

**Relevance of Sufi Dance to Mihaly Csikzentmihaly's Flow Theory  
(Literature Study on the Relevance of Sufi Dance to Mihaly  
Csikzentmihalyi's Flow Theory)**

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**Abstract**

This research was motivated by the researcher's interest in the relevance of the spiritual activities of Sufism, namely whirling dervish, with western psychological theory, which then the researchers discovered that there was a theory that had similarities with the concept of whirling dervish, namely the flow theory put forward by Mihaly Csikzentmihaly. This type of research uses a qualitative approach method. This research aims to provide insight and knowledge regarding the relevance of whirling dervish and Mihaly Csikzentmihaly's flow theory. The results of this research show that the relevance of whirling dervish and flow theory is the concept of self-fusion which makes individuals forget aspects of life that are considered unimportant in carrying out an activity.

**Keyword:** *Flow* theory; Mihaly Csikzentmihaly; Whirling dervish

**Introduction**

Islamic civilization was once in its heyday, where all aspects of people's lives experienced rapid progress. Especially in the field of science, it was marked by the birth of various scientists in various fields. There is one scientist who is well known in the field of Sufism whose various works are often used as references, namely Maulana Jalaludin Rumi. Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi is a Sufi figure and also a prominent poet around the 13th century, so famous Jalaludin Rumi he is not only known around the Middle Eastern countries but also among western countries which is indicated by the number of readers from western countries against Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry.

In addition to contributing his written works, Jalaluddin Rumi also had time to make spiritual dance music accompanied by the recitation of poems, praise, and prayers. There is a special dance that Jalaluddin Rumi

contributed to, namely Sufi dance or known as whirling dervishes. Sufi dance is a dance art that originated in Anatolia in the 13th century. Sufi dance is a part of self-meditation activities with the hope that those who perform the dance will reach the level of perfection of faith, eliminate lust, ego and also desires that make it possible to make it far from the Divine. The thing that must be considered when the dancer wants to do this Sufi dance is that the dancer needs to do some spiritual activities such as dhikr and prayer. Because it is a form of dance, of course this Sufi dance is accompanied by typical Middle Eastern music with strong mystical nuances typical of the understanding of Sufism.

Moving to the world of western psychology, there is a theory about the positive emotions that can be felt by individuals when successfully performing an activity that is carried out with full involvement. The existence of these positive emotions is related to the development of self-ability, the theory is known as flow theory proposed by Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi. According to Mihaly Csikzentmihaly, when an individual has experienced flow, he will feel like an optimal individual, feel enjoyment, and also valuable.

The researcher found several previous studies that have similarities and differences with the current research, including Churnawan, R. P. A., & Diantina, F. P. (2017). "Flow Experience in Professional Gamers of Online Games in Bandung City." *Proceedings of Psychology*, 727-732. The results of this study concluded that online games are growing rapidly in Indonesia, both in terms of the number of enthusiasts and the variety of game types. Players who engage in these games professionally are called professional gamers. These professional gamers are highly immersed and enjoy playing online games to the point of losing track of time. This behavior indicates a state of flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), flow experience is a positive emotion felt by individuals when they are fully engaged in an activity. Positive emotions in flow are associated with increased ability and performance. The dimensions of flow include challenge-skill balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time and autotelic experience (Churnawan & Diantina, 2017).

This study used a quantitative approach with 50 professional gamers as subjects. The measurement tool used was the Flow State Scale 2 (FSS) adapted by the researchers. The results showed that 39 professional gamers experienced flow dimensions such as concentration on the task at hand, loss of self-consciousness, and autotelic experience. However, some professional gamers did not experience six dimensions of flow: challenge-skill balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, sense of control, and transformation of time. In conclusion, most

of these professional gamers experienced the flow state when playing online games

The similarity between the previous and current research lies in the fact that both studies utilize the same theoretical framework, namely the flow theory proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. However, the differences lie in the research subjects and the research methods employed. In the previous study, the subjects were professional gamers, whereas in the current research, the focus is on the spiritual practice of Sufi whirling. The previous study used a quantitative approach, while the current research employs a qualitative approach.

The research framework in this study is divided into three parts: problem formulation, objectives, and benefits. The problems formulated from the title above are: 1) What is Sufi whirling? 2) What is flow theory according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi? 3) How does the Sufi whirling relate to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory? Therefore, the objective of this research is to explore the relevance of Sufi whirling to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. The expected benefits of this research include providing insights into Sufi whirling and Mihaly's flow theory, as well as demonstrating the application of Western psychological theories in spiritual practices within Sufism, particularly the implementation of flow theory in Sufi whirling activities.

## **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative research method, where qualitative research is a scientific approach frequently used and conducted by researchers in the fields of social sciences, education, and other academic disciplines (Darmalaksana, 2020). Research is used to help explain the article, considering that the article is written concisely, clearly, and simply without the need for extensive descriptions (Darmalaksana, 2020). The research process involves tracing primary and secondary sources, conducting a literature review and content analysis, classifying data based on the research framework, processing data, citing references, presenting data, abstracting data, interpreting data, and drawing conclusions (Darmalaksana, 2020).

## **Result and Discussion**

### **1. Sufi Whirling**

Sufi whirling, also known as *Sama'*, is a dance performed by spinning movements with the purpose of attaining tranquility, as each movement contains elements of remembrance of Allah (Wardah & Rohayati, 2020). Sufi whirling, also known in the Western world as the Whirling Dervish, is a

dance performed by Sufis. According to Chindi Andriyani, this dance emerged from Jalaluddin Rumi's perspective that the world is in constant rotation, much like the cycle of human life that begins from nonexistence, comes into being, and then returns to nonexistence. Each movement performed in Sufi whirling carries a profound meaning, symbolizing the journey of love and devotion that aims to cultivate awareness and submission to Allah.

Sufi whirling, or the Whirling Dervish, is also an expression of a devotee's longing for their Creator. In this dance, an individual experiences a sense of self-annihilation, feeling that nothing exists except Allah alone. When a person experiences this feeling of self-annihilation, they attain a sense of peace, as their soul becomes filled with the light of Allah (Murdiati, 2011). In practice, Sufi dancers wear special attire that symbolizes the death of the ego or worldly desires. The long black robe represents the death of worldly attachments, while the white skirt underneath symbolizes the shroud, the final garment worn by Muslims. The wide sleeves represent angel wings, and the tall felt hat symbolizes a tombstone.

According to Hajriansyah (2015), Sufi whirling is a spiritual dance that has been performed for centuries, with each distinctive movement carrying its own meaning. The spinning motion, aligned with the clockwise direction, symbolizes the journey of a devotee towards the Divine. The right hand is raised upward with an open palm, representing the devotee's acceptance of the Divine's grace. The left hand faces downward with an open palm, symbolizing the distribution of the received grace to the earth. The posture of the body, upright and graceful, represents the strength and steadfastness of the devotee on their spiritual journey. The closed eyes indicate that the Sufi dancer has transcended worldly concerns and finds inner peace through their connection with God.

This dance has been practiced since the 13th century, originating in Konya, Turkey. The dance, characterized by its spinning movement, holds deep spiritual meaning and spreads spiritual values throughout the region of Konya. Known as Sufi whirling or Whirling Dervish, it is a spiritual dance inspired by the ideas of the renowned Sufi and poet Jalaluddin Rumi. The dance emerged from the profound spiritual bond between Jalaluddin Rumi and Shamsuddin, which ultimately transformed Rumi's life entirely during the six months of their close friendship. Following Shamsuddin's death, which deeply saddened Rumi, he spun for three days and nights as an expression of his grief. However, Rumi later expressed that death is not merely about the physical body's disappearance but also represents a journey back to Allah (Rosyidah, 2020). Afterward, Jalaluddin Rumi began organizing sama' gatherings to commemorate the passing of Shamsuddin. From these sama' gatherings emerged a Sufi institution that features a

dance characterized by spinning movements, symbolizing the longing and deep love of a servant for their Creator.

According to Nasruddin Umar, there are several benefits and functions of Sufi whirling for those seeking inner peace and tranquility. First, it softens a hardened soul. By listening to and immersing oneself in the music, songs, and specific rhythms, one's heart can become gentler and more mature in behavior. Sufi whirling also helps correct misguided thoughts, and cleanse a tainted heart and mind. Second, it serves as a means to remove barriers that have distanced one from God. Uncontrolled arrogance and a hardened heart can distance a servant from their Creator, but through Sufi whirling, one can reconnect with divine knowledge through poetry and dhikr often recited during the dance. Third, it reaffirms one's spiritual commitment to continuously believe in Allah as our Lord. Fourth, when practiced correctly, Sufi whirling can deeply touch one's inner self, often leading to tears of longing for Allah.

Nasruddin Umar also believes that there are many factors that can cause a person to turn away from God. For this reason, Sufis seek ways to attain peace and tranquility of the soul, one of which is through Sufi whirling. This dance allows an individual to focus on drawing closer to the Divine. (Umar, 2020). A similar opinion is also expressed by Annemarie Schimmel. She states that through Sufi whirling, an individual feels closer and their soul experiences a deeper longing for the Creator. This is accompanied by music rich in spiritual significance and movements that are entirely devotional, aimed at achieving a closer connection with the Divine (Khalil et al., 2022).

The creator of Sufi whirling, Jalaluddin Rumi, also spoke earlier about how Sufi dance serves as nourishment for lovers of the divine, as it contains a fantasy of inner peace. Through Sufi whirling, individuals experience a great accumulation of positive energy. The continuous spinning dance, accompanied by the recitation of dhikr (remembrance of God), encourages and helps individuals focus on remembering God. As a result, dancers do not feel dizzy, even when the dance is performed for extended periods. Psychologically, the act of remembering God leads to a heightened awareness of the Divine's presence, and individuals gradually feel lighter and more at peace. They do not feel alone, as the Divine acknowledges their desires and sincere devotion. Thus, through Sufi whirling, a devotee experiences the presence of their Lord, leading to a sense of tranquility and closeness with God, and ultimately, a feeling of not being alone (Mahendar, 2014).

## **2. Flow State Theory**

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow is a state in which a person becomes completely immersed in an activity, making other concerns

seem insignificant. In this state, an individual enjoys the activity so much that they continue to engage in it persistently. Flow represents how someone achieves a harmonious life by reaching their desired goals. It allows a person to forget all pleasurable things and to feel continuously happy while engaging in their preferred activity, leading them to regard as unimportant any other aspects that seem incorrect. Flow enables an individual to achieve their best performance when they are in a state of total immersion or are solely focused on the task at hand. This total immersion creates a sense of euphoria and can lead to an addiction to the activity (Fajrina & Rosiana, 2015).

According to Aini et al., (2019), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identifies several aspects of the flow theory. *First, Challenge-Skill Balance.* Flow occurs when there is a balance between a person's abilities and the challenges they face. An optimal flow experience happens when there is a balance between one's skills and the challenges presented. This balance helps individuals achieve higher goals in line with their existing abilities. *Second, Action-Awareness Merging.* Often, individuals experience a lack of awareness while performing an activity, as their attention is entirely focused on the task at hand. This merging of action and awareness results in a flow state where activities become spontaneous, automatic, and integrated with the person's sense of self. *Third, Clear Goals.* In a flow state, individuals are aware of the goals they aim to achieve through their activity, which leads to satisfaction when these goals are met. If the goals are not yet achieved, they will continue the activity until they are reached. *Fourth, Unambiguous Feedback.* After achieving a goal, adequate feedback is necessary to evaluate the success of the activity and goal attainment. Proper feedback helps individuals improve and achieve better outcomes. *Fifth, Concentration on the Task at Hand.* Flow allows individuals to forget irrelevant aspects of their lives, enabling them to focus solely on what they deem important. *Sixth, Sense of Control.* Flow involves a complete sense of control over oneself during an activity, which empowers individuals to perform effectively and confidently. *Seventh, Loss of Self-Consciousness.* Flow can lead individuals to become less aware of others and themselves, allowing them to concentrate fully on the activity without external distractions. *Eighth, Transformation of Time.* In a flow state, individuals perceive time differently; it seems to pass unusually fast or slow, making conventional measures of time irrelevant. *Ninth, Autotelic Experience.* The term "autotelic" comes from Greek, where "auto" means self and "telos" means goal. An autotelic experience refers to an activity done not for future benefits but as an end in itself, considered a reward. In essence, autotelic activities are pursued because they are inherently satisfying and enjoyable.

### **3. Relevance of Sufi Whirling to Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi's Flow Theory**

After a brief explanation of Sufi whirling and flow theory, we can explore the relevance of Sufi whirling to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. A key aspect of this relevance is self-immersion, which causes individuals to disregard aspects of life they deem unimportant while engaging in an activity. In Sufi whirling, dancers often achieve a state of deep involvement or total immersion, where their focus is solely on the movements of the dance. They direct their attention and energy towards these movements in an effort to achieve spiritual unity with God. When relating this to the aspects of flow theory, we find several points of relevance between Sufi whirling and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. *First*, the relevance of Sufi whirling to the flow theory's aspect of Challenge-Skill Balance. The movements of Sufi whirling often require physical strength, mental endurance, and high levels of focus to be performed consistently. This presents a challenge for the dancers, but when they overcome this challenge with their skills, they experience flow, feeling fully engaged in the dance without difficulty. *Second*, the relevance of Sufi whirling to the flow theory's aspect of Action-Awareness Merging. Sufi dancers merge their actions with their awareness, focusing their consciousness through dhikr (remembrance of God) as an outpouring of longing. As a result, even during prolonged spinning, the dancers do not experience dizziness or other distractions. *Third*, the relevance of Sufi whirling to the flow theory's aspect of Clear Goals. Sufi whirling has a clear objective: achieving unity with the Divine. *Fourth*, the relevance of Sufi whirling to the flow theory's aspect of Concentration on the Task at Hand. In practice, Sufi dancers concentrate fully on their yearning for the Divine, disregarding all aspects that distance them from this goal. *Fifth*, the relevance of Sufi whirling to the flow theory's aspect of Loss of Self-Consciousness. In the context of Sufi whirling, the structured movements help dancers dissolve their egos in their pursuit of unity with God. This creates a condition where dancers feel at one with the movements and their spiritual goal, freeing them from self-consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

Sufi Whirling, or Whirling Darvish, created by Jalaluddin Rumi in the 13th century, is an expression of a devotee's longing for their Lord and a form of sorrow for the departure of his friend, Shamsuddin. This dance illustrates the feeling of self-abandonment and a focus solely on Allah SWT. Its relevance to flow theory lies in self-immersion and the forgetting of non-essential aspects of life, incorporating elements such as balance between skills and challenges, merging action with awareness, clear goals, concentration on the task, and loss of self-consciousness. Although flow theory was initially applied to contemporary activities, the concepts of self-

immersion and loss of self-consciousness are also relevant in understanding spiritual experiences in Sufism, particularly in Sufi whirling.

This research aims to expand the understanding of the spiritual experience of Sufi whirling through flow theory and encourage integration between psychology and spirituality. The results are expected to be beneficial in helping individuals find balance in their daily spiritual context. However, this study is limited to flow theory, has low generalizability to other spiritual practices, and faces methodological constraints. Recommendations for further research include cross-cultural exploration, the use of quantitative methods, and the integration of flow theory with other psychological theories, such as mindfulness, for a deeper understanding.

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