THESIS

THE MEANING OF OCCUPATION: A META-SYNTHESIS OF ELEVEN QUALITATIVE

RESEARCH ARTICLES FROM THE JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL SCIENCE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

THE MEANING OF OCCUPATION: A META-SYNTHESIS OF ELEVEN QUALITATIVE

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The presence of meaning in one's life is recognized to be important for fostering health and well-being. Humans create meaning through occupation, but whether there are similarities across the components of meaning for individuals remains unanswered. Meaning is revealed through language and narrative, which necessitates a qualitative, interpretive approach to its study (Polkinghorne, 1988). Qualitative research has supplied rich data about the meaning of occupation for various cultures, populations, and activities, but to-date, there has not been a systematic review to identify if general patterns of meaning and experience exist in occupation. Following a framework synthesis approach to qualitative meta-synthesis, the current exploratory study examined positive subjective experiences associated with occupation to uncover elements of the meaning of occupation. Two higher-order themes were discovered, *social meaning* and *selfhood,* that contained multiple themes as well as four additional themes including *satisfaction*, *pleasure/enjoyment*, *stimulating*, and *health and well-being.* Complex interconnections between themes also arose and are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Meaning and occupation

It is an accepted notion within occupational science that engagement in meaningful

occupations contributes to personal health and well-being (Hasselkus, 2011). Focusing on

meaningful occupations is an essential part of delivering client-centered care in occupational

therapy practice. The term *meaningful* often denotes that a person's experience of an occupation

is *important*, *significant* or *valuable* in some way to his or her life. However, defining the

meaning in occupation through the use of these synonyms offers little to an understanding of

what exactly meaning is or how it is created. The personal experience of meaning in occupation

is unique for each individual (Pierce, 2001), however, there are likely identifiable aspects of

meaning which all persons share. Theorists, in occupational science and otherwise, have

endeavored to define global features of meaning in occupation.

Finding meaning within day-to-day activities involves a process of identifying

associations between doing and the experiences of doing such that a person may categorize and

make sense of the world and find stability throughout the life course (Baumeister, 1991). Further,

the experience of meaning in everyday occupations may contribute to a person's overall sense of

life satisfaction and meaning in life (Eakman & Eklund, 2012). Therefore, determining what

features constitute meaning in occupation is a necessary line of inquiry for understanding human

experience and advancing the study of occupation.

Psychological theories postulate on the likely features of meaning within occupation that

foster personal well-being. Self-determination theory, for example, identifies autonomy,

competence, and relatedness as basic human needs and important features of goal-directed action

(Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, Baumeister (1991) includes a sense of purpose, fulfillment of

values, self-efficacy, and self-worth as four aspects of experience that arise through occupation and contribute meaning to life. In addition, Emmons (1999) has identified goals, purposes and enjoyment as components of day-to-day actions that contribute to the experience of meaning.

Ultimately, meaning in occupation may be a way through which individuals interpret their lives and find reason for their existence. Though the creation of meaning is unique to each individual, it is inextricably tied to contextual social and cultural forces that influence what one finds to be important (Christiansen, 1999; Reed & Hocking, 2013). Meaning motivates continued engagement in daily activities as people strive to find justification of their actions as part of a larger purpose (Baumeister, 1991). The complex nature of meaning produces a challenge to those embarking upon its study.

Qualitative study of meaning

The study of meaning may elude objective measurement because it requires a process of interpretation of individual accounts of experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). Meaning is also deeply embedded in people's mundane day-to-day activities and often goes unrecognized until those taken-for-granted activities are disrupted (Christiansen, 1999). As a constantly-changing, subjective experience, meaning may be best understood through a narrative account by its holder (Polkinghorne, 1988; Reed & Hocking, 2013). This characteristic calls for a qualitative approach to its study.

Qualitative research is an interpretive, naturalistic approach to studying people and phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher, through his or her theoretical lens, assumptions, and interpretation of the data, attempts to gain a holistic account of the problem or issue being studied. This requires an intimacy between the researcher and his or her informants that gives qualitative data a richness and depth that escapes its quantitative counterpart.

Qualitative research can help extricate the complex aspects of human nature (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2004) and therefore is the optimal method to attempt the byzantine task of understanding meaning.

A breadth of qualitative methods have been employed in the study of occupation. For example, phenomenology is a qualitative method commonly used to understand and describe the patterns of meaning for a group of people who have shared a lived experience (Creswell, 1998). Other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, which moves beyond description to develop an explanation of a phenomenon, and ethnography, which describes and interprets the shared experience of a culture, are also used to investigate meaning. These methods employ the use of observation as well as open-ended interview questions, which helps the researcher uncover the obscure features of meaning. To date, a multitude of qualitative research on the meaning of occupation has explored shared personal experiences across a variety of cultures, populations, and activities. Such studies are valuable to understanding meaning in occupation in specific contexts. Left in question, however, is whether there are patterns of meaning in the experience of occupation which are shared regardless of the context. Synthesis of existing research is needed to reveal this information.

Qualitative meta-synthesis

Qualitative meta-synthesis is defined as an, "interpretive integration of qualitative findings in primary research reports that are in the form of interpretive syntheses of data" (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; pg. 199); and offers an effective approach to collectively examine and interpret the findings of multiple studies. Synthesizing research about a phenomenon of interest to a discipline can deepen the understanding of the topic and increase the transferability of the findings to a larger group than the original findings of any individual study.

Nonetheless, synthesizing qualitative research may be viewed as controversial in that some believe it goes against the principle that the findings from a form of inquiry are not intended to be generalized outside the context of the study. But because of this characteristic, rich qualitative findings often go unused in clinical application (Sandelowski & Barroso).

There are multiple approaches to qualitative meta-synthesis, including framework synthesis, thematic synthesis, textual narrative synthesis, and constant target comparison, among others (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Out of the many options, framework synthesis appears to be the most effective approach for studying meaning in occupation. Framework synthesis brings together the data of multiple qualitative studies by categorizing information using a priori codes informed by past research, theory and consensus of a team of researchers (Barnett-Page & Thomas). The use of a priori codes guides the direction of analysis, but does not eliminate the possibility of adding de nova codes that may surface throughout the process (Dixon-Woods, 2011). Framework synthesis has been established in primary qualitative research and the same characteristics that make it a valid choice for primary studies make it a viable and appealing option for research synthesis. The process begins deductively, but as it progresses deeper into the interpretative stages of theme analysis, the researcher takes on a more inductive role to enhance understanding about the topic (Barnett-Page & Thomas).

Several assumptions from the philosophy of occupational science informed the questions and the direction of research. Firstly, personal meaning is an important construct useful for understanding the contributions of occupation to health and well-being (Hasselkus, 2011). Secondly, the pursuit of well-being is a life-long dynamic process involving participation in the occupations that one finds meaningful and purposeful (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Vessby &

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Kjellberg, 2010). Thirdly, occupation is embedded with experiences of meaning and this meaning may motivate future occupations (Kielhofner, 2002). Fourthly, there are features intrinsic to a person as well as external influences upon occupation that either encourage or inhibit occupational engagement (Harvey & Pentland, 2010). Working under a framework synthesis approach, a priori codes were developed by a team of researchers based on these assumptions to identify common themes across multiple articles that studied meaning and occupation (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

The subjective experience

Inherent in the notion of occupation is the understanding that the experience of engagement is unique for each person (Pierce, 2001). As Hasselkus (2011) has emphasized, "the *experience* [original emphasis] of the occupation may very well be the most important part" (p. 185). Therefore, the study of meaning in occupation requires a focus on the personal and subjective experience that one perceives in relation to occupation. Satisfying and fulfilling positive experiences arise from harmonious interactions between personal and environmental factors within an occupation (Kielhofner, 1980). In contrast, negative experiences arise from a misfit between the person, environment, and occupation. These ideas guided the development of the a priori codes focused on positive or negative experience.

Positive subjective experiences have been associated with feelings of control, continuity, inner peace and strength, empowerment, enjoyment, pleasure, as well as satisfaction. Frequent experiences which evoke positive affective feelings can lead to an overall sense of well-being (Diener, Sandvik, & Pavot, 1991).Conversely, negative experiences within occupations have been associated with feelings like sadness, fear, anxiety, grief, exhaustion, boredom, and isolation (Baumeister, 1991).

The current exploratory study arose out of a larger project for which the intent of synthesis was to identify possible patterns across the findings in studies of meaning related to occupation. Several research questions, developed based on occupational science literature, guided and shaped the direction of the larger project. How do positive and negative subjective experiences differ in their influence on occupation? Are there patterns which link the quality of the experience of occupation to the continuance of occupational engagement? What are the effects of various internal and external supports and barriers on the occupational experience? Finally, how do the perceptions of meaning interact with supports and barriers to influence occupational engagement?

A comprehensive understanding of meaning is necessary in order to understand the role occupation has in a person's life (Reed & Hocking, 2013). Since the study of meaning in occupation has almost exclusively occurred in the realm of qualitative research, this exploratory study will synthesize findings from several qualitative studies in order to increase the understanding of meaning and reveal similar characteristics across cultures and occupations. However, the breadth of questions posed for the larger project goes beyond the scope of one research study. Thorough examination of each question is necessary to obtain true understanding of meaning in occupation. Thus, the scope of the current research study was narrowed to focus on positive subjective experiences associated with occupation.

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

The current exploratory study is part of a larger, ongoing study investigating the interactions between positive and negative subjective experiences and the presence of supports and barriers to occupation. The centrality of subjective experience to understanding meaning in occupation has been addressed above (Hasselkus, 2012; Pierce, 2001; Yerxa, 1990). Furthermore, models of occupation (Trombly, 1993), as well as the Institute of Medicine (IOM) model (Brandt & Pope, 1997) and the World Health Organization's (WHO; 2002) International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) model emphasize the influential effect supports and barriers can have on performance and participation. Taking these models into account and working under the framework synthesis approach, the researchers created four a priori codes to apply to the data: 1) positive subjective experience associated with occupation, 2) negative subjective experience associated with occupation, 3) supports to occupational engagement, and 4) barriers to occupational engagement. For the purposes of the present study, the meta-synthesis proceeded only with analyzing positive subjective experiences associated with occupation and supports to occupational engagement because these two a priori codes were commonly found together in the data. Methods of the preliminary work on the larger study as well as methods of analysis for current study are outlined below.

Preliminary work

Primary research reports for the present study were identified within the *Journal of Occupational Science* (JOS) because of its focus on describing human occupations and their relationships with context, health and well-being. Reports included in the present study employed some form of qualitative method in which a study of occupation was occurring. Studies were included only if the use of qualitative methods were explicit and the researchers

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elicited personal narratives or first-hand experiences related to occupation. For the purpose of report selection, occupation was defined broadly to reflect some form of culturally understood action, task, participation or role-relevant behavior. Further, reports were included only if the clear intention of the authors was to address meaning in the context of occupation. Therefore, only those reports including the terms meaning, meanings, meaningful or meaningfulness within their titles were used for the present study. Through this process, eleven articles were selected which were published between 1997 and 2010. Descriptive information about each article is outlined in Table 1.

Based on the project problem, the researchers created a data collection template to guide the search for information that was relevant to the four a priori codes. Data were sought and extracted only within the Results or Findings sections of the eleven research reports. These data were typically 1-2 sentences in length and necessitated reference to a positive subjective experience associated with some form of occupation. Report findings were not included if they either: 1) addressed a positive subjective experience with no obvious tie to occupation, or 2) addressed some form of occupation yet there was no obvious association with a positive subjective experience. Further, for the purposes of data extraction, findings included in the present study needed to display a level of abstraction or analysis beyond that of the primary data collected by the authors of the reports (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007). For example, a direct quote from an informant serving as an instance of a higher-order theme was not included as data, as in this instance from Aguilar, Boerema, and Harrison (2010) in their study of the meaning of computer use for older adults to illustrate their theme of "Keeping the brain active":

Annabelle stated that "computer users know they will fail from time to time, but oh the euphoria when things work out" (p. 30).

Examples of findings that would indicate positive subjective qualities of experience in relation to some aspect of occupation included being in charge, feeling in control, pleasure, satisfaction, feelings of adjustment, empowerment, and relating well to others. Examples of findings indicative of supports to occupation included adapting to change, modifying task demands or role demands, a supportive social environment, or likely future engagement in occupation.

Table 1

Descriptive information of primary articles

Authors and Date	Country	Population	Method*	General Approach to Occupation
Aguilar, Boerema, & Harrison (2010)	Australia	Older males & females, age 65-82 years	Interpretive phenomenology	Computer use
Bundgaard (2005)	Denmark	Elderly males & females, age 75-100 residing in assisted living units	Contemporary & focused ethnography	Daily meals
Hannam (1997)	United Kingdom	White, middle-class, Catholic adult women	Phenomenology	Tea-making
Hocking, Wright-St. Clair, & Bunrayong (2002)	Thailand & New Zealand	New Zealand women 65+ years & Thai women 60+ years	Interpretive & explorative	Holiday cooking & recipe work
Jonsson, Borell, & Sadlo (2000)	Sweden	Recently retired males & females, age 65-66 years	Grounded theory	Change in occupations after retirement
Leufstadius, Erlandsson, Bjorkman, & Eklund (2008)	Sweden	Males & females, age 20-55 who have had 2+ years of psychiatric services, currently living in the community	Content analysis	General daily occupations
Lin, Kirsh, Polatajko, & Seto (2009)	Canada	Males & females, age 31-54, living in the community under supervision after being found Not Criminally Responsible due to mental disorder	Phenomenology	Occupational engagement
Ludwig, Hattjar, Russell, & Winston (2007)	United States	White, middle-class grandmothers age 60 years and older	Comparative case analysis	Caregiving for grandchildren

Reed, Hocking, & Smythe (2010)	New Zealand	White males & females, age 27-67, with occupational disruptions	Hermeneutic phenomenology	General daily occupations
Scheerer, Cahill, Kirby, & Lane (2004)	United States	White females, aged early 20s-mid 70s	Phenomenology	Cake decorating
Shank & Cutchin (2010)	United States	Elderly women, aged 87-90, living alone aging-in-place	Multiple case study	General daily occupations

Note. * Method was either explicitly stated by authors or was inferred based upon descriptions provided by authors.

To determine the efficacy of the a priori codes used in data extraction, each of the reviewers individually gathered findings from a test article that was not included in current study. The template was revised several times and tested again on the article until agreement was reached between all researchers. Three of the researchers, working in pairs, then applied the a priori coding scheme to the statements of research findings in the results section of each of the eleven articles. The extracted data were cross-checked by all three researchers and disagreements were resolved through discussion to reach a consensus. The most frequently applied code was positive subjective experience associated with occupation ($n = 72$) followed by support to occupation ($n = 67$). This provoked interest in further analyzing the data under these two codes for the current study.

Current study

The next stage of analysis began as two of the researchers independently engaged in what Creswell (1998) refers to as a data analysis spiral of reading, reflecting, describing, classifying, and interpreting. The qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti v.6.2 (ATLAS.ti, 2011) was used to aid in this process. The data on positive subjective experience associated with occupation were categorized and then compared with one another to identify recurring patterns across the categories. This process required both inductive and deductive reasoning as the researchers moved back and forth between the data and the themes which emerged from the data.

As analysis progressed, interconnections between themes began to emerge. These connections were considered significant only when two or more links amongst themes across two or more studies were identified. A network diagram was created to illustrate significant relationships and help the researchers visualize the complex intricacies of the interrelated themes of meaning (see Figure 1).

The researchers met periodically to discuss findings and reach consensus on interpretations of the data. Imported concepts from occupational science, occupational therapy, and social and developmental psychology were also considered in the generation of the study's emergent themes and their interconnections (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

Two other methods were also enacted to ensure the credibility of the current study (Creswell, 1998; Krefting, 1991). To achieve reflexivity, each researcher kept analytic notes throughout the process. This established a data trail of the decisions about patterns in the codes and the strategies each researcher undertook to reach those decisions. In addition, the researchers had access and consistently referred to the primary articles to assure the findings were grounded in the original data.
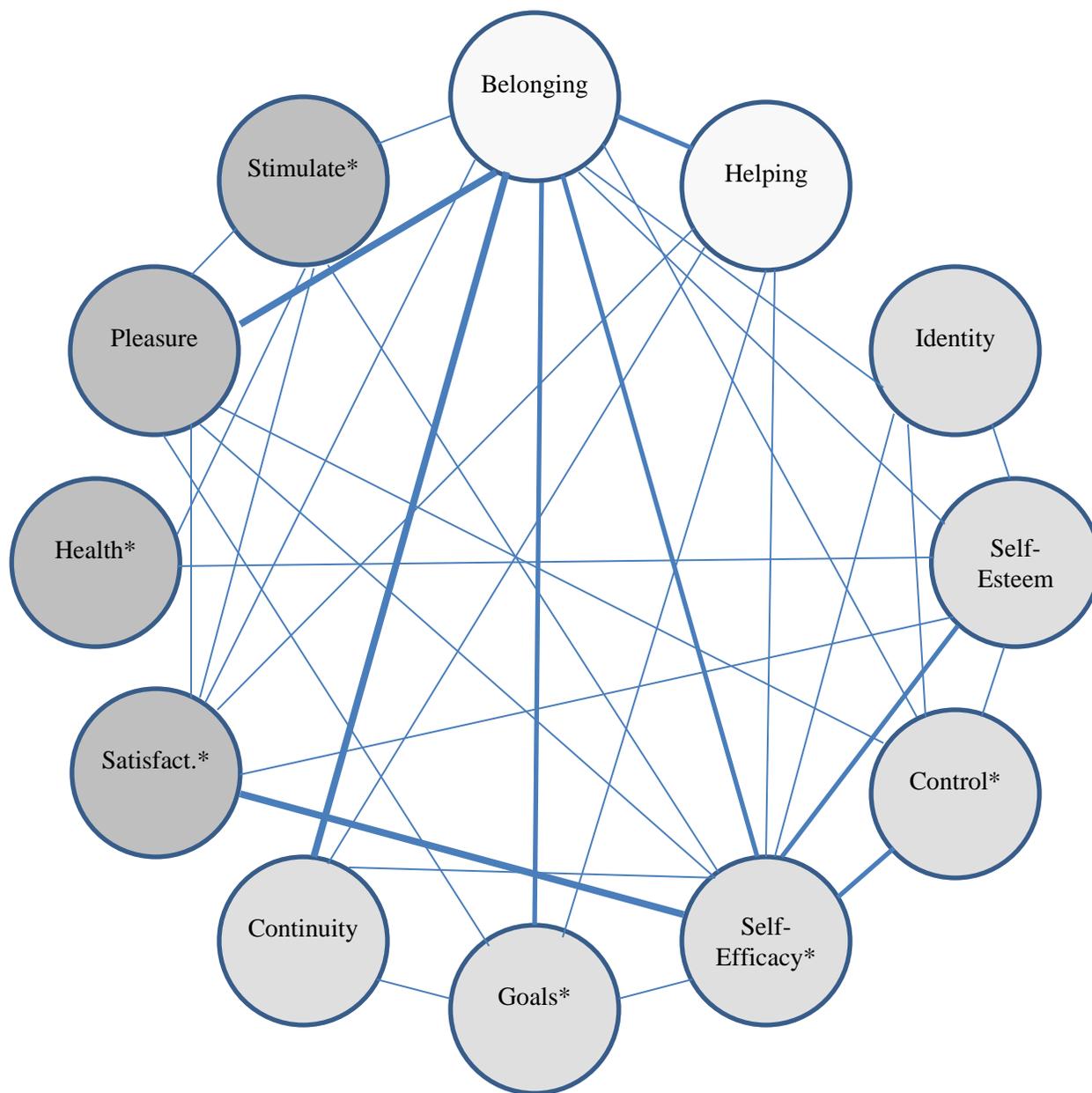
Figure 1: Inter-related themes of positive subjective experiences (meanings). * Control =
Control/Autonomy/Independence, Self-Efficacy = Competence/Self-Efficacy, Goals =
Goals/Purpose, Satisfact. = Satisfaction, Health = Health/Well-Being, Stimulate = Stimulating;
Line sizes: 1 pt. font = 2-4 connections, 2 pt. font = 5-7 connections, and 3 pt. font = 8 or more
connections; Higher order theme shading: Social = light grey, Selfhood = medium grey, Other =
dark grey.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

This study sought to identify and describe positive subjective experiences associated with occupation in order to further understanding of the meaning of occupation. Using a framework synthesis approach to guide analysis, more specific themes of meaning were discovered, including two higher-order themes: *social meanings* and *selfhood*. Four additional themes were found that were not included under the higher-order themes: *satisfaction*, *health and well-being*, and *stimulating*. The number of articles each theme was found in, as well as the total frequencies of each theme, are included in Table 2.

Social meanings

The social context of occupation was found to be an important feature of the meaning of occupation. Experiences in which the individual felt connected to others or the individual was able to contribute to others were identified as a positive subjective experience in all eleven studies analyzed. Being with others was also associated with other positive subjective experiences, such as pleasure and enjoyment, a sense of continuity, self-esteem, and independence. The prominence of the theme of social meaning in the data aligns with the idea that humans are "socially occupied beings" and emphasizes the importance that an individual's social context has upon the meaning of occupation (Lawlor, 2003). Two subthemes of social meanings found from the data were conceptualized as *belonging* and *helping*. These two categories often overlapped as well, as people felt that by contributing to others, they were creating a place for themselves in a community.

Table 2

Frequency of themes

Theme	Number of Articles	Frequency
Social	11	29
Belonging	7	21
Helping	6	8
Selfhood	11	75
Identity	4	10
Autonomy/Independence/Sense of Control	5	16
Self-Esteem	6	12
Competence/Self-Efficacy	6	14
Goals/Purposes	4	10
Continuity	6	13
Satisfaction	4	7
Health and Well-being	7	11
Pleasure/Enjoyment	8	18
Stimulating	5	9

Belonging

Belonging was the most frequently identified positive subjective experience identified within the studies. Occupation often served as a medium through which participants would connect and relate to significant others or achieve a sense of belonging within a community. The involvement of others in an occupation added special meaning to the event that went beyond the actual activities. Reed, Hocking, and Smythe (2010), for example, investigated the meanings of occupation in twelve adults from New Zealand who had experienced occupational disruptions and found that occupations that had once been done with others lost meaning when done alone.

> *It is through occupation that an avenue to Be-with others is created and meaning is revealed that is more than the occupation itself.* (Reed, Hocking, & Smythe, 2010, p. 145)

Ludwig, Hattjar, Russel, and Winston's (2007) study addressed the occupations of grandmothers who served as caregivers for their grandchildren. Grandmothers who had infrequent contact with their grandchildren chose special occupations for their time spent together, such as picnics and hiking. These co-occupations were also associated with other positive subjective experiences, such as a sense of continuity and competence in their abilities to contribute to their grandchildren's lives. Similarly, preparation of holiday foods was a way for older women in both New Zealand and Thailand to solidify their place in both their immediate family as well as their larger culture, and this made the experience a positive one (Hocking, Wright-St. Clair, & Bunrayong, 2002).

> *Through their work in preparing the food for Songkran...older Thai women confer long life and unity on those who share it, wrapping them in to a network of family, friendship and spiritual relationships* (p.120).

Sometimes, occupations helped people overcome barriers to belonging. Older adults who engaged in the occupation of computer use found that computer use enabled them to transcend obstacles, such as distance and illness, which hindered regular interaction with their family and friends (Aguilar, Boerema, & Harrison, 2010). These occupations often led to a sense of enjoyment and purpose in their everyday life. Reciprocally, the presence of social supports was sometimes seen as a way to maintain engagement in other occupations, despite potential barriers. A study of older women aging in place found that social relationships allowed them to remain independent and continue meaningful routines, even after a potentially life-changing event such as a fall (Shank & Cutchin, 2010).

For individuals living with mental illness diagnoses, the opportunities for social interaction held significant meaning. Lin, Kirsch, Polatjko, and Seto (2009) studied the meaning of occupation for individuals with mental illness living in the community after committing a crime. Occupations such as work and vocational training provided the opportunity to socialize and connect with others. At times, occupations were engaged in just to be in an environment where other people gathered:

> *Some of the participants enjoyed being in the presence of other individuals who were socializing, even if they were not directly interacting with them* (Lin et al., 2009, p. 115).

Belonging was consistently associated with feelings of enjoyment. Being with others and connecting with them was often reported to be a pleasurable experience. Both Thai and New Zealand women enjoyed talking about holiday recipes and meal preparation with other women who shared similar experiences (Hocking et al., 2002). A sense of continuity and familiarity also accompanied positive subjective experiences of belonging such as that found amongst residents and staff in assisted living units when engaging in day-to-day occupations (Bundgaard, 2005).

Helping

Individuals reported positive subjective experiences when their occupations enabled them to contribute and care for those in their family or community. Helping others was a way of validating their sense of belonging, as well as displaying their capabilities. Grandmothers who provided infrequent or supplemental caregiving in Ludwig et al.'s (2007) study felt they were able to offer special occupational opportunities that would enhance their grandchildren's learning and development.

> *She felt she was able to rescue the children from the "boredom of day care" and provide developmentally enriching occupations* (p. 45).

Feelings of self-efficacy and competence in performing an occupation were related to participants' experiences of helping. Older adults in assisted living units enjoyed the chance to utilize their skills and knowledge to benefit the household (Bundgaard, 2005). For older women aging in place, sharing lifelong skills and passions with others contributed to the meaning of the occupation. Teaching quilting classes or displaying artwork offered new ways that the women could continue their artistic occupations, despite age-related disabilities.

> *For her, quilting was a meaningful occupation because it had "allowed [her] to share the activity with a lot of people* (Shank & Cutchin, 2010).

Selfhood

Selfhood is referred to here as the qualities that contribute to how one perceives themselves as a unique individual as well as part of the larger social structure to which they belong (Kontos & Nagalie, 2009). Multiple themes relating to the self were identified, including *identity, self-esteem, autonomy/independence/sense of control, self-efficacy/competence, goals/purposes,* and *continuity.* These themes have been previously identified in the literature as being interwoven features of the self. A sense of identity offers a means through which

individuals define themselves within a social context (Christiansen, 1999); whereas the self requires a sense of continuity linking the past to the present as well as a future-oriented perspective (Herzog & Martin, 1999; Sheldon, 2004). Sheldon (2004) also suggests that the self requires a sense of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem in order to maximize well-being.

Identity

Occupation was meaningful to individuals when it contributed to their sense of identity. The theme of identity was closely associated with that of social meanings and occupations that contributed to one's identity also seemed to validate a sense of belonging. Culturally-valued roles held great importance for individuals' personal sense of identity. For Thai women, as well as their New Zealand counterparts, their identity was strongly rooted in their ability to carry out their familial and societal roles during holiday traditions (Hocking et al., 2007). People living with a mental illness found meaning in occupations that connected them to society:

> *For example, Amanda described how she had worked since a very young age and valued work because it made her feel like a contributing member of society* (Lin et al., 2009, p. 115).

Occupation was also a means to maintain a sense of identity after a life transition or occupational disruption. Older adults residing in assisted living units found meaning when they engaged in familiar activities that had been central to former roles (Bundgaard, 2005). Similarly, older women aging in place maintained a sense of identity through life changes by modifying the ways that they engaged in their valued occupations (Shank & Cutchin, 2010).

> *The transaction of Nancy and her place, her valued lifestyle, and the meaningful roles and patterns of occupation that developed through the lifestyle and transactions in her situation helped to maintain and re-generate her identity* (p. 8).

Continuity

A sense of continuity was identified as a substantive feature of occupation in the findings of multiple studies. Continuity is the perception of stability of self across time (Baumeister, 1991), and occupations seemed to serve as a modality for achieving this sense of coherence. For British women, the occupation of tea-drinking helped maintain a sense of coherence through challenging life transitions:

> *Although tea-drinking did not create these changes it was a tool, easing transitions and maintaining important personal elements of culture through crisis and conflict* (Hannam, 1997, p. 72).

For others, occupation was a way to incorporate meaningful past roles into their present situation, even if it had significantly changed. Continuity was frequently linked to a sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and autonomy/independence/control across the findings of the studies. For example, older women aging in place maintained these aspects of the self by adapting their occupations to better fit with new circumstances, such as the occurrence of a physical disability.

> *Since she was no longer creating art, manipulating and displaying what she had was both meaningful art occupation for the present as well as a way to stay connected to the past* (Shank & Cutchin, 2010, p. 9).

There was often a social theme of meaning associated with a sense of continuity as well. As mentioned above, occupations done with others in the assisted living units afforded opportunities to reminisce about meaningful events in the past (Bundgaard, 2005). Occupations also brought up a sense of belonging with one's family and culture. Objects used in tea-making that were passed down from earlier generations were meaningful because they reminded individuals of special times spent with family whenever the objects were used (Hannam, 1997). Long-held traditions and rituals served as an expression of continuity that connected Thai women to their family and their culture during the holiday of Songkran:

For older women in Chiang Mai province, having to do the same things, in the same way, is not in any sense punitive. Rather it is expressed as a fundamental, intrinsic desire to carry on gathering, preparing, cooking, and offering foods at Songkran, and sharing the remaining food with family and friends, as women have done since ancient times (Hocking et al., 2002, p. 121).

Recognition of the sense of continuity that occupation provided also appeared to motivate individuals to continue to engage in occupation. Maintaining the traditions of the Thai culture supported older women's sustained occupation of holiday meal preparation. Older women aging-in-place also continued occupations that they felt formed a bridge between their past and their present.

Goals/purposes

Findings across four different studies indicated that meaning in occupation includes the positive subjective experience of having goals and purposes that support future occupations. Occupations were a means to goal attainment and having a long-term goal gave purpose and meaning to present occupations. For example, recent retirees engaged in regular exercise with the purpose of maintaining their physical health. Learning to use a computer was initially the goal held by the older adults in the Aguilar et al. (2012) study, but it also became a way to fulfill other, larger goals in life.

Future goals included having fun on the computer, developing new income streams, and working on computer projects with family members (p. 31).

Goals and purposes served not only as sources of meaning, but were also identified as a critical aspect of motivation for future occupations. This duality was consistent across all findings in this theme. For example, grandmothers anticipating a visit from their grandchildren would plan special activities that differed from their daily occupations with the purpose of providing their grandchildren with unique experiences (Ludwig et al., 2007). Older women

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aging-in-place engaged in certain occupations with the purpose of maintaining their sense of

identity or independence, which were meaningful concepts to them (Shank & Cutchin, 2010).

Self-efficacy/competence

Self-efficacy refers to the expectation that one possesses the abilities to carry out an

activity (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, feelings of competence indicate a level of confidence that

one can successfully do what they intend to (Ryan & Deci, 2006). People expressed their self-

efficacy and competence through their occupations and identified these experiences as positive.

For example, the occupation of preparing traditional holiday foods was a way for Thai women to

demonstrate competence in their cultural role, and this led to feelings of happiness, pride, and

belonging (Hocking et al., 2002). In a study of community-dwelling people with severe and

persistent mental illness, occupations that afforded the chance to create something were found to

be meaningful because it gave them the opportunity to showcase their abilities (Leufstadius,

Erlandsson, Bjorkman, & Eklund, 2008).

> *We also discerned expressions of meaningfulness linked to the fact that the participants*
> *had to use their skills to complete an occupation* (p. 31)

Self-efficacy and competence were often linked to other positive subjective experiences, such as

independence, sense of control, self-esteem, and enjoyment. These associations were especially

strong in the studies that looked at occupations requiring technical knowledge and skills to

perform, such as holiday meal preparation (Hocking et al., 2007) and computer use (Aguilar et

al., 2010).

> *A few participants also felt that computer use would continue to help them to have a*
> *sense of control, function well in the community, and remain independent in the future*
> (Aguilar et al., 2010, p. 30).

Competence was also linked to the positive subjective experience of helping. This finding suggests that skills or competencies underlying occupations are required for helping to occur. Older adults in the Aguilar et al. (2010) study used their computer skills to help family members or peers who had less experience with a computer. Grandmothers found meaning when they crafted occupations that they felt were contributing to their grandchildren's development (Ludwig et al., 2007). Whereas recent retirees recognized the positive aspects of increased free time, they simultaneously expressed a desire to work at least some of the time, in order to feel that they were still contributing members of society (Jonsson, Borell, & Sadlo, 2000). As these demonstrations of competence involved important others, these occupations appeared to foster feelings of belongingness.

Autonomy/independence/sense of control

Autonomy, independence, and a sense of control are related ideas that refer to the experience of self-governance, or rule by the self (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Occupations that led to such positive subjective experiences were identified as meaningful and themes consistent with the ideas of autonomy, independence, and a sense of control were discovered across five of the studies.

Often, occupation was a means for maintaining autonomy, independence, and a sense of control. Aguilar et al. (2012) found that older adults found meaning in computer use through the ways in which it allowed them to manage aspects of their lives and keep up with world events:

> *A few participants also felt that computer use will help them to have a sense of control, function well in the community and remain independent in the future* (p. 30).

Older women aging-in-place identified occupations as supporting their independence in various ways (Shank & Cutchin, 2010). Maintaining daily routines was an indication that one was still able to successfully live on her own. Social relationships also enabled the women to

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remain living independently as they aged and their health decline necessitated an increase in day-to-day assistance. Yet autonomy and control continue to represent a form of meaning even after one is unable to live independently. Elderly adults residing in assisted living units were found to identify these concepts as positive subjective experiences:

> *Being able to make coffee when they felt like it, getting a special drink out of the refrigerator, and selecting different foods at the table allowed the possibility of deciding and choosing for themselves, and of having individual needs and wishes considered* (Bundgaard, 2005, p. 96).

The experiences of autonomy and control also served to enable further engagement in occupation. The freedom of choice accorded in the assisted living units studied by Bundgaard (2005) supported the elderly residents to continue to exercise their autonomy within their occupations. Likewise, computer use served as a supporting factor for continued occupation for older adults because they believed proficiency with technology would help them remain independent (Aguilar et al., 2012). Jonsson et al. (2000) studied the occupational transitions of older adults and found that retirement provided new opportunities for individuals to make choices and decisions for oneself about occupation. Prior constraints of these persons' work schedules had previously limited what, when, and how occupations were engaged in, but retirement changed the rhythm of their days:

> *The participants described freedom from the demands of work and how they could now plan and schedule the day and the week themselves* (Jonsson et al., 2000, p. 31).

Autonomy, independence, and control were also associated with other positive subjective experiences related to occupation. For adults with mental illness living in the community, occupation became a way for them not only to express their independence, but also their identity and self-worth (Lin et al., 2009). Recent retirees and older women aging-in-place both noted that

a sense of autonomy and independence contributed to a sense of health and well-being (Jonsson et al., 2000; Shank & Cutchin, 2010).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was found to be a meaningful aspect of occupation. Self-esteem refers to an individual's perceptions of their own value and worth and is deeply ingrained within a social context (Leary & Baumeister, 2001). A positive self-image was commonly related to feelings of belonging and acceptance and people often reported an affirmed sense of self-esteem when their accomplishments were recognized by important others.

> *Several others also described a sense of pride and self-respect when their computer competence was acknowledged by family members and friends* (Aguilar et al., 2010, p.31).

The emotion of pride surfaced time and time again as an aspect of self-esteem in descriptions of occupation. At times, pride was felt in relation to the finished product of an occupation. Women who engaged in cake decorating found meaning from the sense of accomplishment and pride that occurred from their completed work (Scheerer, Cahill, Kirby, & Lane, 2004). Thai women also felt proud from the successful completion of holiday meal preparation (Hocking et al., 2002). For others, pride arose from the ability to engage in their desired occupations. Individuals with mental illness living under supervision in the community reported feelings of pride and self-esteem from participating in occupations (Lin et al., 2009). This positive subjective experience served to support further engagement in occupations for the individuals in that study, as well:

> *Many of the participants described engaging in occupation because it contributed to their self-esteem* (Lin et al., 2009, p. 115-116).

Other meanings

Four additional themes were discovered that did not seem to fit into the higher-order themes of *social meanings* and *selfhood*, though they were found to be salient themes nonetheless. These themes, *satisfaction*, *pleasure/enjoyment*, *stimulating*, and *health and well-being*, were found to be important features that contributed to meaning in occupation. Consistent with the findings of the previously-discussed themes, they were also frequently found to be linked to additional themes of meaning as well.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as a positive subjective experience that arises from the fulfillment of some expected outcome (Persson, Erlandsson, Eklund, & Iwarsson, 2001) and was identified as being a meaningful feature of occupation. At times, the outcome was abstract. Older adults expressed a sense of satisfaction when they were able to overcome challenges on the computer (Aguilar et al., 2010). At other times, satisfaction was realized through the accomplishment of a tangible product, such as when women finished decorating a cake (Sheerer et al., 2004) or when community-dwelling adults with mental illness did the laundry or cooked a batch of marmalade:

> *Occupations involving producing something that was a source of satisfaction were meaningful* (Leufstadius et al., 2008, p. 31).

Competence and self-efficacy were frequently associated with satisfaction. Many of the occupations that led to a sense of satisfaction, such as using a computer (Aguilar et al., 2010), preparing a traditional holiday meal (Hocking et al., 2002), and cake decorating (Sheerer et al., 2004), require specialized skills. The ability to utilize such skills to successfully reach a desired outcome was expressed as meaningful to people. This sense of satisfaction also was linked to pleasure/enjoyment at times as well in the context of the successful execution of occupation.

The resultant feelings of pride and happiness that come from having done or managed all the jobs themselves, having everything go to plan and knowing the right things have been done are an affirmation of their place within family and society (Hocking et al., 2002 p. 123).

Pleasure/enjoyment

Pleasure and enjoyment have been defined as the good feelings that occur as a result of fulfilling one's needs and expectations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In eight of the studies, the meaning of occupation was in part attributed to the positive subjective experiences of pleasure and enjoyment, which were often related to the occurrence of other positive subjective experiences. For example, people found it to be an enjoyable experience when they were able to engage in occupations that they found interesting. Participating in hobbies was identified as meaningful to individuals with mental illness living in the community. In addition, women described cake decorating as a source of happiness (Scheerer et al., 2004):

They talked about how they enjoyed the activity and thought it fun (p. 71).

Pleasure and enjoyment was often associated with occupations occurring in a social context. Enjoyment was reported when individuals were able to connect with others during engagement in occupation. Older adults enjoyed using the computer to communicate with important others in their life (Aguilar et al., 2010). Lin et al. (2009) found that participants with mental illness found enjoyment in occupations that gave them the opportunity to just be around others. Furthermore, grandmothers in the study by Ludwig et al. (2007) felt much pleasure when they had the opportunity to engage in occupations with their grandchildren:

For her, his visits brought great joy and she would plan activities and instill in him a "sense of wonder with each new experience" (p. 45).

Demonstrations of competence through occupation were often connected with pleasure and enjoyment. Individuals seemed to have pleasurable experiences when they had the opportunity to utilize their skills. Successful completion of a holiday meal resulted in feelings of pride and happiness for older Thai women, wherein they enjoyed the process of developing their skills through discussing recipe work with others (Hocking et al., 2002). Grandmothers found enjoyment in occupations in which they also felt able to promote their grandchildren's development (Ludwig et al., 2007). For individuals with mental illness living under supervision in the community, occupations that made them feel productive were enjoyable and also contributed to their self-esteem (Lin et al., 2009).

Stimulating

Stimulating refers to the arousal of the senses or the mind and occupations that involved stimulation were found to be meaningful. Sensory stimulation occurred from the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes that accompanied occupation. The bustling kitchen was the center of activity in the assisted living units studied by Bundgaard (2005) and the interactive nature of the occupations around mealtimes engaged the residents fully in mind and body:

> *From their flats, the residents could hear the rattling of china and could smell the food, which told them what was going on in the kitchen. They liked it when something was happening* (p. 95).

Some occupations stimulated the mind, and these were perceived as positive subjective experiences. Computer use provided novel opportunities to challenge themselves and acquire new knowledge, which they perceived as ways to keep the brain active (Aguilar et al., 2010). The adults with mental illness in the Leufstadius et al. (2008) study also indicated a positive subjective experience from mental stimulation:

> *Meaningfulness was experienced in occupations that involved learning something new, developing new skills or being stimulated intellectually or creatively* (p. 31).

Sensory stimulation was closely associated with pleasure and enjoyment. The physical qualities surrounding tea-drinking added another layer of meaning to the occupation (Hannam, 1997). The look and feel of the objects used determined the quality of the experience for the women, who believed that the taste of tea was improved when special porcelain china cups were used. Adults with severe and persistent mental illness also reported concurrent pleasure and enjoyment when engaged in occupations that were pleasant to the senses.

Health and well-being

Occupations that enabled a sense of health and well-being were found to be meaningful in seven of the eleven studies. Health and well-being was conceptualized in many different ways relating to physical and mental health. For some, like persons residing in assisted living units and recent retirees, maintaining physical health through occupation was seen as meaningful (Bundgaard, 2005; Jonsson et al., 2000). Others related their engagement in occupations as contributing to their overall sense of well-being, in mind and body. Women who engaged in cake decorating found the occupation to be therapeutic and stress-relieving (Scheer et al., 2004). Hannam (1997) studied the meaning of tea-drinking for women in Britain. The people in her study indicated that drinking helped them cope through difficult times. Community-dwelling individuals with severe and persistent mental illness identified occupations that supported their health and well-being as meaningful:

> *Performing occupations that made the individual feel well, physically and/or mentally, and remain healthy was expressed as meaningful, and the participants performed certain occupations as a strategy to take care of themselves* (Leufstadius et al., 2008, p. 32).

Two of the studies found links between health and well-being and a sense of self-esteem. Grandmothers found occupations with their grandchildren to be supportive of their personal value (Ludwig et al., 2007). Likewise, individuals with mental illness who lived in the

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community perceived their routines as being beneficial to their health and well-being as well as their self-worth (Lin et al., 2009).

Health and well-being seemed an especially salient feature of meaning to populations that were facing health-related issues. Grandmothers attributed the occupations they engaged in with their grandchildren as keeping them healthy and young (Ludwig et al., 2007). For residents of assisted living units and recent retirees, maintaining their physical health gave purpose to their daily occupations (Bundgaard, 2005; Jonsson et al., 2000).

> *Keeping fit and feeling physically and mentally well were expressed to be some of the purpose of participating in the activities around the meals* (Bundgaard, 2005, p. 97).

Similarly, both studies looking at persons with mental illness found health and well-being to be a meaningful feature of occupation. Eating and sleeping regularly, taking the time to relax, and engaging in occupations specifically for maintenance of health was meaningful to individuals (Leufstadius et al., 2008). Daily schedules and routines helped other individuals engage in healthy occupations and avoid ones they perceived as unhealthy (Lin et al., 2009).

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The meaning of occupation is an elusive concept yet one that is central to understanding the human experience. A central aspect of occupation is its concomitant subjective experience, perhaps the most salient aspect (Hasselkus, 2011; Yerxa et al., 1990). Consistent with this view, Hammell (2009) has proposed a new classification of occupation based on the type of experience, rather than activity, to fully encompass the true nature of occupation. Therefore, identifying subjective experiences associated with occupation is a reasonable endeavor so as to uncover the meaning of occupation. The study of subjective experience and meaning invites the use of qualitative methods, as meaning is revealed through the narrative account of the holder (Polkinghorne, 1988). Qualitative methods were employed in the primary reports to understand the meaning of occupation for a variety of populations. In order to draw more transferable conclusions, the current study synthesized findings of eleven studies related to the meaning of occupation from JOS using a framework synthesis approach. While subjective experience has the potential to be both positive and negative, the focus of this exploratory study was on positive subjective experience associated with occupation.

Qualitative meta-synthesis is used to expand understanding of a phenomenon by integrating the findings of multiple qualitative studies to generate new discoveries (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The framework synthesis approach to qualitative meta-synthesis used in the current exploratory study based on the a priori code of positive subjective experience associated with occupation was successful in guiding analysis and recurring themes of meaning were revealed across the studies. These findings serve to inform and expand the understanding of meaning associated with occupation.

The findings of this study illustrate the similarities in meaning associated with occupation that exist across many different occupations, for multiple populations situated in several different cultures. Meaning seems to have universal importance, because it helps individuals make sense of their actions and behaviors, as well as the world around them (Baumeister, 1991). Positive subjective experiences that contributed to the meaning of occupation included social experiences, experiences related to the self, a sense of satisfaction, experiences that were perceived as stimulating, and experiences that enabled a sense of health and well-being. There were also multiple interconnections between the themes of positive subjective experience that will be discussed (see Figure).

In many cases, positive subjective experiences associate with occupation also served as supporting features for continued engagement in occupation. Motivation is recognized as an important element of occupation in the model of human occupation (MOHO; Kielhofner, 2002). MOHO conceptualizes motivation as driven by feelings of self-efficacy, importance or worth, and enjoyment or satisfaction. In other words, people are motivated to engage in occupations that they feel able to do, that are meaningful, pleasurable, or satisfying. The findings of this study expand on MOHO and suggest a far greater array of features that support continued engagement in occupation.

Social meanings

Occupations provided an avenue through which connections with significant others were forged or sustained. Social connection is an intrinsic human need and has been shown to contribute to well-being and quality of life (Hammell, 2009). Occupation and its social context are inextricably linked which makes achieving a sense of belonging through engagement in occupation a primary source of meaning in occupation. Because the need for social belonging is

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strong, it also seems to serve as a motivating factor for continued engagement in occupations that foster it. Hammell (2009) also connects a sense of belonging to other positive subjective experiences, such as enjoyment, continuity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, links which were substantiated by the findings of the current study as well and may further explain the pervasiveness of meaning that a sense of belonging holds.

Helping or contributing to others is also considered to fulfill a social need of humans (Hammell, 2009). Literature on the theory of altruism, which refers to the actions by one individual for the sake of benefitting another, suggests that the urge to act in ways that benefit others may be a part of human nature (Batson, Ahmad, Lishner, & Tsang, 2005). Humans are motivated to help others when they are empathetic to their situation, which requires a level of understanding and connection to another person. In this way, helping may foster an increased sense of connection between people, an idea that is supported by the finding of the link between the themes of helping and belonging. All things considered, the corroboration between the results of this study and multi-disciplinary literature suggest that social meanings are an important factor for the meaning that is found in occupation.

Selfhood

It is through occupation that one realizes and confirms their sense of self (Hasselkus, 2011). The process of creating the self occurs through interpreting and organizing daily events and experiences in a way that helps one make sense of their past, understand the present, and plan for the future (Polkinghorne, 1988). Development of the self can be thought of as a lifelong process of generating and revising one's life story in pursuit of an ideal self; and it appears from the findings of this study that occupation serves a central role in this process. Furthermore, an optimal self-image may require the satisfaction of basic needs assumed to be universally relevant

to all humans. These have been identified in the literature as the need for autonomy, competence, belonging, and self-esteem (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, 2004). The findings of the current study substantiate these theories about the self as well as situate them in relation to the meaning of occupation.

The theme of identity was found to be a salient feature of meaning in this study that was commonly linked to a sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with literature that suggests identity is intimately tied to the social context and plays a pivotal role in the meaning-making process (Christiansen, 1999). Identity offers a means through which individuals may make sense of their lives, integrating an array of socially-construed experiences found through occupation into a coherent pattern of purposeful action. Ultimately, the creation and sustainment of identity seems to be a meaningful factor in occupation. It provides a semblance of continuity and purpose and may create a sense of meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991).

Previous work has suggested there is an innate human aspiration to maintain a coherent sense of self across time within the chaotic and ever-changing world (Baumeister, 1991; Herzog & Markus, 1999). As events occur across the lifespan, they are interpreted through the lens of an individual's self-concept, and one is motivated to engage in occupations that will continue to foster an idealized and consistent image of the self. This study found that individuals find meaning in continuity and seek out further engagement in occupations which foster it. In addition, continuity seems to be linked to a sense of belonging and connection with others, which can be explained by Christiansen's (1999) postulation that the self is striving for coherence in the context of the social environment.

Occupation provides not only a way to make sense of one's life in relation to the past, but also to work towards the possible selves of the future (Herzog & Markus, 1999). Realization of a

possible future self occurs through fulfillment of the goals one holds. Positive subjective experiences construed as goals and purposes were found to be aspects of meaning associated with occupation in this study, consistent with literature asserting that goals and purposes serve as sources of meaning (Baumeister, 1991; Emmons, 1999). As purpose-driven creatures, humans find meaning in the present by imagining the possibilities of the future. The pursuit of an ideal self may therefore occur through occupations that serve to implement the goals and choices an individual makes in his or her life.

The goals and purposes identified in the present study had the unique quality of consistently being both an aspect of meaning as well as a supportive factor for continued occupation. This finding is congruent with existing literature that recognizes goals as directors of behavior (Carver & Sheier, 1998). Having clear goals provides an explanation or a reason for the behaviors and actions one takes. Furthermore, people are motivated to act in ways that they believe will advance their goals and make progress towards an ideal future self.

Achieving progress towards personal goals through occupation was found to lead to a sense of self-efficacy and control over one's life. Self-efficacy, and the related concept of competence, arises when a person is confident in his or her capabilities to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). Successful completion of an occupation promotes a sense of competency that improves one's confidence that they will be able to take on new challenges in the future (Christiansen, 1999). As well, perceiving oneself as a competent individual is considered to be an essential need for optimal human functioning, successful social interaction, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the current study, individuals concurrently experienced enjoyment and pleasure, increased self-esteem, and a sense of autonomy when engaged in occupations that promoted self-efficacy and competence. This seemed to contribute to the

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meaning of those occupations. In addition, a sense of competence appeared to enable individuals to help others, which was also perceived as meaningful.

Self-efficacy also appears to support continued occupation, a finding confirmed by Bandura (1977) as well as Ryan and Deci (2000; 2006). A sense of self-efficacy and competence becomes a source of intrinsic motivation as one begins to expect continued success based on past achievements. Self-efficacy provides people with a level of confidence to seek out new challenges and occupations. Without concurrent experiences of choice and control over one's actions, though, the effect of self-efficacy on motivating further occupation would be limited (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is through demonstrations of autonomy and control that self-efficacy is realized and expressed (Christiansen, 1999). Indeed, the themes of self-efficacy/competence and autonomy were commonly linked.

Autonomy refers to the perception that one exerts control and choice over the actions one makes and is considered to be another essential human need (Hammell, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2006; Sheldon, 2004). One's selfhood is expressed through the choice and control that engagement in occupation provides and occupations that foster a sense of autonomy and control are thought to positively influence well-being (Christiansen, 1999). Corroborating this idea is the discovery of the theme of autonomy, independence, and sense of control as meaningful factors associated with occupation. While the concepts are not synonymous in the literature (Ryan & Deci, 2006), they were closely related aspects of meaning in this study. Even though it is possible for autonomy and control to be experienced in the absence of independence, independence was recognized as a state that allowed the exercise of autonomy and control. Autonomy, independence, and control were also found to support further occupation. Autonomy is a tenet of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It seems that the

presence of choice and autonomy in decision making increases the likelihood of engagement in occupations that are endorsed by the individual.

The themes of self-efficacy/competence and autonomy/independence/control were also found to be associated with self-esteem in the current study, as was the theme of belonging. Diverse sources of evidence support these links, which aids in explaining why self-esteem was found to be a meaningful component of occupation. The relationship between autonomy and self-efficacy noted above by Christiansen (1999) is also posited to extend to the increase of self-esteem through the exercise of choice, control, and competence. Similarly, Hammell (2009) suggests that self-esteem may be improved through occupations which promote competence and belonging. Self-esteem is proposed to be a reflection of the status one holds in a social group (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). As competence is a socially-valued attribute, a person's sense of worth will be closely tied to their self-efficacy. The desire to be seen by others as valuable motivates people to engage in behaviors to maintain their self-esteem at a level that ensures their acceptance into a social group. In this study, self-esteem was found to be a factor that supported further engagement in occupation, verifying Leary and Baumeister's (2000) supposition. Therefore, occupations that contribute to an individual's sense of self-esteem may be an important facet of the experience of belonging and motivate engagement in occupations which fulfill these central human needs.

Other meanings

The experience of satisfaction accompanied occupation when perceived challenges were overcome or a valued outcome was achieved. Satisfaction seems to arise from achievement of desired outcomes of occupation, and this contributes to the meaning in occupation (Persson, et al., 2001). Further, the link between self-efficacy/competence and satisfaction derived through

occupation in this study indicates the importance of competence within occupations as requisite for the experience of satisfaction. One needs to have the ability and expertise in an occupation to feel a satisfying experience from it.

Pleasure and enjoyment appear to be features that support the experience of meaning in occupation and life in general (Harvey & Pentland, 2010; McDonald, Wong, & Gingras, 2012). While a meaningful experience does not always have to be a pleasurable one, many experiences that elicit meaning are often paired with a sense of pleasure and enjoyment (Emmons, 1999). Positive experiences identified in this study as being associated with pleasure and enjoyment were belonging and competence. The literature recognizes that social relationships are perceived as both pleasurable and meaningful (Emmons). Since competence is a socially-valued trait that validates one's status in a social group and fosters a sense of connection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), it could reasonably be thought of as also contributing to the pleasure and enjoyment of an occupation.

Stimulation of the mind and body was a meaningful aspect of occupation that was associated with pleasure and enjoyment. This connection appeared to be mostly in the context of the sensory stimulation in the environment in which occupation occurred, but also included intellectual stimulation that arose when an occupation presented a challenge or inspired creativity. This finding is consistent with the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1996) who has identified creativity as a defining characteristic of human action. Creativity expressed through occupation is thought to contribute to its meaning and foster a sense of health and well-being (Hasselkus, 2011).

Health and well-being embodies both the physical and mental health of an individual, as well as satisfaction with life in general, and occupation assumes a significant role in its

determination (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010; Hasselkus, 2011). Though a maximal state of health may be ideal, the experience of health and well-being can be achieved even in a state of illness, injury, or disability. An individual's ability to engage in the occupations they want and need to do seems to be more important in creating a sense of health and well-being, regardless of physical or mental condition. The findings of this study confirm that people attribute perceptions of their health and well-being to occupation. Interestingly, when health and well-being was threatened or limited, the recognition of the importance of their role in the meaning in occupation was increased.

A web of meaning

The application of the framework synthesis approach to analysis revealed a diverse web of connections amongst the many different themes of meaning (see Figure 1), highlighting the complex nature of meaning associated with occupation. A web as a metaphor for meaning has been previously presented by Baumeister (1991), who posits that meaning is created through connections between different experiences. The associations between features of meaning vary in strength and proximity to one another, but ultimately, every event and experience is conceptualized in relation to something else. Meaning in occupation, therefore, may be more than just the presence of a variety of experiences but instead is the composite of all the associations between experiences.

The utility of Baumeister's (1999) idea of a web of meaning is substantiated by literature indicating that meaning arises from the complex interplay of the everyday context in which occupation occurs, the social aspects surrounding it, and how it contributes to coherence between the past, present, and future (Reed & Hocking, 2013). In this study, social meanings were interwoven with all other themes of meaning in occupation which suggests that relationships and

their social context are major contributors to the experience of meaning in occupation.

Considering meanings associated with occupation as occurring in interconnected webs could

substantively effect how meaning in occupation is presently conceptualized. That is, occupation

is often considered meaningful, or valued, or important, yet it is not clearly evident which

aspects of experience likely inform this meaning or personal salience. By considering webs of

meaning, however, researchers may begin to discover how "meaningful" occupation may be

composed of recurring, interrelated aspects of experience such as a sense of belonging,

continuity, personal goals and a sense of self-efficacy, as well as the experience of enjoyment

and pleasure derived through doing.

Comparison of findings to the primary studies

The intention of qualitative meta-synthesis is to integrate qualitative research articles and

expand the understanding of a topic or phenomenon by confirming or refuting findings of the

individual studies. The findings of this meta-synthesis aligned in some way with the findings of

most of the reports, but diverged from the results of others; two examples are provided. Reed et

al.'s (2010) study investigated the meaning of occupation for adults who had recently

experienced disruption to their occupations. Their themes of meaning included the care or

concern we have for others or events that call us to action, being-with and feeling connected to

others, and imagining possibilities of the future which in turn connect us to our past. These

themes of meaning aligned closely with the findings of this study with respect to socially related

meanings as well as the themes of meaning underlying the self such as identity, self-efficacy and

continuity. Reed et al. reported that there existed a dynamic interplay amongst their three themes

through which the meaning of occupation may be understood. Furthermore, these authors

acknowledged the motivating quality that meaning may serve in supporting occupation. Overall,

the findings of the present meta-synthesis were in substantial agreement with those reported by Reed et al.

In contrast, the findings of Scheerer et al. (2004), who investigated meaning associated with cake decorating, can be challenged by the results of the present meta-synthesis. The majority of the themes identified by Sheerer et al. were quite consistent with those of the present study. However, those authors presented their findings within the context of either the concepts of: 1) meaning related to cake decorating (i.e., satisfaction, flow, and health) or 2) motivating qualities supporting continued cake decorating (i.e., social praise, caring, and having a creative outlet). Though the higher order themes were seen as related, the concepts underlying the meaning of occupation and motivation for occupation were conceived as being mutually exclusive. As is demonstrated by the current study, the positive subjective experience that contributes to the meaning of an occupation also serves to motivate further engagement in that occupation. Therefore Scheerer et al.'s findings may oversimplify the role that experiences related to occupation plays in the meaning-making process.

Study limitations and future research

Approaching the concept of meaning by way of positive subjective experience may have influenced the findings of the current study. By narrowing the focus to this one construal, there was the chance that other perspectives of meaning may have been overlooked in the reports, such as cultural meaning. However, rigorous methodology was employed to ensure consistency in data extraction that solely focused on positive subjective experience, increasing trustworthiness that the findings reflect meaning in occupation within this perspective.

Another possible limitation was that the primary articles selected for this meta-synthesis were not evaluated for quality, which may have affected the themes that were revealed in the

findings. In addition, by limiting the search to JOS, valuable and relevant articles regarding the meaning of occupation may have been overlooked. Future research could expand the search for articles outside JOS and compare them to the findings of the current study.

Also, some themes of meaning may have been missed due to trying to find similarities across such a diverse range of populations. It would be beneficial for future research to narrow the scope to one population, but still look at a variety of occupations. Another line of future inquiry would be to more closely examine the relationships between different aspects of meaning. The complex interplay between the findings in this study suggests that meaning in occupation may be better understood by exploring the nature of associations amongst differing themes. Meaning is more than just the sum of its parts, and thus its study requires thorough investigation into the interrelations.

Conclusion

Meaning is created through occupation and thus it is an important area of research. Identifying the features and patterns of meaning will help cultivate a more complete understanding of occupation. Meaning is expressed through language and narrative, which requires a qualitative, interpretive approach to its study (Polkinghorne, 1988). The current exploratory study employed a framework synthesis approach to qualitative meta-synthesis which resulted in the identification of many themes of meaning, as well as complex interconnections between themes, across multiple studies. The veracity of these themes is supported by interdisciplinary literature, strengthening the possibility that the findings of this study are transferable across different populations and occupations.

CHAPTER 5: REFLECTION

My decision to pursue a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy by doing a thesis came after I was introduced to qualitative research by Pat Sample in the Research to Practice I course. I had not considered such an approach to research before, as I had only been exposed to quantitative research in psychology through my undergraduate studies. To me, quantitative methodology fell short in explaining human nature and the human experience, and I felt like a missing link had been discovered when I learned about qualitative research. For the first time, I could see myself doing research in the future, and it was exciting.

Throughout this process, my understanding of qualitative research and qualitative synthesis has grown and changed. Creswell (1998) and Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) have been my main guides, steering me through the methods of qualitative research and synthesis, the advantages and gains achieved through it, as well as the limitations and controversies. Learning how to engage in qualitative methodology has solidified my interest in it and my belief that it provides an important component of knowledge to the field of occupational science.

At the beginning of this journey, I had not given much thought into the significance of understanding meaning related to occupation. Just as it is for most people, the meaning of occupation was so embedded in my daily activities that I never stopped to think about it. As I began to explore the literature around meaning and meaningfulness, my concept of meaning became even more befuddled. Early in my reflective journal, I write, "So what *is* meaningful activity?" and "Why is meaning important?" I had a hard time pinning down an exact definition, but noted that meaning seemed to arise from occupational engagement and participation in an environment that has the significant feeling of place. I began to recognize that in order to

understand an individual, there had to be a level of understanding about the meaning within that person's occupations.

Reflecting on my own personal experiences helped me gain an early grasp on the significance of meaning related to occupation. I thought a lot about the occupational shifts that occurred when I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree. My central and long-held role as a student was lost, along with the habits and routines that accompanied it. I was lost. Who was I? What purpose in everyday life did I have? I found odd and comforting pleasures in the most mundane of occupations that I had previously thought of as a nuisance, such as grocery shopping, doing my laundry, and going to the bank. But even those occupations did not extend into having a meaningful place in the world to me. I was not, in the words of Wilcock (2006) and Hammell (2004), "doing, being, belonging, and becoming" to my satisfaction. Stagnation became a heavy burden and soon I was motivated to seek out new occupations that would help me fulfill the meaning in my life.

Wilcock's emphasis on the importance of doing, being, and belonging, as well as Hammell's addition of becoming, formed the basis of my early understandings of meaning. Again and again, I saw evidence of those concepts throughout the articles that I was reviewing for this study. In some ways, it helped me begin to organize meaning in my head, but latching onto Wilcock and Hammell also narrowed my scope, as I had a difficult time spotting deeper and more specific sources of meaning in occupation. Introduction to other literature on meaning by scholars such as Baumeister (1991), Christiansen (1999), and Polkinghorne (1988) helped me break free of the oversimplification I had become wrapped up in. I began to see how occupation played the pivotal role in meaning-making for one's life, by providing a means to form and maintain identity, foster competence, and achieve a sense of continuity between the past and the

present. It also became clear how influential the social environment was on the creation of meaning.

The three authors also helped me begin to understand how to embark upon the study of meaning. Quantitative methods, while useful to investigate measurable descriptions and outcomes of occupation, fell short of accessing the essence of the experience and meaning of occupation. Language, narration, and the interpretation of people's subjective experiences were the keys to unlocking the mysteries of meaning. In order for me to expose the meaning of occupation in the articles that were selected for this study, I would need to become intimately acquainted with the participants' stories, reading them without assumption and using their words to shape my understanding of meaning, rather than coming in with predisposed and biased theories based on my experience.

Approaching the data without assumption was a persistent challenge for me. As I began coding and organizing the codes, I found myself jumping to categorize before I had thoroughly acquainted myself with all the grounded data. Many hours were spent re-coding and re-organizing after meetings with Dr. Eakman in which I realized I was guilty of reaching for premature conclusions. I had to learn to sit back and listen to what the data were trying to tell me, rather than interrupting it with declarations of my comprehension before the data were done speaking.

As research has a tendency to do, this study has opened up more lines of questioning as I answered the ones I had from the beginning. While I chose to focus on positive subjective experience related to occupation, the data contained other concepts that merit further study. I touched on the supportive effects of positive subjective experience on the continuance of occupation, but there were also additional features that served to motivate further engagement in

occupation, such as having routines. Identifying patterns across motivating features would contribute to models of occupation such as the model of human occupation (Kielhofner, 2002), which emphasizes the importance of motivation, but does not fully delineate what is motivating to people. In addition, I coded, but did not analyze, negative subjective experiences related to occupation and features that serve as barriers to occupation. There were also complex interactions within and between all these concepts, the study of which would be an interesting future endeavor.

While I think that the variety of populations, cultures, and occupations included in the current study validate the findings as general and collective features to meaning in occupation, I think that another line of future research could be into studying the differences in meaning between populations. Throughout analysis, I often noticed that some themes of meaning were more prevalent in some populations than others. For example, the meaning of health and well-being was especially salient to people with mental illness and older adults. This piqued my interest and provoked new queries even as I worked to answer the original research questions. What other themes of meaning might be more emphasized with certain populations?

In any project, hindsight is twenty-twenty. Looking back, there are a few things that I would have done differently. It was difficult for me to come into the larger project with Dr. Eakman when I was not involved in the selection of articles or the development and application of the a priori codes. Occasionally, I found myself questioning or disagreeing with what data was coded, but had to put my dissonance aside because that part of the process was completed.

Even though I appreciated the wide representation of populations and occupations, at times it was overwhelming with the number of themes that arose from the data due to this large breadth. In addition to the major themes found that were outlined in this study, there were

numerous other mini-themes that were less frequent, but still apparent, such as the meaning of place or the meaning of solitary, private time. Perhaps by narrowing the focus down to one population, some of these salient mini-themes would be revealed more in depth.

Future research is also needed to confirm, extend, or disconfirm the findings of this study. While the findings were strongly supported by research and theory from multiple disciplines, it is important that other researchers approach the topic of patterns of meaning in occupation through the lens of occupational science. Getting a firm grasp on the basic knowledge of meaning will open doors for applied research that is more directly relatable to occupational therapy practice and promoting optimal health and well-being of individuals.

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