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Towards an Experiential Model of Occupational Balance: An Alternative Perspective on Flow Theory Analysis

Hans Jonsson & Dennis Persson

Abstract

The Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM) being elaborated within flow theory provides a unique opportunity to collect data about occupational experiences. Both four- and eight-channel models have been developed, to capture various dimensions of people's lived experience. However neither of these models seems suitable for analysis and discussion of balance within everyday life and its relationship to other factors such as well-being. The purpose of this study was to analyse balance of everyday occupations from a novel experiential viewpoint, using an alternative model in which the eight channels are condensed into three dimensions; High Matched Experiences, High Not Matched Experiences and Low Challenge Experiences. A secondary analysis of published data from four cross-cultural ESM-studies with a total of 159 participants from three countries was conducted. The results show a similar pattern in all samples, with Low Challenge Experiences comprising barely half of the pattern and the other two dimensions relatively evenly distributed. Analyses of three case examples indicate possible problems regarding balance conditions between the different dimensions. The analysis supports the condensed model as a framework to understand and analyse occupational balance and patterns from an experiential perspective. This dynamic model has the potential to explain the relationship between everyday dimensions of occupations as a health promoting balance as well as potentially dysfunctional patterns causing occupational deprivation or risk of overload and burnout.

Key Words

Everyday life
Experience Sampling Method
Optimal experience
Occupational deprivation

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When flow theory was introduced in the social psychology literature about 30 years ago (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a; 1975b), it served as a theoretical model for understanding optimal experiences in human behaviour. Flow theory was seen as an alternative to the predominant psychoanalytical explanations of that time, by focusing on the dynamic interaction between the person's skills and the challenge of an occupation. As such, it made an important contribution to understanding the complex relationship between human occupation, well-being and life satisfaction.

Together with the explication of flow theory, development of a methodology to assess flow experiences took place. While the invention of the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM) can not easily be credited to a single person or research program (Scollon, Kim-Prieto, & Diener, 2003), it is reasonable to say that its current form has evolved within the framework of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977). ESM was developed to make it possible to directly measure experiences in their natural settings, thus making it possible to systematically collect actual experiences of participation in occupation. The essence of the ESM-method is that individuals rate the amount of challenge (high-low) in the given occupation and the degree (high-low) to which that occupation requires their skills. By relating these two factors to each other, different categorisations of experiences can be made.

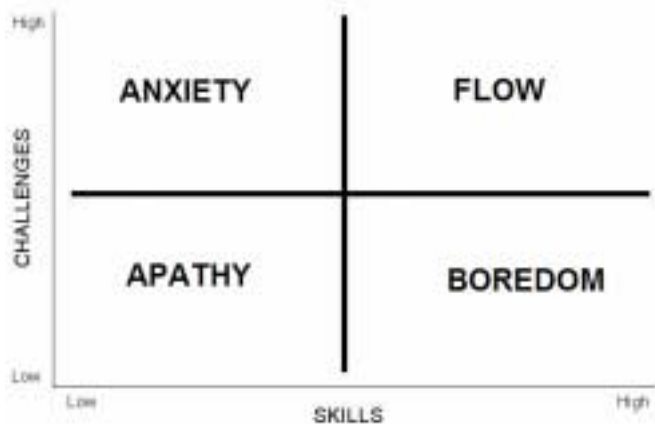
Over time, flow theory has become established and accepted in a variety of fields in the human sciences. Examples include creativity research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a; Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994) and the developing field of positive psychology and happiness research (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In occupational therapy literature, flow theory is frequently mentioned as an important therapeutic agent (Christiansen & Baum, 2004; Emerson,

1998; Neistadt & Crepeau, 1998; Wright, 2004) and research projects have been carried out using the concept of flow as the theoretical base (Gerhardsson & Jonsson, 1996; Jacobs, 1994; Kennedy & Vecitis, 2004; Persson, 1996; Persson, Eklund & Isacson, 1999). In occupational science, flow theory was identified as an important concept from the outset (Yerxa et al., 1990) and the use of ESM to collect flow experiences has been highlighted as methodologically important for developing knowledge in the science (Carlson & Clark, 1991; Farnworth, Mostert, Harrison & Worrell, 1996).

Flow, Health and Balance

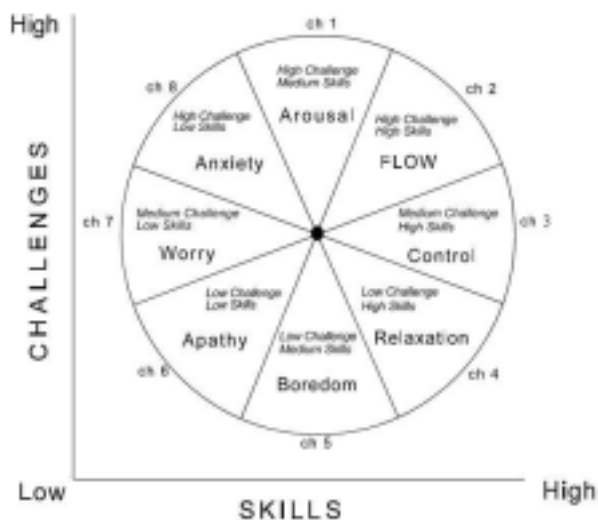
The concept of flow has contributed to knowledge of the dynamic relationship between health and occupation. In general, people seem to benefit from flow experiences to experience satisfaction in their occupational life. However it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between the distribution of flow experiences and satisfaction with one's occupational life is not linear, meaning that more flow does not always lead to more satisfaction. To a certain extent, a positive relationship between flow and satisfaction might be the case, but a breaking point would occur when skill demands are at the limit of one's capacities and become a heavy burden. This eventuality is not sufficiently addressed in the literature. Furthermore, the concepts used in the theory imply that flow is the only valuable experience in human occupation. This assumption is especially obvious in the four channel model developed to analyse human experience, which identifies only one 'positive' experience: flow, and three 'negative' experiences: boredom, apathy and anxiety (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Four-Channel Model for Analysis of ESM-Studies



Because of these limitations, and in order to capture qualities of experiences with greater richness, an eight-channel model was developed (F. Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & Carli, 1987). Four new channels were added: control, relaxation, worry and arousal (see Figure 2). This development highlighted flow as the most positive type of experience and points to the possibility of a dynamic relationship between the channels.

Figure 2. The Eight-Channel Model for Analysis of ESM-Studie



Although flow experiences seem to be one of the essentials for improving well-being, flow can sometimes be 'bad flow' when it shows signs of being addictive. For example, many people working with information technology at the beginning of the 1990s were so seduced by its novelty and possibilities that they became thoroughly absorbed by their experiences at the computer and only slept a few hours. In a short time, they developed symptoms of chronic fatigue, at that time known as the yuppie disease (Ware & Kleinman, 1992). Another questionable and addictive means of experiencing flow was presented in a study of Japanese motorcycle gangs who showed contempt for their own and others' death, by riding blindfolded against red traffic lights (Sato, 1988).

Thus, it seems that when individuals organise their consciousness to experience flow, this can be done in ways that stifle other important everyday tasks and experiences, leading to illness or practises that are destructive, dangerous and even lethal. This effect highlights the concept of occupational balance or rather, balance between experiences in occupations. In this respect, there might be a need to balance the experience of high challenge occupations with the experience of low challenge occupations, i.e. relaxation. Even occasional boredom might be a prerequisite for being able to have highlights in flow. Furthermore, if flow experiences are seen as a dynamic state in which the individual develops skills, where might the next generation of flow experiences come from, when the present ones no longer constitute a challenge?

Perhaps flow, like other aspects of occupation, exists in some kind of dynamic balance. First linked to occupation in the 1920s, balance was initially understood to involve achieving a balance between different kinds of occupation; work, rest, play and sleep (Meyer, 1922/1977). More recently, balance has been affirmed as an important concept within occupational science (Christiansen, 1996; Westhorp, 2003). Hammell (2004), however, questioned the present focus on balance in relation to objective categories like leisure and self-care,

proposing instead a focus on meaningfulness. Primeau's (1996) examination of the dichotomy between work and leisure adds further weight to this argument. It seems, as Backman (2004) concluded, that "despite its long history occupational balance remains an abstract and evolving concept" (p. 202). To summarise, it seems that achieving too much flow might be detrimental to health, and that occupational balance might relate more to qualities rather than categories of occupation. It therefore seems reasonable to propose that health is underpinned by a dynamic balance of flow and qualitatively different occupational experiences.

Pros and Cons of the ESM-Models

The four-channel flow model developed in early ESM studies (Figure 1), which categorised experiences into flow, boredom, apathy and anxiety, represented one of the first attempts to divide everyday occupational experiences into different qualities. The weakness of the four-channel model was that it was quite restricted as a description of the range of experience qualities in everyday occupations. The development of the eight-channel model, which added control, relaxation, worry and arousal, made it possible to have a more modulated view of how flow compares to other experiences or challenge-skill ratios. Using the eight-channel model, the relationships between different forms of experience becomes more evident, for example the relationship between flow and relaxation. It also becomes more obvious that there are a range of other possible outcomes of occupational experiences, in addition to a continuous increase in flow experiences. Yet, the nuances of experience included in the eight-channel model also increases the difficulty of analysing such variations in the data. It also becomes difficult to differentiate between some of the dimensions with low levels of challenge, such as relaxation and boredom. While the emotional experience of these dimensions can be assumed to be quite different, in the model they are very close to each other. The problem with these channels was made particularly evident when the developers found it necessary to change their relative positions on the diagram during the development of the model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a).

Another consideration is that, from the beginning, studies that employed the ESM to investigate flow focused on how and when flow experiences occurred (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Delle Fave & Massimini, 1988). The development of the eight-channel model, and empirical studies in connection with this model, made it possible to discuss what was called emotional atrophy (F. Massimini et al., 1987). From an occupational perspective, emotional atrophy might align with occupational deprivation (Wilcock, 1998). Other issues that were highlighted were the relationships of flow to different health factors, such as sense of coherence (Persson et al., 1999) or meaning (Persson, 2001).

In current flow theory research using ESM, the focus seems to be happiness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), self-determination (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Moneta,

2004), and social context (Kennedy & Vecitis, 2004). One pilot study exploring balance using ESM data has also been published (Wilcock et al., 1997). In that study, equal involvement in physical, mental, social, and rest occupations was found to be significantly related to self-reported health, but there was no discussion of the relationship between them.

Prompted by Wilcock et al's (1997) earlier study, we determined that it would be possible to explore the concept of balance in daily occupations from a new viewpoint, an experiential perspective, using empirical data from ESM studies. Given the limitations of both the four- and the eight-channel models, this study explores an alternative or complementary way to categorise the ESM data, using the eight-channel classification as a starting point. Therefore the purpose of this study was to return to already published data and conduct a secondary analysis of the relationship between challenges and skills from an occupational perspective, addressing balance and the dynamic relationship between different dimensions of occupational experiences.

Method

Studies of flow using the ESM and the eight-channel model of analysis are quite rare, given the international popularity of flow theory. Studies to further develop and deepen understandings of the concept of flow, through secondary analysis of existing data, are therefore warranted. The term secondary analysis refers to various analytical practices that use pre-existing data, either to investigate new research questions or to re-examine primary study questions for purposes of corroboration. Secondary analysis has assumed a central position in social science research, as existing survey data and statistical computing programs have become increasingly available (Kiecolt & Nathan, 1985). While the secondary analysis of statistical data is an established and well-documented methodology, the re-use of qualitative data remains underdeveloped (Heaton, 1998). In this study, secondary analysis of quantitative as well as for qualitative data was undertaken. ESM data were recalculated and used as the basis for an alternative, condensed model. The condensed model was drawn from the eight channel model and represents a novel approach to interpreting and categorising the channels, utilising a balance of context perspective.

Participants

The data used in the current study was made up of four different data sets of participants from the USA, Italy and Sweden.

The Italian adolescents sample

The Italian data set (n=47) were adolescents between 16-18 years of age drawn from an academically oriented lyceum in Milano (F. Massimini & Carli, 1988). Participants were given a pager for one week and instructed to rate the amount of challenge and skills when beeped randomly seven times a day. The answer rate was 73% and in total 1682 beeps were analysed according to the eight-channel model.

The American adolescents sample

This data set (n=75) of adolescents between 14-17 years of age was drawn from a community high school (A. Massimini, Carli, Delle Fave, & Massimini, 1988). The same procedure with the pager was used. Answer rate and total number of beeps were not published in the study report.

The Swedish adult sample

This sample (n=18) contains data collected by the second author in two different studies. The first data set (Persson et al., 1999) contained ESM reports from six people, three women and three men, who varied in age from 21-50 years. Four of them were considered healthy and two had long-term pain. The second study (Persson, 2001) was drawn from the data of 12 people with long-term pain (both local and widespread). The sample was heterogeneous for gender and age, 7 women and 5 men, with a mean age of 54 years, ranging from 42-71 years, but quite homogeneous as regards type of work and length of education. All subjects were formerly or currently blue or lower white collar workers. The answer rate for this whole sample (n=18) was 83% and the total number of beeps analysed was 739.

The women with HIV/AIDS sample

Data containing ESM reports of 19 HIV/AIDS positive women aged 21-44 years living in the community was taken from a study conducted recently in the USA (Kennedy &

Vecitis, 2004). Twelve of the subjects had children, 90% were either unemployed or had never been employed, and 32% were married or living with a partner. The answer rate was 74% and the total number of beeps analysed was 591.

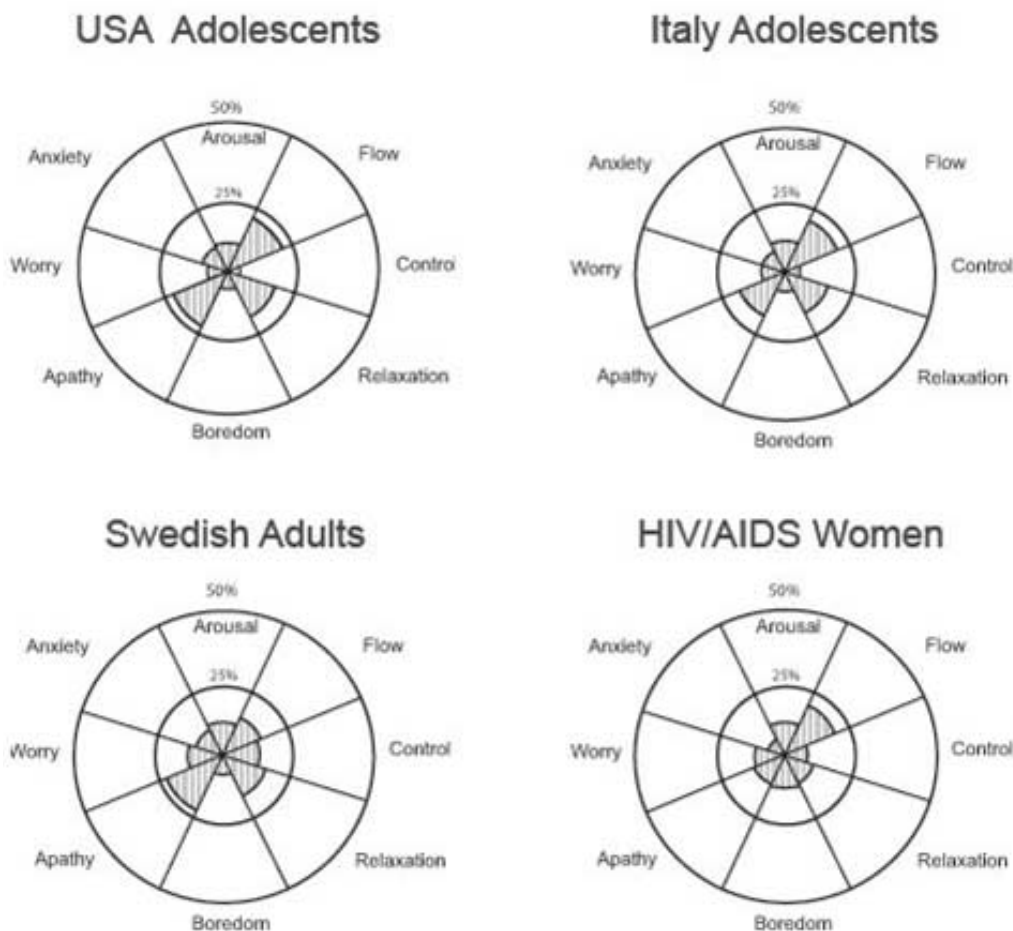
Results

The results are divided into three sections. The first section presents the four sets of data according to the eight-channel model. The second section presents the same data in a condensed model of relationships between challenge and skills. The third section presents three cases that show different patterns according to this condensed model. Data are presented throughout the sections. Both eight-channel data, and the condensed three dimension data are presented as Experience Quality Profiles (EQP:s), a type of diagram that uses a piechart to visually represent the distribution of experiences within each channel and the proportion of the whole, spreading out from a central point. Circles within the profiles mark distribution levels (Persson et al., 1999) in the range of 0 - 50% (Figure 3), and 0 - 100% (Figures 5 and 6).

Section one: The eight-channel model

The four data sets are illustrated in Figure 3. The two adolescent data sets are from earlier studies and have a different placement of the boredom and relaxation channels

Figure 3. Experience Quality Profiles of the Four Samples According to the Eight-Channel Model



than the other two data sets, mirroring the difficulty of the ESM methodology in differentiating between the supposedly positive and negative low challenge occupations that bring about relaxation and boredom. The two adolescent/healthy profiles show the most striking resemblance, while the two adult/ill-health profiles differ more in comparison to each other, as well as in relation to the adolescents.

Section two: A condensed model

The condensed model groups the eight channels into three dimensions of daily experiences in occupation. The rationale for this condensation is that the eight channel model is too fragmented and reflects the relationship between items rather than a possible dynamic relationship among items. The averaged channel data from the four original data sets were recalculated into condensed sectors, according to the following structure. The first dimension, combining channels 2 and 3 (Flow and Control) is the dimension describing highly or moderately challenging experiences that are matched with high skills. This dimension is called High Matched Experiences (HME). The second dimension, combining channels 1, 7, and 8 (Arousal, Worry and Anxiety) represents high challenge that cannot be matched with high skills. This dimension is called High Not Matched Experiences (HNME).

Finally the channels 4, 5, and 6 (Relaxation, Boredom, and Apathy) are condensed to form the third dimension expressing low to moderate challenge, called Low Challenge Experiences (LCE). The condensed dimensions are illustrated in Figure 4, together with possible positive and negative attributes of each of the three dimensions.

In Figure 5, the four data sets are presented utilising the condensed model. The similarities across groups are very obvious. This analysis depicts relatively equal experiences of challenge and skill in occupations. Barely half of the occupations in a week are experienced as low challenging occupations that do not require maximum skills. A good half of the occupations in a week are challenging, and most of them can be matched with areas of high skill. One of every four occupations is experienced as being too challenging to be achieved with existing skills.

In a model addressing balance/imbalance of experiences in occupations, it might be suggested that people need to experience occupations that balance challenges with skills, as well as occupations that are out of balance because challenges are too high or too low in relation to skills. Challenging occupations can be intrinsically rewarding, or self-rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1997b), and when met by high

Figure 4. Alternative Dimensions of the Flow Model and its Possible Attributes

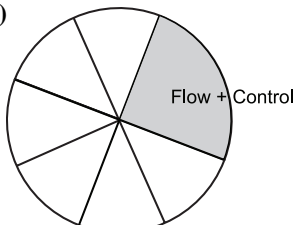
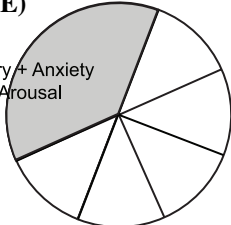
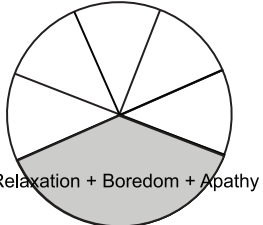
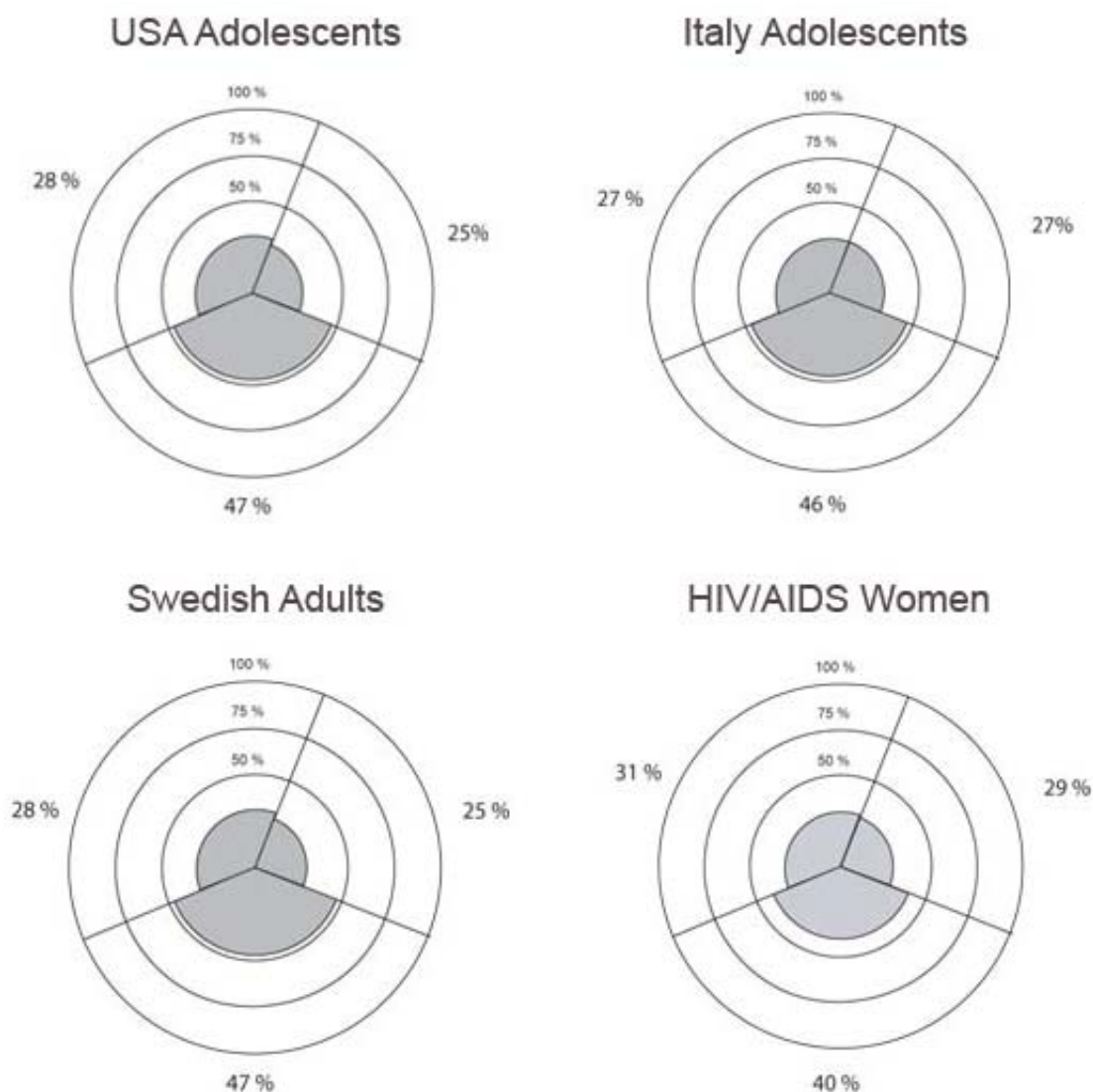
Dimensions	Positive Attributes	Negative Attributes
High Matched Experiences (HME) 	A 'just right' occurrence of these experiences reasonably leads to a joyful and meaningful occupational life-style in which the individual feels alive and competent.	Too few HME might lead to a boring life lacking intensity, creativity and meaning. Too many HME might be a symptom of 'flowholic' addiction and may constitute a dangerous risk for burn-out of the organism.
High Not Matched Experiences (HNME) 	If matched with HME and LCE occupations these type of experiences might constitute a hotbed for future flow experiences – the next generation of HME-experiences. Some of them might also be sorted out as no longer being compatible with the person.	If not balanced with HME, these occupations might lead either to an overload due to massive pressure or to evasive strategies where the doer resigns and avoids every challenging occupation. Too few HNME might lead to a breakdown in the dynamic process of providing new possible HME-experiences.
Low Challenge Experiences (LCE) 	In its right individual prevalence these occupations constitute invaluable and necessary doings representing re-creative and restorative experiences balancing the demands of the other two dimensions. It might also be a takeoff point for new occupational initiatives.	If LCE dominate the lifestyle they constitute a threat for apathy, negative stress and occupational deprivation. If this sector is too small, opportunities to recharge for meeting new challenges might be lacking, leading to negative stress and risk of burnout.

Figure 5. Experience Quality Profiles of the Four Samples According to the Condensed Model



skills people experience flow and competence. But functioning at maximum skill levels requires much energy, so people also need to have low challenge occupations to relax and rest. Even being occasionally bored may have positive effects, as boredom might be a state that challenges initiative and creativity. Thus, in a balanced occupational life, relaxation, boredom and apathy are experienced as well deserved sources of new energy and other positive emotional experiences.

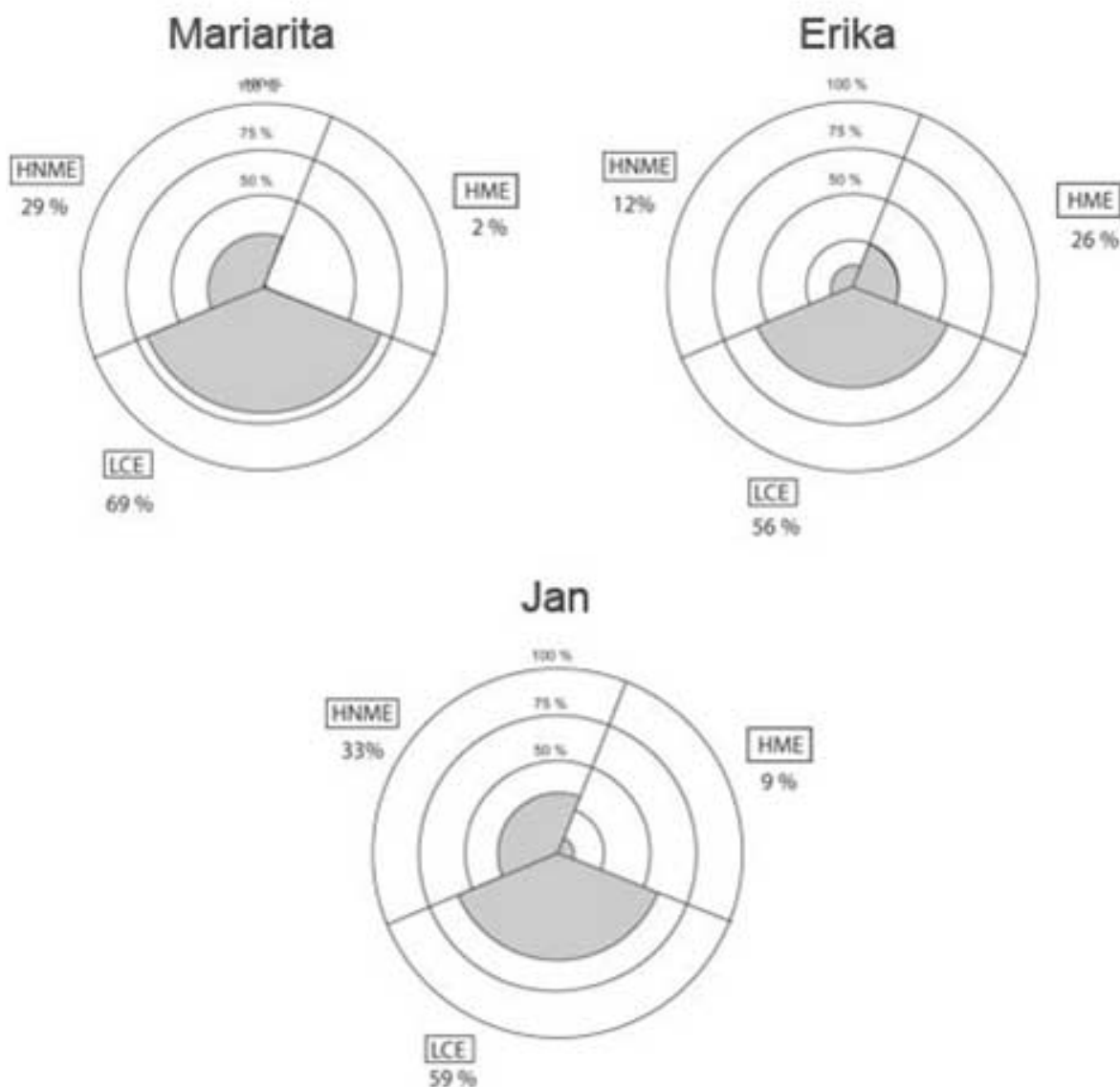
Re-creative occupations such as sitting at the seaside watching the sun godown on a gentle summer’s evening, which are also referred to as ‘being’ (Hammell, 2004; Wilcock, 1998), might, despite low levels of challenge, be as self-rewarding as being in flow (Persson, Erlandsson, Eklund, & Iwarsson, 2001). Further, relaxing in lush green surroundings has been ascribed a restorative impact on the human organism (Stigsdotter & Grahn, 2002). In the challenging part of the occupational experience, people experience having sufficient skills to meet

the demands of most occupations but still face a number of occupations that require more skills than they have at the time. In contrast to matched occupations, this type of occupation triggers individuals to continue to develop their skills in a dynamic process. These occupations may then provide the next generation of flow experiences. In conclusion, we propose that the three dimensions in the condensed model play complementary roles and that having a balance between them is of great importance for people’s experience of meaning and health in their overall occupational lifestyle.

Section three: Three case examples

In section two we presented the condensed model for the whole sample, as a possible illustration of balance among the dimensions. In this section, we present three case examples that indicate different problems regarding balance and dynamics in an individual’s occupational life.

Figure 6. Case Examples of Mariarita, Erika and Jan with the Condensed Model



Mariarita

Mariarita is a case example from one of the first studies that used the eight-channel model (F. Massimini & Carli, 1988). There the authors discussed her lack of flow occupations as an example of emotional atrophy. With reference to contemporary literature about occupation (Whiteford, 1997), Mariarita might be seen to be experiencing occupational deprivation. About 70% of her experiences are in the low challenge dimension. Without being balanced by higher challenges, this type of experience is most likely not experienced as relaxing or a well deserved rest, but rather as apathy and deprivation. In the few challenging occupations that she faced, Mariarita’s skills were not high enough to match the demands. Our expectation is that she would experience lack of competence and mastery of difficult tasks. Moreover, she would in all probability move into a destructive cycle where she avoids challenges and thereby, over time, her competence and skills will deteriorate. She could be perceived to be in a process of occupational atrophy.

Erika

Erika, from the Swedish sample, experiences a low level of challenge in a good half of her occupations. Of the challenging occupations that she experiences, she can match a majority of them with high skills. This results in a positive experience that confirms her competence. On the other hand, she does not have many challenging occupations that are still too difficult for her. Seen from a dynamic and developmental perspective, this situation might be problematic for her future. Over time, she is likely to become more skilled and thus to no longer experience high levels of challenge. Furthermore, because she has so few imbalanced occupations, the likelihood of any of them developing into the next generation of balanced highly challenging experiences is very small. Without these triggers, she is at risk of an expansion of the low challenge area and, in the long run, might also experience occupational deprivation.

Jan

Jan, also from the Swedish sample, has over 40% of his experience profile in challenging occupations. Compared with Erika, however, he has the opposite relationship between occupations that he can match with his skills and the ones he cannot. Jan has experiences of high challenge in his occupational life, but in most cases his skills do not match the level of demand. Having insufficient skill to satisfactorily perform demanding occupations might be very energy consuming, without giving anything back in terms of intrinsic rewards and feelings of competence. If this imbalance continues, there might be a risk of burnout. From an individual perspective, one strategy would be to try to avoid challenging occupations or to shift the experience towards the low challenge dimension, with its inherent risk of occupational deprivation in the future. Alternatively, with preparedness for taking slight risks and an ‘occupational stubbornness’, high not matched experiences might develop into the next generation of flow occupations, and provide a better balance between the dimensions.

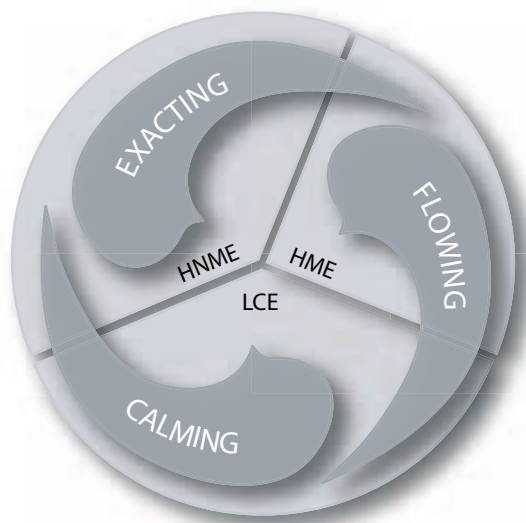
Towards an Experiential Model of Dynamic Balance in Occupation

The analysis of the empirical material supports the condensed model, which collapses the eight experience channels into three dimensions and makes it possible to analyse how these dimensions interact in a dynamic, everyday cycle of balanced experiences that promote health and well-being. All three dimensions and their relationships are thereby important to achieving balance in occupational life, meaning that none of them is intrinsically positive or negative. The three dimensions have different relationships to each other and are needed within the total context of everyday experience. If any of these three dimensions is too dominating, an imbalance arises that in the long-term might risk developing into a destructive process, one that would lead to occupational deprivation and/or to an occupational overload, with negative consequences on health and well-being. If we were to transform the taxonomy of experiential dimensions into less technical terms, we suggest the following: (1) Exacting for experiences of everyday occupation exceeding our actual skills (HNME), (2) Flowing for experiences with a reasonable match between skills and challenges (HME), and (3) Calming for the low challenge experiences of relaxation, boredom or apathy (LCE). These terms and their dynamic relationship are illustrated in figure 7.

It is reasonable to assume that Calming experiences are needed to recharge people’s batteries and for purposes of relaxation, but if they become dominant, experiences become too boring and depriving. Flowing experiences are a source of intrinsic rewards and feelings of competence, but if they dominate, experiences might become too energy demanding and even addictive, possibly leading to overload and social isolation. Exacting experiences are important and necessary sources of personal development that trigger new flow experiences as the dynamic process continues. In the actual situation, these types of experiences might initially arouse negative feelings of frustration and stress. This might be the price one has to pay to

secure further development and creativity, and to be able to experience flow in the future – advanced occupations that are eventually mastered, yet in the beginning are frustratingly difficult. If the Exacting experiences are too dominant, experiences of negative stress, incompetence and/or overload might arise.

Figure 7. The Experiential Model of Occupational Balance and its Inner Dynamics



Supported by the empirical data, we have proposed a tentative model of occupational balance based on the relational experience of skills and challenges in the daily occupational pattern (Figure 7). In that data, High Challenge Experiences (Exacting and Flowing) constituted around half of the pattern, with matched and not matched experiences representing slightly over a quarter each. Low Challenge Experiences (Calming), which are considered necessary for rest and relaxation, constitute barely half of the pattern. The fact that the distribution and balance between the three condensed dimensions could be so coherent within groups that in age, culture and health status is very interesting. If the dimensions are reasonably balanced, that constitutes a dynamic and healthy occupational experience pattern that probably contributes to development, well-being and meaning for the individual, and permeates, his or her contribution to the social network and societal context. However, residing within such coherent global profiles, as shown in the three individual cases discussed, are individual profiles that might prove to be relatively imbalanced and probably hazardous to health.

The Dynamic Aspect of the Condensed Model

Making the forms in figure 7 more life-like, we will use some personal experiences to illustrate the dynamics of how a single occupation can proceed through all the dimensions. Running might be a new occupation, taken up with the goal of beginning a ‘new life’ after having quit smoking and deciding to lose weight and to exercise more. In the beginning, the occupation is very hard and problematic, and easy to give up (Exacting experiences). With time and effort, however, these

hardships can be mastered and running at the top of your skills in surroundings that you love can elicit Flowing experiences. For most runners, this might be the peak of the occupation. With time, running becomes more relaxing, even sometimes boring when becoming more a habit (Calming experiences). Occasionally running can become a real challenge again, for example by deciding to train for a long distance run.

A further example many will recognise is the different qualities of experience people have when setting out to learn a new computer program. In the beginning, there are experiences of helplessness and anxiety, close to the limit of giving up. By overcoming these feelings, a mastery process begins and individuals gradually experience having a high level of skill and being able to do advanced tasks with the programme. With time and practice the programme becomes incorporated into day-to-day work, and is no longer experienced as challenging. Perhaps then it is time for a new and more advanced programme, or using it in a completely new way.

Connections to Contemporary and Historical Theories

The idea of a dynamic balance/imbalance within people's everyday occupations has been addressed by several occupational therapy and occupational science authors (Christiansen, 1996; Hammell, 2004; Westhorp, 2003; Wilcock et al., 1997). In this literature balance is generally conceived from a quantitative perspective that omits experience, that is in terms of more or less occupation within categories such as work, leisure and maintenance. Persson and co-workers (2001) proposed that it might be possible to experience concrete, symbolic and self-reward values in every process of engaging in occupation. They also discussed the importance of experiencing a certain amount of these occupational values in daily life, in order to have a sense of overall meaning in life. Their focus on such values being present in everyday life experiences, in a dynamic individual fit or balance, is similar to the thoughts presented in this paper.

Within Activity Theory (Fortmeier & Thanning, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978), the concept of zone of proximal development is used to denote a level of competence whereby the individual does not yet have the desired degree of control, which results in tension between what he or she is able to do and wishes to be able to do. When an action lies within this zone, it has the potential to encourage the doer to learn new skills, as the demands slightly exceed his or her abilities. Otherwise, the action becomes a source of such anxiety that, at worst, will result in the deterioration of existing competence as the individual loses confidence (Mott, 1992). This concept and way of reasoning seems to be in tune with what is proposed in this article.

If occupations are considered to be in the high not matched experience area, they contribute to the development of the doer, which makes it possible to leave this 'proximal' area and takes the occupation into a new and, in developmental terms, higher zone. Adding to the discussion of balance, activity

theory proposes that if occupations with high demands are to have developmental potential, the challenge those occupations represents cannot be too far ahead of the capacity of the doer.

In addition, within the philosophical tradition of dialectics, processes that are similar to the proposed cyclical nature of the three dimensions of the proposed condensed model can be found. For example, the Taoist idea of the yin and yang relationship was central to ancient Chinese cosmology, and embodies the harmony of opposites. Nothing is completely yin or completely yang, and both contain the seed for its opposite; cold can turn into hot, and 'what goes up must come down'. Thereby yin and yang within the Taoist world view represent a dynamic combination of opposites which keeps the world spinning, striving towards a state of balance in all aspects of life (Kaptchuk, 2000). Similarly, Hegelian dialectics involves the dimensions of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, comprising the notion that movement, or process, is the result of the conflict of opposites. The thesis might be an idea or an action that contains within itself incompleteness that gives rise to opposition, or an antithesis. As a result of such a conflict, a third point of view arises, a synthesis, which overcomes the conflict by reconciling, at a higher level, the aspects contained in both the thesis and the antithesis. This synthesis becomes a new thesis that generates another antithesis, thereby continuing the process (Kojève, 1969). Dialectical thought has been criticised for being reductionistic and representing a kind of binarism, that compacts meaning into a closed either/or opposition (Soja, 1996). In an attempt to contest these dialectic polarities, Lefebvre introduced an open alternative entity, transforming the closed logic of conflicts into an open logic of both/and, which he called trialectics (Lefebvre, 1996).

In dialectic traditions, opposite complementary phenomena are seen to establish a dynamic dyad, that fosters development through alternating between imbalance and balance, in a continuing process. This idea has similarities to the relationship of the condensed dimensions proposed here, whereby dynamic motion is propelled by the relationship between challenge and skills that exist in every occupation in an individual's daily repertoire. Thus when occupational performance has reached a certain level of competence and experience, an imbalance arises that directs the ongoing process, by moving the experience from one dimension to another in a continuous spiral motion. If it were possible to depict the fluidity of an individual's occupational experiences three dimensionally, the picture would capture one moment in the individual's everyday balance/imbalance of experience.

The trialectic proposition of a third entity added to the dialectic polarity seems interesting in relation to the experiential model containing three dimensions. The third entity is described as a type of open and disordering other in relation to traditional dialectics. This is particularly interesting in relation to the Exacting dimension because it could be argued to represent an unpleasant yet necessary positive disorder which concomitantly carries open possibilities for future health and development.

Limitations of the Experiential Model of Occupational Balance and Implications for Future Research

Condensing the eight-channel model to three dimensions made it possible to analyse and discuss the relationships and balance between dimensions of experience in the everyday arena in a more holistic sense. However, it is important to consider that the operations made to condense the eight original channels might have been more logical if the three dimensions had been the same size. Because we used secondary data that was originally distributed in previously calculated sectors, spreading from the 8-channel circle's centre, we were bound to proceed from the borderlines of these sectors. This resulted in a slightly smaller Flowing dimension compared to the remaining two dimensions. Another consideration concerns the loss of differentiation. For instance the experience denoted as apathy in the original model was fundamentally different from relaxation, especially when referring to meditative experiences relating to nature's beauty or similar experiences. Although the condensed model does not differentiate between those experiences, it assumes that both can be interpreted as resting or relaxing from more challenging experiences. Further, considering the uncertainty between what might be considered good and bad about low challenge experiences, it seemed reasonable to incorporate them into one mutual dimension. An interesting philosophical question emerges in connection with this concern: is the experience of boredom and apathy a necessary and possibly positive part of a dynamic occupational pattern? One future line of research could be to study people known to have an especially intrinsically rewarding occupational repertoire, to investigate whether experiencing periods of apathy and boredom is a prerequisite for achieving this state, or whether a rewarding pattern can exist without these opposites.

The strengths and uniqueness of the ESM-methodology is that it collects basically un-reflected data at the time of the experience, which gives a high degree of ecological validity (Scollon et al., 2003). Conversely, a weakness of this methodology is precisely that it is un-reflected, because the human experience of meaning is closely connected to reflection, for example in the narrative tradition (Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricour, 1984). Another possible area of future research would be to conduct studies that combine ESM-methodology with, for example, occupational storytelling interviews (Clark, 1993; Persson et al., 1999) to see whether data collected and analysed in the actual situation are in accordance with the subjective perspectives presented in narratives. Another aspect to consider is that the analysis using the 8-channel model seems a bit complex. In future studies, it may be relevant to trial using the condensed three-dimension model to reach the dimensions directly, without starting from a preliminary study using 8-channel analysis. Such an operation might also enable the slight shifting necessary for having three dimensions of the same size.

In summary, further studies are needed to capture and more fully understand the dynamic process of the proposed three-dimension model, encompassing both constructive and destructive processes in occupational development. The secondary analysis of ESM-data shows the potential contribution flow theory might make to understanding the dynamic relationship between different experiences of participating in occupations, as an alternative to focusing on productivity, leisure and self-care occupations. This understanding may contribute to deepening what Christiansen (1996) called the most widely cited philosophical belief within occupational therapy, that is, that a balance of occupations is beneficial to health and well-being.

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