

## Peak Experience, Peak Performance, and Flow: A Comparative Analysis of Positive Human Experiences

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Peak experience (intense joy), peak performance (superior functioning), and flow (intrinsically rewarding experience) are described and compared in detail. Peak experience and peak performance are models of optimal human experiencing and, therefore, are important in personality study. Flow, although not always at a high level, shares many qualities with both constructs. Important attributes shared by all three include absorption, valuing, joy, spontaneity, a sense of power, and personal identity and involvement. The topologies also reveal distinguishing characteristics. Peak experience, for example, is mystic and transpersonal; peak performance is transactive, clearly focusing on self as well as the valued object; and flow is fun. Differences among the constructs concerning sense of self and motivation are also noted. Several implications for future research and application are suggested.

During the past 20 to 25 years, a "quiet revolution" (Rogers, 1977) or a "reasonable evolution" (Landsman, 1977) has nudged psychology toward becoming a human science (Giorgi, 1970), which addresses the whole person and is adequate for a broadly based helping profession. For half of a century, psychology stressed *behavior* with laboratory research and *pathology* with clinical treatment. Emphasizing a more holistic psychology, the emerging humanistic, existential, and phenomenological perspective includes both *experience* and *behavior* (Gendlin, 1962; Landsman, 1961; Rogers, 1977; Smith, 1978) and the *positive* as well as the *pathological* (Maslow, 1962). This "third force" psychology offers, in addition to significant and exciting content, a fledgling technology (Jourard, 1968; Kelly, 1969; Price & Barrell, 1980), which encourages explicit inclusion of experience and behavior as basic data categories in personality study.

The third component fundamental to a science, in addition to content and technology, is systematic organization of knowledge (Polanyi, 1964). Toward further organization of three positive experiential phenomena, data from previous research are examined, clarified, and ordered in the study to develop a comparative topology. Two of the constructs from

humanistic literature describe intense, positive experience: (a) peak experience (Laski, 1962; Maslow, 1962, 1964, 1971), defined as an intense and highly valued moment, and (b) peak performance (Privette, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1981, 1982; Privette & Landsman, 1983), defined as an episode of superior functioning. Each construct represents both optimal levels and subjective experience that is not dependent on particular types of behavior, for example, interpersonal interactions. Therefore, a shared quality is that peak experience and peak performance are models for optimal human experiencing, as self-actualization is a model for the evolution of personality (Maslow, 1971). In this sense, peak experience and peak performance are prototypic and generic constructs.

A third phenomenon, flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975a, 1975b; Furlong, 1976), defined as an intrinsically enjoyable experience, is similar to both peak experience and peak performance, as it shares the enjoyment or valuing of peak experience and the behavior of peak performance. Flow per se does not imply optimal joy or performance but may include either or both.

Each of the three has been described both globally and in detail in ways that suggest that the phenomena overlap. For theoretical clarity and practical application, this apparent interrelation should be examined. It is to be expected that descriptions of peak experience,

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peak performance, and flow coincide on many points, for each phenomenon is a positive, subjective experience. Further, a single event may involve more than one experience. In this case, the collective constructs offer different perspectives of the event. On the other hand, each construct alone describes a discrete phenomenological experience that may occur in isolation. Therefore, with contrasting as well as common features, each construct may be considered a syndrome, that is, a pattern of characteristics, all of which may not be found in any one episode.

This study is an analysis of detailed descriptions of each phenomenon as presented in theoretical and research reports. The comparison identifies and clarifies mutual and distinguishing characteristics of peak experience, peak performance, and flow.

### Peak Experience

Peak experiences, Maslow (1962) wrote, are "moments of highest happiness and fulfillment" (p. 69). In peak experiences he recognized a level of psychological experiencing that surpasses the usual level in intensity, meaningfulness, and richness. Leach (1963) defined the peak experience as

that highly valued experience which is characterized by such intensity of perception, depth of feeling, or sense of profound significance as to cause it to stand out, in the subject's mind, in more or less permanent contrast to the experiences that surround it in time and space. (p. 11)

Laski (1962), studying "ecstasy," further defined peak experience as "characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued, and extraordinary to the point of often seeming as if derived from a praeternatural source" (p. 5).

In peak-experience research, Maslow (1962) and Laski used interviews and questionnaires to collect retrospective self-reports of peak or ecstatic experiences. Their research participants were college students, friends, mail recipients, and respondents to a radio broadcast, a varied but not random sample. Laski first screened the data for bizarre responses before her later content analysis. She acknowledged that her data provided no evidence about the distribution of individual ability to have ecstatic experiences.

### Peak Performance

Peak performance is the prototype of superior use of human potential; it is more efficient, creative, productive, or in some way better than habitual behavior. Although it was defined operationally for research purposes as "behavior which exceeds typical behavior," peak performance also refers to full use of any human power. Peak performance is a high *level* of functioning rather than a *type* of activity. Therefore, it may occur in any activity as creative expression through an art form, physical strength in a crisis, prowess in an athletic event, intellectual mastery of a problem, or a rich human relationship. Peak performance may further be isolated as a once-in-a-lifetime event, or it may occur often or, in rare instances, continuously. As a prototypic construct, therefore, peak performance is useful for understanding human potential and for an examination of qualities common to all experiences that significantly tap human power (Privette, 1964, 1968).

A holistic description of peak performance was recently inferred from related theoretical literature and factor analyses of retrospective self-reports of 120 respondents systematically screened from a large data pool. Respondents in four discrete groups—psychology, adult education, graduate counselor education, and creative arts (music, theater, and visual arts)—described their own peak performance in varied activities. Frequency of peak performance within the general population was not addressed (Privette, 1981, 1982).

### Flow

Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) described flow as a common experiential state found in play and, under some conditions, in other activities. Flow is defined as enjoyment, an intrinsically rewarding, or autotelic, experience. People seek flow primarily for itself. They enjoy it.

Flow ranges from repetitive, almost automatic, behavior that provides a small increment of enjoyment to very complex behavior. Microflow, for example, may be as inconsequential as chewing gum, whereas deep flow or macroflow has a full range and depth of potential, which may be accompanied by ec-

stasy. Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) found that flow is most often experienced in games and play. These may be considered flow activities with "patterns of action which maximize immediate, intrinsic rewards to the participant" (p. 21). The activity itself is rewarding. A key to the flow situation is challenge that matches skill. When this fit occurs, there is flow, standing outside boredom and anxiety.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) studied retrospective self-reports of flow from rock climbers, composers, dancers, chess players, and basketball players. His subjects were at varying levels of skill in their activities, and levels of functioning or enjoyment were not criteria used in defining the construct or identifying the experience. Flow highlights enjoyment. The construct provides a model for understanding intrinsic motivation and reward.

### Triggers

Underlying each construct is the assumption that the experience may occur in many activities. Some flow activities are thought to be intrinsically rewarding naturally. Csikszentmihalyi (1975a) identified key flow activities, or common triggers to flow. In addition to play and games, he mentioned creativity and research at the frontier; transcendental, peak, or religious experiences; collective ritual; and Zen, Yoga, and other meditative states.

Such triggers for peak performance have not been systematically studied and identified. However, Privette (1981) found that respondents, when asked for an account of any personal peak performance, described the following number of events: death crisis (20), aesthetic (28), intellectual (21), sport (20), personal-interpersonal (14), and other (17).

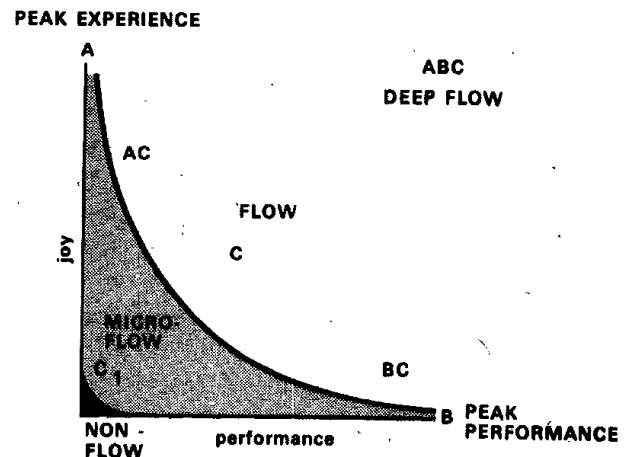
For peak experience, some common triggers have been identified. Laski, for instance, found among her questionnaire group the following triggers for ecstasy in descending order of frequency: "art, nature, sexual love, religion, exercise and movement, creative work, 'beauty,' childbirth, scientific knowledge, recollection and introspection, and poetic knowledge" (1962, p. 492). Maslow (1971) also found empirically that music and sex are the most common triggers. He anticipated a reciprocal relation with peak performance when he re-

ported, "It looks as if any experience of real excellence, of real perfection . . . tends to produce a peak experience, though not always" (p. 17). There is evidence that the converse occurs, and peak experience, or intense joy, triggers positive performance (Mogar, 1967).

### Prototypic Activities

A joyful event is exclusively peak experience when it does not specifically involve (superior) behavior. An event is exclusively peak performance when superior performance is not accompanied by joy or enjoyment. An activity is exclusively flow only at the lower levels of joy and performance. A basic comparison of prototypic activities of peak experience, peak performance, and flow can be seen in the graphic representation of their interrelation in Figure 1 and in the following discussion.

An excellent example of a single event that qualifies as all three experiences (ABC in Figure 1) is found in a study by Ravizza (1977), who reported peak experiences during greatest moments, or peak performance, in sports, a flow activity. Characteristics that his subjects



- (A = peak experience. listening to music, childbirth,
- B = peak performance. crisis, placebo,
- C = flow: enjoyable bicycle riding, game playing;
- ABC = peak experience, peak performance, and deep flow  
joyous, superior running, painting, Ravizza's peak  
experience during greatest moments in sports;
- AC = peak experience and flow: joyous bicycle riding,  
sky diving, sex;
- BC = peak performance and flow: enjoyable superior  
running or painting,
- C<sub>1</sub> = microflow. chewing gum.)

Figure 1. Interrelation of constructs and prototypic activities.

designated are clearly related not only to peak experience but to peak performance and flow as well.

On the other hand, a peak experience—listening to music (A), for example—may not be peak performance, unless one considers allocentric perception described by Schachtel (1959) as peak performance. Music listening probably is not deep flow or macroflow but might be an example of microflow. Childbirth and sexual experiences are other frequently mentioned peak experiences, neither of which, in itself, is peak performance. Childbirth often is not flow; sexual activity often is.

Crisis events, especially death-threatening crises, may trigger peak performance (B) but not peak experience and usually not flow. Likewise, responses to placebos, hypnosis, and biofeedback may be exclusively peak performance.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975a, 1975b) did not specify that behavior in flow is superior. It seems likely that many sport and game events are flow (C), both involving and enjoyable yet not entailing superior performance or accompanied by the intensity of feelings and perceptions found in peak experience.

#### Comparison of Constructs

In theoretical and research literature, detailed descriptions of the three constructs contain a baffling quantity of characteristics and semantic differences which present an immediate impression of disarray. In this section, comparisons of characteristics of the constructs are shown in three ways. First, a table presents individual characteristics with the least modification of original descriptions and specific literature references. The resulting topologies, defined as detailed descriptions of entities, are based on interpretations and reduction of data and may be most useful as a reference. This analysis may be replicated by following markers in Table 1 that identify the theoretical and research source of each characteristic. The second presentation of the comparison is made in graphic form which illustrates the most salient features of each construct. Essentially, Figure 2 is a summary of Table 1. Finally, the constructs are compared by discussion of unique, varying, and common qualities.

#### Unique Qualities

Most noticeably, peak experience seems to have a mystic or transpersonal quality that is not as clearly defined in peak performance or flow. Terms such as *cosmic*, *pure psyche*, *absolute*, and even *ecstasy* are all descriptive of this aspect of peak experience.

Peak performance involves a holistic experience of clear focus on self and valued object in transaction. The clarity of focus, the strong sense of self, and the awareness of the transaction share importance with the value and focus on the central object. The self is not lost.

Flow is fun. It is the structure of the flow activity that largely determines the motivation, the goals and acts of completion, and the action and guidance.

#### Varying Characteristics

Key variations among the constructs include the intensity level, active versus passive modes, relational modes, sense of self, and motivation. Both peak experience and peak performance include a great magnitude, or high level, of joy and/or performance. Flow, on the other hand, is not defined by the intensity of either joy or performance but may range from moderate to high performance and/or joy. In peak performance and flow, the person participates in a transaction, with the actor responsive to a task, value, another person, or situation, or in some way interactive with the environment. In contrast, peak experience tends to be perceptual, receptive, and passive, perhaps not involving behavior at all.

Fusion with the world or object and subsequent loss of self are associated with peak experience and flow. In peak performance, however, the person encounters the world or object with a strong sense of self. Research respondents denied the importance of other people to the outcome of their peak performance. Their repudiation was strong enough to suggest that involvement with others may often prevent achieving potential (Privette & Landsman, 1983). In contrast, flow may be a time of companionship during activity. Although the degree of companionship varied with the activity, there is widespread evidence of friendly fellowship and, in some cases, stimulating competition during flow. The role of

Table 1  
*Topologies of Peak Experience, Peak Performance, and Flow*

Qualities	Peak experience <sup>a</sup>	Peak performance <sup>b</sup>	Flow <sup>c</sup>
Unique qualities	transpersonal (A12, B1)	clear focus (A4, 1, B12, C9)	fun (definition)
Intensity	high level of joy (definition)	≠ high level of performance (definition)	≠ optional high joy or performance (inferred)
Active mode	(superior) behavior optional (A8)	≠ superior behavior (definition)	≠ behavior, superiority optional (B43)
Passive mode	perceptual/receptive/passive (B92-95)	≠ transactive/responsive (A2, 13, Bb, Cc)	≠ active/interactive with world (A30, 46, B43)
Relational mode	unity, fusion (A16, B2) ?	≠ encounter (Bb, Cc, inferred) ≠ not companionable (B1, m, Ci, h, subset)	≠ fusion with world (A42, 97) ≠ companionable (A30)
Self	loss of self (A7, B2) noninterchangeable (A19, B5, 9, p. 109)	≠ strong sense of self (A4, Cc, subset) self-understanding (Ab, 12, B5, 13)	≠ loss of ego (A42) clarity of role (A44-46)
Motivation	non- or metamotivation (A6, B12)	≠ intention (A11, B10, a, C8)	≠ intrinsic motivation (A41)
Process	spontaneous, triggered (A175)	≠ spontaneous, triggered (narrative) prior involvement (A3, B9)	≠ structured, planned, practiced (A39, 46) prior involvement (A46)
Familiarity	here, now, nonhabitual (B10) completion, closure (B14)	≠ actions new (C6, 7, a) ≠ impulsion toward closure (A5, B2, Cd)	≠ practiced, rule-structured (A39, 46) ≠ goals structured (A39)
End goal	Taoistic, spontaneous (B1, 4, 6, 7, 10)	spontaneous, free (A6, 7, 8, B8, 11, C1, 11)	action follows action (A35-36, 46, B43)
Mode	joy, graced (A17, B16)	fulfillment (A10a, 10d, 10f, B7, C2, 5)	enjoyment, perhaps ecstasy (A47)
Characteristics	being value (A3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 15) feeling of peak power (B3) ineffability (A14, B13) playfulness (A18, B15) resolution of dichotomies (A13)	value, fascination (A10c, B1, 4, C3, 10, b) awareness of power (A9, B3, C5) words not enough (A10e, B7, C2) ≠ not playful (Bn, Ci) ?	feeling of control (A44-46) ? ≠ play (definition) fusion of dichotomies (A36)
Focus	attention, absorption (A2)	clear focus: absorption (A1, B6, C9)	limited stimulus field (A40)
Orientation	outside time and space (A10) temporality (definition)	overwhelmed other senses (Bc, d, C4) temporality (operational definition)	lost time and space (A182) temporality (B45)

Note. ≠ means not equal to; ? indicates that a quality has not been explicitly associated with an experience.  
<sup>a</sup> Maslow: A = 1971, pp. 260-266; B = 1962, pp. 97-108 (other pages are noted). Qualities are numbered.  
<sup>b</sup> Privette: A = 1981, pp. 57-67; B = 1982, topology Table 2; C = 1982, topology of difference scores, Table 4. Factors are numbered; items, lettered.  
<sup>c</sup> Csikszentmihalyi: A = 1975a; B = 1975b; page numbers are noted.

other people in peak experience has not been systematically observed and reported.

Maslow described peak experience as non-motivated, or metamotivated; Privette found strong motivation and intention, at least concerning effort, important to peak performance; and Csikszentmihalyi defined flow by the presence of intrinsic motivation, or enjoyment inherent in the activity. Both peak experience and flow were described as playful; however, respondents in peak-performance research emphatically denied playfulness during their greatest moments. How much these differences are real and how much they are semantic is speculative.

*Qualities Common to All Constructs*

It is of interest to note that these three positive experiences share several qualities. Among these shared components, some have been emphasized in the description of one phenomenon. One such quality, which appears to be characteristic of all phenomena and is discussed more fully by Privette, is absorption, attention, or clear focus. Overwhelming other senses, this perceptual set is critical to full

involvement that results in superior functioning in peak performance and is perhaps equally pertinent to enjoyment and joy in flow and peak experience. Also stressed in peak performance, but present in all phenomena, is the awareness of power.

Joy and valuing also are components of all experiences but are perhaps considered synonymous with peak experience. Maslow viewed the peak experience as highest happiness and intense meaning. Another characteristic of all three phenomena is the spontaneous, effortless, letting-be of the process and the graceful, integrated, Taoistic nature of the person in the event. Maslow stressed these attributes lucidly and persistently in his description of the peak experience.

In each phenomenon the person experiences integration and personal identity. This may be through a sense of meaning, a sense of responsibility and power, or clarity through the structure of the activity.

In addition to these qualities that appear characteristic of positive experiences, the two phenomena exemplifying optimal intensity, peak experience and peak performance, are also characterized by a sense of newness of

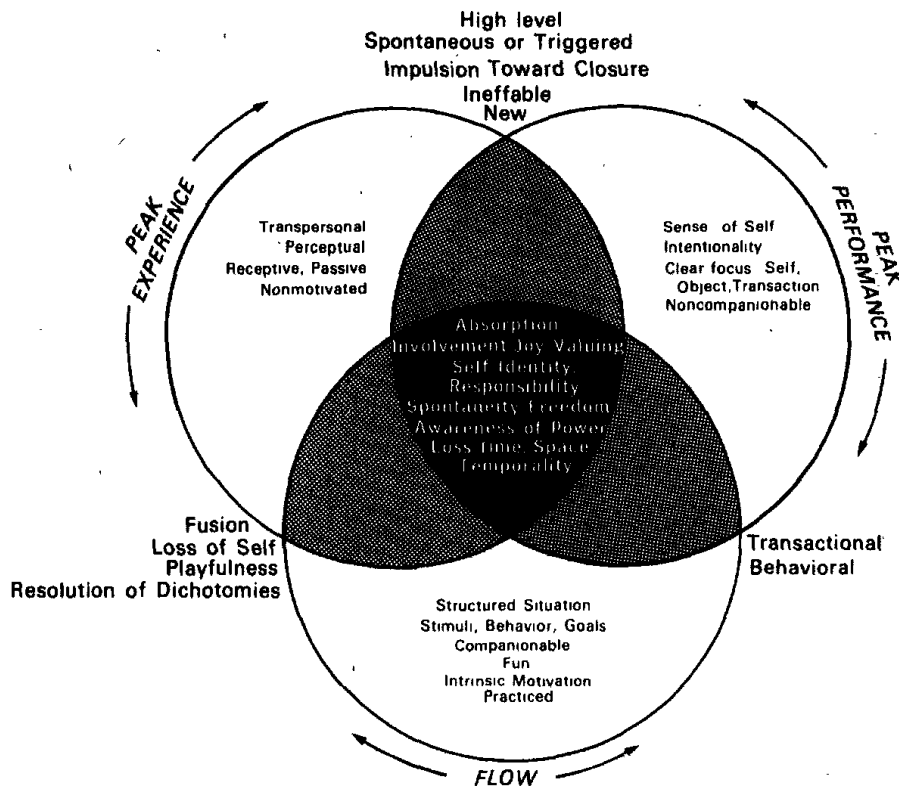


Figure 2. Comparison of topologies of peak experience, peak performance, and flow.

perception and process. They both tend to occur spontaneously or are triggered by something in the environment. Both are experienced as new instead of repetitious. In both, there is a strong impulse toward closure or completion. In flow, these dimensions are provided by the structure of the activities and are perhaps masked. In contrast to the others, flow experiences are at least partially sought and planned by virtue of participating in autotelic activities, which, as structured situations, allow or facilitate flow, involve practiced actions, and provide goals and acts of completion.

### Implications

The emergent topology raises interesting questions about the phenomena and their interrelations. Included among these questions are the following:

1. Are "loss of self" and "strong sense of self" actually oppositional or only semantically so? How is "self" experienced in peak moments? Does it differ in peak experience and peak performance? In flow?

2. What are the genuine differences in non-motivation or metamotivation, intentionality, and intrinsic motivation? Is peak experience always and only a happy surprise? Is this true for peak performance?

3. Do other people inhibit peak performance? Peak experience? What sort of interpersonal interactions are encouraging to each phenomenon?

4. Combining power and joy seems both a synergic merger and a suspect one. Is this combination dangerous? Productive and fulfilling? Or both?

5. Perhaps more exciting than the clarification of each phenomenon is the possibility inherent in the interrelation of power and joy. It is clear that the two sometimes occur together and that each, under some circumstances, triggers or facilitates the other. This supports transpersonal education as a method of encouraging peak intellectual performance. It also supports performance-oriented programs as methods of creating a sense of meaning and valuing in apathetic or alienated people. Testing the intricacies and processes of this interrelation promises to be intriguing research,

6. Personality, developmental, and environmental correlates of each phenomenon suggest a variety of research questions. Are certain personality variables or developmental patterns associated with frequent or intense peak experience? Peak performance? Flow? Are there identifiable environmental conditions that encourage or inhibit peak experience? Peak performance? Flow? One of several problems in pursuing such questions is the difficulty of measuring frequency and intensity of experiential phenomena.

In the context of a human science, this analysis comprises a reasonable topology of mutual qualities of intense, positive experience and of distinguishing characteristics of peak experience, peak performance, and flow. As a reasonable, rather than an empirically tested, topology, however, its utility remains to be proved. A specific outcome of the analysis is a research questionnaire pertinent to the three phenomena, *Questionnaire: Peak Performance and Peak Experience (and Flow)*.<sup>1</sup> The reduction of data is certain to add clarity for researchers or practitioners concerned with any one of these phenomena and to increase the feasibility of testing and developing sophisticated conceptualizations.

<sup>1</sup> Privately distributed, the questionnaire is available from the author.

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### Third Edition of the *Publication Manual*

APA has just published the third edition of the *Publication Manual*. This new edition replaces the 1974 second edition of the *Manual*. The new *Manual* updates APA policies and procedures and incorporates changes in editorial style and practice since 1974. It amplifies and refines some parts of the second edition, reorganizes other parts, and presents new material. (See the March issue of the *American Psychologist* for more on the third edition.)

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