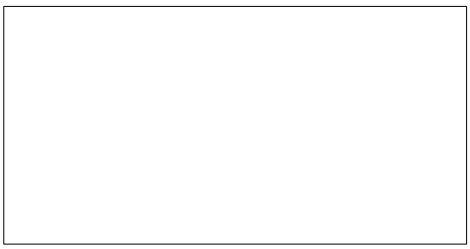

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Transitioning in and out of Autistic Flow: A Qualitative Study Presenting a Non-Pathologising Approach to Autistic Well-Being and Conceptualising Autistic Ways of Being in Clinical and Therapeutic Settings

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Autistic flow is a term that has been used to describe the autistic experience of being deeply immersed in an activity. Autistic flow theory proposes that autistic people may be uniquely positioned to access and manage flow states. However, more research is needed to understand the facilitative conditions that support autistic people transitioning into and out of flow states, particularly given the complex interplay of sensory needs, monotropic focus and environmental factors.

Aims and Methods: Semi-structured interviews were used alongside Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the qualitative experiences of ten autistic people transitioning in and out of flow.

Results: The analysis highlighted three themes: (1) Flow is enjoyable and essential for autistic well-being, playing a regulatory role in everyday experiences across sensory, emotional and cognitive facets; (2) autistic ways of being (i.e., monotropic attention, sensory sensitivity and repetitive behaviours) can amplify experiences in and out of flow; and (3) predictability is important for feeling safe to enter flow.

Discussion: We discuss the wealth of expertise autistic people possess about their own flow experiences and how this can be harnessed to build enabling environments for well-being. The findings contribute to a non-pathologising reconceptualisation of autistic ways of being through the approach of autistic flow theory.

1 | Introduction

Psychological flow is a pervasive feature of human life and occurs when a person becomes absorbed in an activity such that they experience intense focus, motivation and enjoyment, while other psychological features become increasingly peripheral, such as sense of self, time and space (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 2014). Autistic people, in particular, use the term 'autistic flow' colloquially to describe the autistic experience of being immersed in an activity, with diagnostic criteria associated with autism showing strong similarities to being in a flow state (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023). This includes an intense focus on certain tasks, difficulty switching between tasks, difficulty changing from familiar patterns/routines, and strong intrinsic motivation for behaviour. Other terms have also been used to describe such experiences,

Summary

- Implications for practice
  - Autistic people use the term 'autistic flow' colloquially to describe the autistic experience of being immersed in an activity (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023). The clinical significance of the study is its in-depth insight into the lived experiences of autistic people transitioning through flow states.
  - We conceptualise flow as having a regulatory impact on autistic experiences. We therefore suggest flow is an important psychological concept that can help to facilitate well-being and embrace autistic strengths that practitioners can use.
  - This study makes the case for reconceptualising autistic ways of being through a non-pathologising lens of autistic flow theory, e.g., seeing repetitive stimming behaviours as facilitating flow transitions. This has implications for practitioners in terms of navigating some of the stigma traditionally associated with autistic traits.
  - Practitioners should ensure neuro-inclusive environments within their therapeutic practice in supporting autistic people transition through flow (i.e., in psychological assessment, treatment planning and therapy), as sensory distractions and interruptions can have a negative impact on autistic flow transitions and well-being.
- Implication for policy
  - Experiences of autistic flow can inform and address the deficit framework of conceptualising autistic ways of being. Autistic flow theory (Heasman et al. 2024) offers a theoretical framework for positively conceptualising autistic ways of being which integrate and enrich existing policy movements towards non-pathologising, inclusive and neuro-affirming policies.

including 'monotropic attention', 'hyperfocus', 'in their own world' and 'zoned in' (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023).

The connection between psychological flow and autistic flow has increasingly been explored through phenomenological accounts (Chapman 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017; Heasman and Gillespie 2019a; Milton 2014; Williams et al. 2021). While flow is experienced by everyone regardless of neurotype, these accounts show how traits associated with autistic ways of being influence how flow states are accessed and managed. Synthesising this evidence, Heasman et al. (2024) proposed four theoretical principles indicative of autistic flow: (1) that autistic people are uniquely placed to discover and manage flow; (2) that their experience of flow may qualitatively diverge from traditional models of flow; (3) that transitions into and out of flow may be particularly challenging for autistic people; and (4) that constraints, both internal and environmental, may limit the potential of autistic flow (Heasman et al. 2024). This approach reframes autistic ways of being as strategic in engaging flow, potentially explaining how sensory sensitivities, repetitive behaviours, and monotropic attention styles enhance and sustain flow, with implications for well-being (McDonnell and Milton 2014; Milton 2017). That is not to say that any one of these principles might only be experienced by autistic people, but rather autistic people in particular encounter this collective range of considerations in relation to their flow experience. For this reason, further empirical research is needed to explore these principles and deepen understanding of the lived experience of autistic flow, especially given its potentially distinct phenomenology.

1.1 | Understanding the Lived Experience of Autistic People in States of Flow

The phenomenological approach within studies of autism aims to explore the conscious lived experience through interpretation, and prioritises the autistic voice (i.e., autistic perspectives) as the expert. In doing so, it seeks to counterbalance past research where autistic voice has been typically excluded from the process of constructing knowledge about autism (Chapman 2020; Milton 2014; Ridout 2017). Phenomenological accounts are increasingly guiding directions in autistic research, helping to increase mutual empathy, common language, and focus on aspects of autistic experience that have previously been neglected (Green and Shaughnessy 2023; Murray et al. 2023). In addition, flow states are an intensely subjective experience. Thus, this study aims to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to understand how autistic people experience flow, how autistic strengths interact with flow experiences, and how flow is facilitated for autistic people.

1.2 | Autistic Strengths Theorised to Enhance Flow

Monotropism refers to the distinctive way autistic people allocate their attention by focussing deeply on areas of specific interest, in contrast to polytropic minds, which spread attention broadly across topics with comparatively moderate interest (Bervoets et al. 2021; Murray 2018; Murray et al. 2005). Monotropism is therefore part of a natural variation in attentional styles observed when attention is understood to be a limited cognitive resource (Frith and Happé 1994; Gernsbacher et al. 2008). Despite this, monotropic tendencies have been stigmatised as 'fixated interests' due to social norms favouring attention that fosters social bonding (Heasman and Gillespie 2019b).

Atypical sensory processing styles involving greater attunement to smell, vision, touch, taste and sound (Crane et al. 2009; MacLennan et al. 2023) may also provide a unique route to discovering flow (Heasman et al. 2024; Rapaport et al. 2023). For example, in a study of 'sensory-seeking' individuals (i.e., characterised by high sensory stimulation and physiological arousal), they were more likely to access flow when challenge and skill levels varied (Baumann et al. 2016). Similarly, autistic sensory sensitivities may intensify feedback, a key component of deep flow (Leong 2016). This feedback can arise from environmental stimuli, the activity itself, or repetitive behaviours. Heasman et al. (2024) suggest several autistic sensory pathways into flow:

(1) sensory sensitivity stimulates motivation to begin the activity by providing structure and control; (2) (so-called) 'restricted and repetitive behaviours' provide continuous sensory feedback about progress within the activity; (3) sensory sensitivity may increase the chance of identifying distractors, thus facilitating the autotelic experience of flow (Robertson and Simmons 2015).

Stimming is a term that has been used to describe how autistic people consciously and unconsciously engage with repetitive, usually rhythmic, behaviours. Stimming can include body movements (e.g., hand flapping, finger flicking) and vocalisations (e.g., muttering and whistling) and is often used by autistic people as a self-regulatory mechanism for handling excess emotion, sensory overload and distracting or overwhelming thoughts (Kapp et al. 2019). McDonnell and Milton (2014) suggest autistic people use repetitive behaviours to help access flow states offering a sense of achievement, control and pleasure in a potentially overwhelming environment (Lawson et al. 2014; Pellicano and Burr 2012). Stimming is thought to be beneficial for cognitive and emotional regulation (Kapp et al. 2019; McDonnell and Milton 2014). However, different stims may serve different functions, such as sensory modulation (McCormack et al. 2023), and maintaining a homeostasis of arousal by controlling sensory stimulation (Kapp et al. 2019). It remains to be explored how stimming contributes to predictable sensory input, aiding regulation, and enhancing focus (Lidstone et al. 2014; McCormack et al. 2023; McDonnell and Milton 2014).

1.3 | How Do Autistic People Transition in and out of Flow?

While autistic traits may increase the likelihood of accessing flow, more research is needed to understand how this occurs in practice (Heasman et al. 2024). Identifying the strategies autistic people use to cultivate flow could guide the creation of environments that support flow and well-being. Although unpredictable, sensory-rich settings can lead to sensory overload, immersion in a single activity may help prevent it and promote well-being (Heasman et al. 2024; Kapp et al. 2019). Further insight is therefore needed into how autistic people seek out or adapt environments to discover and sustain flow.

1.4 | Therapeutic Practice With Autistic People

There continues to be a need for therapists to adopt neuro-affirmative and inclusive practice, for example in psychological assessment and treatment planning. Furthermore, policies that reflect anti-discriminatory practice can facilitate the creation of environments and therapeutic service provision that exemplify a necessary shift towards social justice (Deakin et al. 2024; Lisboa White et al. 2024). Many interventions are not designed for autistic people and often fail to consider the autistic experience independently from a comparison with a neuromajority (Deakin et al. 2024).

Literature suggests that autistic flow may contribute towards well-being (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023). The utilisation of flow within therapeutic settings, known as flow therapy, has gained traction due to its recognised benefits for well-being (Riva et al. 2016). Intrapersonal flow therapy involves identifying sources of flow experiences, operationalising the conditions necessary for accessing flow, and implementing strategies to enhance the frequency of experiencing flow (Riva et al. 2016). However, Heasman et al. (2024) suggest that autistic people may have qualitatively and environmentally distinct ways of accessing, experiencing, and exiting flow and accessing well-being. For example, previous research has characterised repetitive stimming behaviours as a maladaptive response to emotional dysregulation, often leading to stress-related treatments (McDonnell and Milton 2014). Conversely, phenomenological insights suggest that repetitive stimming behaviours are beneficial for accessing flow, coping with anxiety and stress, and contributing to increased well-being, cognitive and emotional regulation (Heasman et al. 2024; Kapp et al. 2019; McDonnell and Milton 2014). Lisboa White et al. (2024) suggest that being immersed in an activity, especially special interests, can be a strategy towards well-being for autistic people; providing a sense of connection, mitigating experiences of disconnection and loneliness.

Autistic flow theory may present an opportunity to focus interventions which promote autistic thriving and a necessary shift towards psychotherapeutic interventions that embrace autistic ways of being. However, it is imperative to incorporate autistic experiences of transitioning into and out of flow. Understanding the role of autistic ways of being may also move towards neuro-affirmative and non-pathologising conceptualisations of behaviour.

This raises three key questions for investigation in the present study. RQ1: What is the experience of autistic people in flow states? RQ2: What makes autistic flow distinct, in autistic terms, from traditional conceptualisations of flow? And RQ3: what strategies do autistic people use to support the transition in and out of flow?

2 | Methodology

2.1 | Positionality Statement

The co-authors' positionality considers neurodiversity as a natural part of human variation (Runswick-Cole 2014) and does not see difference as deficit (Kapp et al. 2013). Rather, it recognises that there is unrealised potential within neurodiversity should environments be optimised to support all neurotypes (Heasman 2018). The co-authors collectively have a wealth of lived experience and expertise across neurotypes, including autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Identity-first language was employed in line with majority community preference (Kenny et al. 2016).

2.2 | Design

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. This design was selected due to the focus on understanding subjective experience and the emancipatory goal of centring autistic

TABLE 1 | Participant demographics.

Participant	Age (SD)	Gender	Ethnicity	Employment status	Example of flow activity
1	21	Female	White British	Routine occupation	Controlling light and sound for performances
2	34	Male	White British	Lower supervisory and technical	Visiting train stations
3	46	Female	Black British of Caribbean background	Higher managerial professional and self-employed business owner	Website design
4	19	Female	White English	Lower managerial/ administrative/professional	Music writing
5	24	Non-binary	White English	Full-time student	Painting
6	56	Female	White English	Routine occupation	Indoor rowing
7	18	Non-binary	White British	Full-time student	Writing fiction
8	54	Female	White British	Semi-routine occupation and part-time student	Watching theatre
9	22	Queer	White British	Lower supervisory and technical	Archery
10	57	Female	White British	Routine occupation	Writing and outdoor therapy
Mean	35 (16.46)				

voices and lived experience in the process of constructing knowledge about autism (Chown 2014; Heasman and Gillespie 2019a; Milton 2014). Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand themes relevant to autistic flow.

IPA draws on hermeneutic approaches, which have been postulated as providing opportunities for interpretative analysis and contextualising participants' accounts of their experiences.

IPA has three distinctive characteristics: it is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative (Smith et al. 2022). IPA's idiographic approach involves a systematic process where each individual case is thoroughly examined and analysed until sufficient understanding is reached.

The focus on the idiographic process is something that has been highlighted as a key approach for working with autistic people to avoid imposing neurotypical frames of reference and instead note the importance of focusing on individual human lived experiences and sense-making within their context (Heasman et al. 2024). The inductive characteristic of IPA relates to its adaptability and allows us as researchers to employ methods that facilitate the discovery of unexpected themes or topics throughout data analysis. Finally, the interrogative feature of IPA relates to its ability to contribute to psychology through the interrogation of published research (Smith et al. 2022).

In the context of this research, these relate to reflections of flow as an intensively subjective experience and individual experience. In addition, the individual differences being explored, in particular the focus on autistic experiences, highlight a further challenge in relation to constructing an understanding of flow from outside the phenomenon of flow. Thus, a phenomenologically orientated and hermeneutically informed approach is relevant as it facilitates (1) the valuing of subjective experiences, (2) interpretation by the researchers in an endeavour to understand autistic flow (double hermeneutics), and (3) the engagement with theoretical perspectives through the analysis process.

Participatory member checking was undertaken after analysis, providing the opportunity for participants to confirm, build upon, or amend the results several months after the interviews (Birt et al. 2016). A presentation of the results, designed in a visual and simplified format, was emailed to all participants for their review. All ten participants responded; no major changes were suggested, and one participant proposed minor adjustments, which were subsequently implemented. This acted as an important validity check to ensure the interpretation resonated with participant experiences.

2.3 | Participants

Ten autistic adults (clinically diagnosed) were recruited through convenience sampling (See Table 1 for demographics). Inclusion criteria required participants to be diagnosed, screened for autism or self-diagnosed (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Given high co-occurrence with ADHD (AuDHD), participants who self-disclosed co-occurring ADHD (6 participants) were not excluded, in line with inclusive practice guidelines for research (Hours et al. 2022). Pseudonyms were used for anonymity (British Psychological Society 2021).

2.4 | Materials

To explore the research questions, an interview guide (See Data S1) was developed based on literature, using open questions, funnelling, and sequencing to build rapport and trust. The guide was structured chronologically to explore transitions into, during, and out of flow. Interviews allowed for spontaneous probing within the research aims, prioritising the participants as the experiential experts (Smith et al. 2022).

To minimise bias from prior knowledge of 'flow', synonyms like 'in the zone' and 'fully immersed' were used (Rapaport et al. 2023). Question 1 (a–d) prompted reflection on flow-like experiences and drew on established interview questions on flow (Beard 2015; Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Questions 2–6 explored the qualitative characteristics of autistic flow, focusing on feelings, motivations, settings, and interests aligned with core flow criteria (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009). Questions 7–9 and 12 explored autistic strategies and traits shaping transitions into and out of flow (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014). Questions 10–11 explored how the environment and interruptions affect transitions into and out of flow (Heasman et al. 2024; Milton and Sims 2016).

Interviews were held and recorded on Microsoft Teams, increasing access to participants and aiding transcription (Keen et al. 2022).

2.5 | Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the lead researcher's university ethics committee. Multi-source convenience sampling aimed to build a diverse sample through the researcher's professional and personal networks: an occupational therapist (2 participants), a psychotherapist specialising in autism (3 participants), and social media outreach (5 participants). The therapists were approached due to the diversity of their networks with neurodivergent people (allowing a view of flow across different ages) who have experiences in reflecting on their own thoughts and behaviours, facilitating our discussions. To protect participants, the therapists acted as gatekeepers and introduced the study to clients whom they thought were fit to give informed consent and participate. They distributed participant information sheets to interested clients.

After submitting written informed consent, participants received a Microsoft Teams link and the interview guide (see Data S2) in advance to accommodate processing differences (Maras et al. 2021). Demographics and a 6-character pseudonym were collected at the start of each call. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and given time for questions. The researcher clarified their non-judgmental role to reduce social desirability bias, with sensitivity to compensation, assimilation and masking behaviours commonly used by autistic people (Hull et al. 2017). After the interview, a debrief (See Data S3) was provided. All identifiable data were anonymised at the point of transcription and transcripts were stored securely. All participants approved the results and consented for the analysis and data to be published. All data were collected, transcribed and analysed by DW, with supervision from BH, and further reflective feedback from the remaining co-authors.

2.6 | Analysis

Each interview was analysed using an IPA approach (Smith et al. 2022) with hermeneutics of suspicion applied (i.e., reading texts with caution and not assuming the surface meaning). (1) The researcher reviewed transcripts for deeper immersion in the data; (2) initial exploratory notes were written in the margins, focusing on semantics and language of how participants talk about, understand and think about an experience; (3) experiential statements were constructed, relating to participant experiences; (4) connections across experiential statements were mapped; (5) personal experiential themes (PETs) were named and discussed; (6) steps 1–5 were repeated with each interview; (7) by looking for divergent and convergent connections of PETs across transcripts, group experiential themes (GETs) were generated; (8) PETs and GETs were refined via comparison to the data.

The analysis had three iterations of the hermeneutic circle. Iteration 1 identified experiential themes from participant descriptions of transitions in and out of flow. Iteration 2 built on this by organising experiential themes into global themes relating to the lived experience of flow states. These themes achieved a deeper level of interpretation by drawing together connections regarding how participants felt in the situations described and the consequences of flow for well-being. Through discussions with co-authors, these themes were further revised to ensure that the GETs had fully developed sufficient interpretations of the data. Iteration 3 therefore involved returning to data, discussing the analysis with participants, and focusing further on experiential aspects to achieve consensus on interpretation. The analysed data were returned to participants to validate the trustworthiness of the qualitative results. Participants were given the opportunity to review and contribute to the findings through member checking (Birt et al. 2016).

2.7 | Reflexivity

As a team of researchers applying IPA in our own work, integrating reflexivity is not something we see as optional but rather we engaged with reflexivity as a vital part of maintaining methodological integrity and honouring the depth and diversity of participants' experiences. As IPA is grounded in a double hermeneutic process (researchers interpreting participants' interpretations of their experiences), we continually reflected as a team on how our own perspectives shaped the analytic lens. As our research team includes neurotypical, neurodivergent and autistic researchers, throughout the research process we were transparent about our assumptions, values and experiences that may influence data interpretation. This included acknowledging our personal and epistemological biases (i.e., as social and cognitive researchers/psychologists, scientist practitioners, psychotherapists, etc., and how these might have affected the co-construction of our meaning making). From a reflexivity perspective in relation to ethical practice, these discussions enabled us to remain sensitive to the participant's voice and avoid

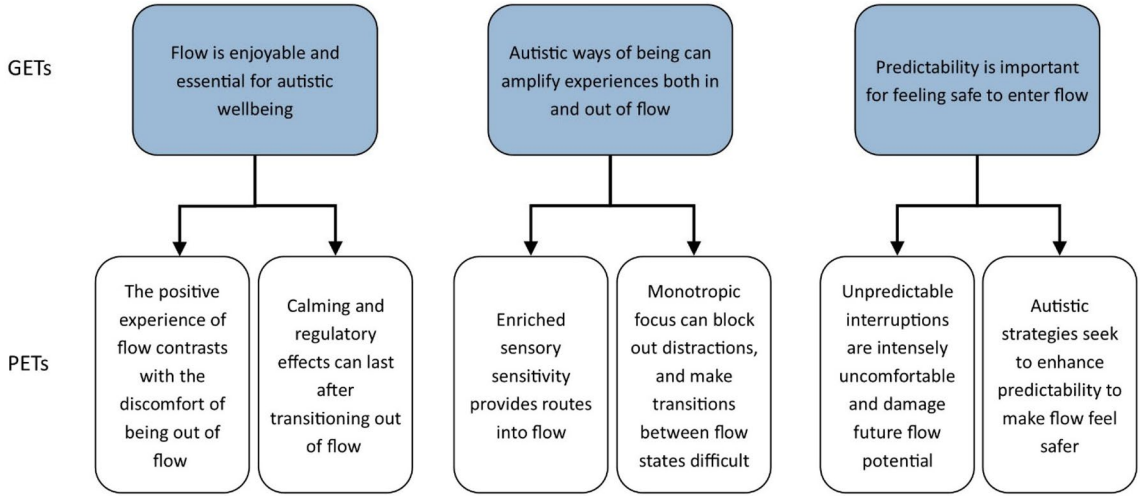

FIGURE 1 | IPA themes exploring the phenomenology of autistic flow.

imposing external frameworks. In relation to practical steps, we engaged in the following to ensure our reflexivity from the conception of the research through to the interviewing process, analysis and write up of the research:

- Kept reflexive journals throughout the research process.
- At preparation level, we reflected on the interview guide to ensure that it avoided using the word 'flow'.
- Member checking was engaged with as a prompt for reflexivity. Feedback received from this process prompted our reflections and discussions as researchers on our own biases, assumptions, and interpretative choices.
- Engaging in peer debriefing and supervision to foster peer-to-peer researcher support and to challenge assumptions as well as discuss any differences we may have been experiencing.
- Revisited transcripts and interpretations to check for coherence and authenticity.

3 | Results

The analysis identified three themes, with associated subthemes (see Figure 1), which explain the phenomenology of autistic flow in response to the research questions:

- 'Flow is enjoyable and essential for autistic well-being'—this theme captures how autistic people experience flow states and the subsequent effects this has for well-being (responding to RQ1).
- 'Autistic ways of being can amplify experience both in and out of flow'—this theme represents, in autistic terms, aspects of flow that are unique for autistic people (responding to RQ2).
- 'Predictability is important for feeling safe to enter flow'—this theme highlights the relationship between internal feelings and external situations that enable autistic people to transition in and out of flow (responding to RQ3).

The following analysis explores themes supported by participant quotes. All participants described flow in ways consistent with traditional conceptualisations, using language aligned with the 'constellation' of subjective states previously documented in flow theory (Heasman et al. 2024; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009). Half of participants explicitly referenced flow theory. Participants described moments of intense concentration (e.g., using synonyms such as 'in the zone' and 'tunnel vision'); intrinsic motivation (e.g., 'I love the thrill of it' [flow activity]); heightened sense of clarity (e.g., 'I know exactly what comes next'); heightened sense of control ('I know what to do and it makes me feel in control'); time distortion (e.g., 'I completely lost track of time'); a merging of action and awareness (e.g., 'I become what I am doing'); and a loss of self-consciousness (e.g., 'in my own world'). Flow interruptions were described as 'breaking a spell' or 'popping a bubble', further reinforcing flow as a distinct psychological experience. The themes below explore how these experiences are uniquely shaped by autistic lived experience.

3.1 | Flow Is Enjoyable and Essential for Autistic Well-Being

Flow has been traditionally associated with enhancing positive aspects of well-being, but it may play a qualitatively distinct role in autistic well-being. This was often ascribed to the escape and intrinsic enjoyment it brings. Immersive experiences were described with phrases like a 'spell', 'a bubble' or 'in my own world', depicting experiences of disconnection from the external environment and immersion into flow.

3.1.1 | The Positive Experience of Flow Contrasts With the Discomfort of Being Out of Flow

Participants frequently contrasted the comfort of flow with the stress of out-of-flow experiences. For example, Participant 10 noted, 'If I've got to navigate a very busy, very noisy, very unpredictable environment. It's a real low-grade stress. But it [flow] would be the polar opposite of that'. Likewise, Participant 1

described, 'I think the thing with autistic people when they don't know what to do, it can really set them off'. In such instances, flow provided a predictable structure that helped regulate sensory input and reduce overstimulation, comparing with wider autistic accounts of the regulatory benefits of flow (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023).

Participants contrasted in- and out-of-flow experiences in terms of connection (with themselves, with others and the activity). For example, Participant 4 used music writing to process and express difficult emotions: 'if I'm overstimulated, I usually feel more calm... it's a way of like an escape for me to kind of process emotions'. This contrasted communication and emotional experiences out-of-flow:

> I struggle with like communication sometimes and specifically like regulating my emotions and trying to like find a way to communicate with the people I'm feeling. I think writing it down in a way that I understand and that I find easy to do actually really helps me to even be more self-aware of how I'm actually feeling as well (Participant 4).

Similarly, participants described flow experiences as a 'connection when I don't always feel connected' (Participant 10). For example:

> Sometimes in my life I feel a bit out of sync [...] interacting with people or it might just be how I'm feeling generally [...] Whereas when I was doing a row like that, it just kind of all melted into one and it just felt it just felt good (Participant 6).

Connections also extended to interpersonal connections through finding flow with others. In the following example, participant 10 discusses their work as a therapist:

> In my work as a therapist, I can often be in a really quite deep state of flow in a session with a client as well. [...] I've moved consciously and unconsciously towards work that plays to my strengths, which is once I'm in a zone I'm very, very focused (Participant 10).

These examples highlight properties of flow for autistic participants centred on connection, calm and regulation, which contrast potential daily challenges, such as social disconnection (Milton 2017; Williams et al. 2021), overstimulation, daily out-of-flow discomfort (McDonnell and Milton 2014) and stress.

3.1.2 | Calming and Regulatory Effects Can Last After Transitioning out of Flow

After transitioning out of flow, there were far-reaching positive effects. Participants describe how flow could 'set me up for the day and I felt much calmer' (Participant 6), highlighting the regulatory benefits of flow:

> There's a level of anxiety that exists pretty much all the time ...If I can't do it (rowing machine) ... my anxiety levels do go up and I don't deal with stuff as well as I would normally. I seem to be more sensitive to... sensory stuff than I would be if I was more regulated (Participant 6).

> It leaves me feeling afterwards. I definitely feel calm, even when things get a bit noisier, everything still feels a little bit more muted. Kind of like I've got like earplugs in and, like, blinders. Everything feels a lot less overwhelming when I've been doing it (Participant 9).

In these examples, residual effects of flow include decreased negative experiences of sensory sensitivity, lower anxiety levels, and a greater sense of control. Indeed, participant 7 explained regular access to flow is 'like maintenance of mental well-being and getting into that place is really good and feels really satisfying'. This highlights an important relationship between psychological flow and autistic well-being where regular access to flow can help to mitigate potential proclivities towards anxiety, sensory overload, and overwhelm (Heasman et al. 2024; Rapaport et al. 2023).

3.2 | Autistic Ways of Being Can Amplify Experiences Both in and out of Flow

Autistic ways of being could amplify experiences in and out of flow. While sensory sensitivity increases proclivity to distractions, it also represents a strength in identifying distractors which could otherwise be problematic for flow. Additionally, sensory sensitivity could enhance enjoyment and connection to the activity, providing routes into flow without the pre-requisite of the challenge-skill balance. Monotropic focus could block out distractions; however, its nature may make transitions between states difficult.

3.2.1 | Enriched Sensory Sensitivity Provides Routes Into Flow

Participants described how sensory experiences enhanced physiological arousal and increased connection to activities. For example, Participant 10 used sounds to increase connection within their writing. 'If I am feeling like I'm losing contact with what I'm doing, I'll use something (music and sounds) to get back in touch... I will get a physiological feeling from certain sounds' (Participant 10).

Participants highlighted that flow was not necessarily defined by a fit between individual skill and task challenge, as traditionally described in flow literature. Instead, the threshold for entering into flow was more flexible. For example, when shooting an end series of arrows onto a target, Participant 9 focused on sensory arousal and repetitive movements, enabling access to flow:

> It's not about whether it's going well or going badly... it's all about the physicality... That feels very comforting, I think, and very calming and very secure... it just becomes about getting the next arrow on the string and proceeding with the movements... it's that feeling of, like, repelling something from you as well. And like the force and movement behind it, which is really quite satisfying (Participant 9).

In this example, the physical feedback of the activity, rather than the performance outcome, is specifically identified as satisfying and calming. It highlights the potential to derive flow from sensory feedback in a way that may not be commonly recognised and raises an interesting question as to whether autistic people are able to find flow more easily in everyday tasks compared with non-autistic people (Heasman et al. 2024).

3.2.2 | Monotropic Focus Can Block Out Distractions, and Make Transitions Between Flow States Difficult

Participants described the intense focus of flow as a consistent trait across their lives, often linked to monotropism:

> It's like there's an electricity happening. It's quite [...] contained, but it's like yeah, I'm like (participant places hands either side of their head and moves them back and forward as though in tunnel) and it's very, it can get very, very tunnel vision-ee which has been a thing all my life with just loads of stuff (Participant 7).

Metaphors such as a 'tunnel' (Participant 7), 'a bubble' (Participant 10), 'a spell' (Participant 8) or 'in the zone' (Participant 1) reflected how flow attention felt enclosed from external reality. This monotropic focus was seen as beneficial for accessing and sustaining flow, particularly by filtering out potentially disruptive or overwhelming stimuli:

> I was completely absorbed in it (psychological flow). It was like nothing else in the world existed while I was doing it, which was really, really beneficial for me because I had a lot of stuff going on in my private life (Participant 6).

Participant 9 described interruptions as any 'large changes to sensory input' such that being in flow state means they 'can block out... base level (sensory input) that exists at all times' but the 'very loud, sudden noises will ...breakthrough'. Monotropism not only supported flow but also contributed to well-being by muting overwhelming stimuli. However, this attentional style was not always recognised positively. Participants reported being mischaracterised due to their intense focus:

> And I mean since childhood I was, you know, I had one year of school reports that when this kid lives in a world of her own [...] I could I can absolutely dissociate into my own bubble with no problem at all (Participant 10).

While monotropism offered a unique route into flow, it could be stigmatised depending on social and cultural expectations (Heasman and Gillespie 2018). Moreover, participants highlighted the challenges of being interrupted while in a monotropic state. Participant 3 expressed frustration when their daughter interrupted them, saying, 'Come in and say hi. But don't plonk yourself down and expect me to be able to split my head in two, and work and listen to you. Because I can't do both' (Participant 3). This describes the difficulty splitting attention between the activity and the interruption. The nature of monotropic attention may make interruptions more damaging due to having to completely switch tasks (Rapaport et al. 2023). Equally, participant 7 explained 'unless my attention is pulled away, I can get back into it'.

3.3 | Predictability Is Important for Feeling Safe to Enter Flow

The transition into flow depended on both internal states and external conditions. It was important for participants to feel safe to enter flow, which was linked to greater situational predictability. This sense of safety could be easily broken by unexpected interruptions, which had cascading adverse effects, including frustration, emotional overload, and difficulty re-accessing subsequent flow.

3.3.1 | Unpredictable Interruptions Are Intensely Uncomfortable and Damage Future Flow Potential

Participants described intense negative experiences associated with interruptions from flow, such as 'intrusive', 'distressing', and 'overwhelmingly upsetting'. Participants identified various sensory and situational interruptions as major disruptors leading to lasting negative effects: 'If I'm already overstimulated... and then something happens to disrupt what you're trying to do (to regulate and cope with the overwhelm) ... I often end up...in tears' (Participant 4).

Anticipating interruptions also posed a barrier to flow. Participant 5 explained, 'I see it (flow) as maybe something quite fragile, like to protect [...] so I might just, say, avoid getting stuck into things [...] so I don't have to deal with the feeling of when it gets interrupted'.

Participant 6 found difficulty accessing her flow activity during COVID-19 because her family would often use the kitchen, where she would usually row in solitude: 'I really struggled to go on it (the rowing machine). It was partly the preparation [...] To choose the time that I was rowing and row knowing that I wouldn't have any interruptions.' This supports findings that persistent sensory distractors hinder engagement in meaningful activities (Milton and Sims 2016). Identified sensory barriers included smells, lighting, loud or sudden noises, and people entering the space: 'Sometimes I will not be able to go into flow state as much because I can't block out the sensory input that I'm getting' (Participant 8).

3.3.2 | Autistic Strategies Seek to Enhance Predictability to Make Flow Feel Safer

Consequently, participants developed sophisticated strategies for minimising the range of different interruptions that could disturb

flow. One such preparation was to create a secure environment where the likelihood of interruptions was low, enabling participants 'to just let go' of the external world and 'fully immerse' into the flow state, free from the fear of being 'pulled out'.

> And then I know that it's all safe and I can umm, just be there and immerse myself in it. But all that does need to happen beforehand [...] it is not even just immersing. It's actually being able to attend in the first place (Participant 8).

All participants reported using implicit and explicit rules to shape their environment and reduce interruption risk. Nine participants did this by communicating expectations to others. Participant 3 'had stuff on every door so that he knew like when I was working and whatever to not disturb'. Participant 5 would 'always lock the door... if a friend comes by, then at least it's like I'm in control of my space'. Eight participants decided to choose a time of day such as early morning or late night. 'I've recently discovered that very early mornings are quite good. Because I'm unlikely to be interrupted' (Participant 10).

Seven participants chose environments with explicit expectations to not interrupt, such as working in the library, the formal theatre, and working in solitude. Participant 8, for example, preferred formal theatre to relaxed theatre rules, where talking and movement were encouraged, because this could pull them out of flow: 'I like to be in that kind of like lights are down and we all know what's expected and, you don't talk during the performance' (Participant 8).

Using sensory sensitivity to identify distractors could therefore help to make environments more predictable. However, preparation for flow could also be internally focused. For example, stimming behaviours created predictable sensory input which 'blocks out other sensory input which can be overwhelming' (Participant 4). Examples of sensory input were rhythmic tapping, playing the same songs on repeat, and layering familiar music and sounds. 'If I just need some more noise blocking, like faffing around with the levels of music to like right and sounds, waterfall noises, primeval forest. Like layering those as well. Yeah, I'm in my zone' (Participant 7). This highlights the dual role of predictability in facilitating flow experiences for autistic participants, which could be focused both externally (preventing unwanted sensory distractions) and internally (controlling the process and regulation of sensory stimulation).

4 | Discussion

This study examined the qualitative experiences of autistic people transitioning in and out of flow. The following discussion contextualises these findings within wider research on autism and flow states.

4.1 | The Qualitatively Distinct Role of Flow for Autistic Well-Being

In exploring RQ1 (What is the experience of autistic people in flow states?), we developed the theme: Autistic flow is enjoyable and essential for autistic well-being. This aligns with existing research demonstrating the positive effects of flow on psychological well-being (Csikszentmihalyi 2014), but in an autistic context, flow appears to serve additional regulatory functions beyond enjoyment.

Our findings suggest that flow not only provides a sense of intrinsic satisfaction but also serves as an essential counterbalance to environmental and sensory stressors. Participants described a stark contrast between their in-flow and out-of-flow experiences, with flow providing a structured and predictable state that mitigates anxiety, sensory overload, and unpredictability. These factors align with wider literature on the contribution of autistic flow to well-being (Heasman et al. 2024; McDonnell and Milton 2014; Rapaport et al. 2023).

The strong association between flow states and cognitive and emotional regulation in our study is also supported by some predictive processing theory accounts of autism, which posit that autistic people experience heightened sensitivity to prediction errors (Bervoets et al. 2021). Given that flow states are characterised by absorption in an activity with a clear structure and immediate feedback, our findings suggest that flow may serve as a cognitive and sensory regulation tool by reducing prediction errors and stabilising attention. This could explain the strong contrast participants reported between their immersive experiences in flow and the stressors they encountered outside of flow states.

4.2 | How Autistic Strengths Facilitate Flow

Through exploring RQ2 (What makes autistic flow distinct, in autistic terms, from traditional conceptualisations of flow?), we identified the theme: Autistic ways of being can amplify experiences both in and out of flow. This supports previous research suggesting that autistic people may be uniquely positioned to access and sustain flow states (Heasman et al. 2024).

Our findings provide empirical support for a theory of autistic flow, particularly in demonstrating how heightened sensory profiles, monotropic attention, and repetitive behaviours facilitate deep immersion in activities. Unlike traditional flow theory, which emphasises the importance of a balance between challenge and skill (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), our findings suggest that autistic people can experience flow through sensory delight and predictability, rather than challenge alone. Participants described how sensory elements, such as the rhythmic movements of rowing, the tactile feedback of archery, or the soundscapes accompanying writing, acted as direct facilitators of flow, independent of skill acquisition. These findings challenge conventional flow models and suggest that autistic flow experiences may be qualitatively distinct in their reliance on sensory engagement as an entry point, aligning with sensory-seeking accounts of flow (Baumann et al. 2016).

Additionally, stimming, often pathologised in diagnostic criteria as repetitive and stereotyped behaviour (American Psychiatric Association 2013), emerged as an important facilitator of flow. Stimming behaviours, such as rhythmic tapping, listening to repetitive music, or engaging in structured movement, provided

participants with a means of maintaining focus, blocking out external distractions, and sustaining immersion. Parvizi-Wayne et al. (2024) suggest that sensory, self-generated outcomes in flow are usually highly predictable. Repetitive behaviours can induce flow states in and of themselves, potentially explaining their role in cognitive and emotional regulation (Kapp et al. 2019; McDonnell and Milton 2014), thus highlighting the need to reframe these behaviours as adaptive strategies rather than deficits.

However, despite these strengths, our findings also revealed the vulnerability of autistic flow states to disruption. The environment has been observed to play a significant role in well-being outcomes for autistic people (Deakin et al. 2024). Many everyday environments are chaotic and overwhelming for those with sensory sensitivities. Likewise, social norms mean that repetitive behaviours and stimming behaviours can be socially stigmatised in particular contexts, further leading to anxiety and negative effects. Some task demands also prevent deep absorption (e.g., likelihood of interruptions), forcing monotropic attention to split in uncomfortable ways. Participants reported that being pulled out of flow unexpectedly was intensely uncomfortable and often led to lingering emotional and cognitive disruption, supporting the idea that autistic flow states require careful environmental and social scaffolding to be sustained (Heasman et al. 2024). These findings are of use to practitioners, providing insight about the interface between autistic traits and how the environment can facilitate transitions into and out of flow.

4.3 | The Role of Predictability in Supporting Flow Transitions

Through exploring RQ3 (What strategies do autistic people use to support transitions in and out of flow?), we identified the theme: predictability is important for feeling safe to enter flow.

Predictability emerged as a key factor in enabling autistic participants to access flow states. Participants described extensive strategies for minimising interruptions, structuring their environments, and setting social boundaries to safeguard their immersion in activities. This supports some predictive processing model accounts of autism, which suggest that many autistic people actively shape their environments to reduce uncertainty and maintain cognitive stability (see Bervoets et al. 2021). Our findings demonstrate that flow states may serve as a mechanism for achieving predictability, offering autistic people a structured, absorbing experience that allows them to manage otherwise overwhelming environmental demands.

Furthermore, social predictability played an important role in autistic flow experiences. Participants highlighted that flow was more easily sustained when shared social expectations were clear, such as in libraries, formal theatres, or synchronised group activities like rowing. These findings emphasise the importance of environmental design in supporting autistic well-being and suggest that autistic people may thrive in structured settings where interruptions are minimised.

Interestingly, participants also highlighted that anticipated interruptions were less distressing than unpredictable ones. When interruptions were expected, such as planned breaks or pre-established transition cues, the disruption to flow was reduced. This insight suggests that flow-supportive strategies should not only focus on eliminating distractions but also on implementing predictable transition mechanisms to help autistic people shift between states more smoothly.

This has implications for non-pathologising approaches to autistic well-being, particularly in therapeutic contexts (Riva et al. 2016) as our findings (1) elucidate the conditions required to access flow and (2) identify strategies to increase flow which embrace autistic ways of being.

5 | Limitations

While the study identified well-being benefits of flow experiences, different flow activities appeared to regulate emotions and cognitions in varying ways. Some participants reported an enjoyable absence of thoughts and emotions through full focus on the activity. Others were immersed in the emotion of the activity; for example, they were immersed in what the theatre character was experiencing. Indeed, this suggests that flow activities can serve multiple regulatory functions that are specific to individual traits (McCormack et al. 2023).

There is wider literature which further highlights potential links between sensory delighting and flow. This is not necessarily specific to autistic experiences; for example, ASMR, spiritual practices, and sports psychology have all been linked to flow (Barratt and Davis 2015; Jackman et al. 2019; Rufi et al. 2016). This raises an important question about the extent to which autistic people are uniquely positioned to access flow. In our data, we did not actively seek to explore the potential boundary between autistic sensory delighting compared to non-autistic sensory experiences. Indeed, it could be argued that the sensory dimension of flow is indicative of how it is pervasively experienced as a holistic and immersive phenomenon, regardless of neurotype. However, our data further highlight how autistic people are uniquely positioned to access flow due to the combination of factors related to monotropic attention, sensory sensitivity, and regulatory stimming. Thus, while the present study is limited in the extent to which phenomenological aspects of flow are specific to neurotype, a key contribution is to recognise how autistic people experience the wider management of psychological flow. Specifically, the consequences of flow on autistic well-being, the balance between inner and outer flow experiences, and transitions into and out of flow.

In addition, it should be noted that autism encompasses wide heterogeneity and, despite meeting qualitative standards, our participants were UK-based, educated to at least GCSE level, and used spoken communication, which may restrict generalisability to wider autistic populations (Koegel et al. 2020).

While there is growing recognition of the high co-occurrence rate of autism and ADHD (Hours et al. 2022), it is possible our findings may also apply to ADHD and AuDHD flow experiences. Indeed, ADHD and autism are two neurotypes that, while distinct, share attentional strengths related to flow states (Ashinoff and Abu-Akel 2021; Dwyer et al. 2024; Heasman

et al. 2024; Hutson and Hutson 2024; Matson et al. 2013; Murray et al. 2005). Their regular occurrence as a diagnosis means that strategies for supporting both diagnoses are often similar (Rong et al. 2021). We therefore cannot definitively say whether our findings relate specifically to autism. However, a high overlap between ADHD and autism was observed in our sample, and an inclusive approach to co-occurring diagnoses enables a better understanding of the lived realities of neurodivergent people in the world. Future research should therefore explore how findings may be applicable between and across neurotypes.

6 | Conclusion

This study highlights the qualitative importance of flow for autistic well-being. Autistic flow is an adaptive, enriching and self-regulatory phenomenon that provides an important source of positive experiences, contrasting sharply with out-of-flow experiences. Flow can mitigate some of the challenges that autistic people face in daily life and has lasting positive effects, enhancing sensory and emotional regulation, reducing anxiety, and improving overall life management. These insights support Heasman et al. (2024), suggesting autistic people are uniquely placed to access and manage flow states, using their experiential expertise to alter environments where possible. The study offers empirical evidence supporting the non-pathologising reconceptualisation of features such as repetitive or stimming behaviours, monotopic attention and heightened sensory sensitivity. The results suggest the environment plays a key role in enabling or inhibiting access to flow; thus, designing environments that support predictability, sensory engagement, and uninterrupted immersion can help autistic people access and sustain flow, ultimately enhancing their quality of life.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** capr70073-sup-0001-Supinfo1.docx. **Data S2:** capr70073-sup-0002-Supinfo2.docx. **Data S3:** capr70073-sup-0003-Supinfo3.docx.