions.  
H1D: Avoidance, but not numbing, relates to IF. |
| Theme 2: The Mind-Body Dichotomy       | H2A: Expressing the body and transcending the body map onto the IF continuum as opposite extremes.  
H2B: Expressing the body correlates with emotional integration.  
H2C: The desire to transcend the body correlates with emotional detachment.  
H2D: There is a correlation between one's relationship to the body and to one's relationship to her emotions. |
| Theme 3: The Ego and Flow              | H3A: The lack of the ego's resistance to flow and the presence of this resistance map onto the IF continuum as opposite extremes.  
H3B: The absence of this resistance correlates with higher transformation of time in flow and autotelic personality.  
H3C: The ego's resistance to flow correlates with lower occurrences of both transformation of time and autotelic personality.  
H3D: Autotelic tendencies are inhibited in a fragmented self due to conflicting desires. |
| Theme 4: Inner Monologue and Flow      | H4A: Infrequent inner monologuing and excessive inner monologuing map onto the IF continuum as opposite extremes.  
H4B: Infrequent inner monologuing correlates to increased loss of self-consciousness in flow.  
H4C: Excessive inner monologuing correlates to less loss of self-consciousness in flow.  
H4D: Inner monologue and narration is an active process in the creation of self in the moment. |
| Theme 5: Flow as an Interpersonal Phenomenon | H5A: Feeling united with a group and feeling the minority in a group map onto the IF continuum as opposite extremes.  
H5B: Relationships with others inform where an individual may lie on the IF continuum. |

Table 5: All hypotheses generated in the study through the analysis
References


