

Lessons from exploring optimal experiences: how reversal theory could change occupational therapy practice.

Jonathan Wright¹, Sharon Wright², Gaynor Sadlo¹, Graham Stew¹

¹University of Brighton, Sussex, United Kingdom, ²NHS Community Health Services East Sussex, Sussex, United Kingdom

Introduction

Flow, or optimal experience, has been of interest to occupational therapists for years. Three phases of research have examined the process of flow. Participants in phases 1 and 2 reported a variety of experiences that led to the conclusion that there was a flow conundrum. The third phase of the research that examined the flow channel will be presented highlighting the importance of reversal theory to occupational therapy.

Objectives

To explore the processes of flow at with participants who had different skill levels.

Methods

The flow experiences of 6 guitarists: two experts, two intermediates and two novices, were examined. Participants were interviewed approximately one week after having completed a two-week journal of flow experiences. Becker's (1992, p.32) empirical phenomenological method was chosen requiring researchers to ask people to describe life events and then use these descriptions to understand the general structure or nature of a phenomenon.

Results

Participants reported a variety of experiences that made the role of skill level in flow unclear. Reversal theory was used to clarify the different types of flow experience, because it was consistent with the findings from all three phases of research, which suggested that there was more than one type of optimal experience and that people move between states of consciousness (Apter, 2007). Participants' experiences included playing the guitar when enjoying the excitement of creating new music, relaxing after a stressful day, getting a particular sound to finish a song and communicating with God.

Conclusion

Flow has been poorly defined. More important than a challenge-skills balance in understanding the nature and process of optimal experiences are metamotivational states, levels of arousal and felt transactional outcomes.

Contribution

Examining flow process has led to consideration of the value of reversal theory to occupational therapy. Reversal theory explains the relationship between occupation, emotion, motivation and personality. The combination of metamotivational states determines the occupational form and meaning an occupation has and could influence the relationship between occupation and health. How reversal theory can inform and justify practice will be explained and future areas for research highlighted.