Occupational Engagement and Meaning: The Experience of Ikebana Practice

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Occupational Engagement and Meaning: The Experience of Ikebana Practice

Engagement and meaning are essential properties of occupation that have been associated with well-being in the occupational science literature. A deeper examination of subjective experiences while engaging in particular occupations may illuminate how specific occupational characteristics contribute to the relationship between occupation and well-being. Consequently, this study investigates the concepts of personal meaning and occupational engagement by exploring the experience of ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement) among practitioners. As a symbolic and disciplined art form anchored in cultural history, ikebana is a highly suitable occupation for examining subjective experiences of occupation and characteristics like personal meaning and engagement. Descriptive phenomenology informed the study design and data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with nine ikebana practitioners, including novices and teachers. Three themes identified through inductive analysis were: 1) ikebana as an avenue to a richer life; 2) transformation of the self through ikebana, and 3) ikebana supports harmony in life. The themes represent qualities of ikebana practice that facilitate ongoing engagement in this and other occupations, and support practitioners’ sense of well-being. These findings reinforce the powerful influence of occupation on individual experience and elucidate the reciprocal relationships among meaning, engagement and well-being.

Keywords: Occupation, Leisure, Engagement, Meaning, Subjective experience, Ikebana

Occupational scientists continue to investigate the mechanisms by which occupation contributes to health and well-being. Occupations may be seen as individually crafted, distinct and uniquely felt experiences (Pierce, 2001) that are purposefully chosen by individuals to achieve and shape identity (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Occupations allow expression and reconstruction of those identities (Asaba & Jackson, 2011), and may be restorative, prompting a sense of rejuvenation that extends beyond the time of participation (Howell & Pierce, 2000). Individuals may attain spiritual well-being through participation in occupations and affirming occupations have the capacity to be a “natural mechanism for health with the potential to keep all parts of the organism honed and working well” (Wilcock, 2003, p. 4). In the absence of occupation, individuals may struggle with identity loss and stigmatization, sacrificing the integrity of their well-being (Stone, 2003). Despite strong commitment to the foundational principles above, there remains a need to investigate and further define the core concepts.
underlying the subjective experience of specific occupations. Investigations in this area may illuminate and further clarify the influence of occupation on well-being (Hammell, 2004; Jonsson, 2008).

One approach to understanding the essence of an occupation is by examining it directly (Dickie, 2003). The study described here focuses on a cohort of individuals who chose ikebana as a valued occupation. Revealing the subjective experience of study participants illustrates how occupation carries specific meanings that, in turn, influence perceptions of well-being and support continued engagement in both ikebana specifically and other occupations, reflecting symbiosis between occupation and well-being.

Ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arranging, is a creative and symbolic form that uses plant materials to express awareness of nature and human life (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999). Based on a rich history and philosophy, ikebana differs from Western forms of floral arrangement in both purpose and structural composition. Western forms value symmetry, abundant displays of flowers and are often created solely for the purpose of aesthetic appeal. Ikebana appears minimalist in contrast; it values line, simplicity, asymmetry (Lau, 2010; Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999), and select use of flowers and other materials such as branches, stones, and containers. See Figures 1 and 2. Further, the practice is highly symbolic, with each plant material, line and form carrying a meaning and significance (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999). The artist observes and is inspired by nature to select materials and create a composition, similar to other art forms like painting. Ikebana emerged in 6th century Japan in the form of a Buddhist custom of dedicating flowers atop temple altars. Although individuals may learn to apply basic principles to ikebana-inspired arrangements, the techniques, history, and inherent discipline take dedicated study (Lau, 2010). The popularity of contemporary ikebana has grown, with more than 2,000 secular schools of ikebana presently operating world-wide (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999; Vancouver Ikebana Association, 2012a). The different schools represent unique artistic styles but share a
common approach to learning through the gradual progression of structured lessons as skills are developed over many years of practice under the guidance of a master teacher or sensei (Moriyama & Moriyama, 1999; Vancouver Ikebana Association, 2012b). A brief history and summary of the major forms of ikebana are described by Lau (2010).

Given the rich tradition and extensive investment of its practitioners to learning it, ikebana was selected as an appropriate occupation for studying subjective experiences and the meaning of occupation. Appreciating the subjectivity of occupational engagement is paramount to this research. While “the ‘doing’ aspect of an occupation may be conducted in a remarkably similar way from one individual to another, the subjective experience of that doing (i.e., the ‘being’) will always be unique” (Hayward & Taylor, 2011, p. 135).

The notion that meaning is central to occupation is reflected throughout the occupational science literature and, simply put, meaning is essential for health and well-being (Hasselkus, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Reid, 2008; Shank & Cutchin, 2010). It has been proposed that meaning is created and
attributed to occupations through three dynamic processes: 1) participation in occupations with meaningful characteristics, 2) social relationships experienced by involvement in occupation, and 3) experiencing transcendence; an escape or break from difficult situations or worries (Griffiths, Caron, Desrosiers, & Thibeault, 2007). It has also been argued that meaning results from individuals’ efforts to make sense of their experiences in daily situations and emerges through participation in occupations (Hasselkus, 2011). Meaning is constantly negotiated and redeveloped to conform to the person and place (Shank & Cutchin, 2010). It is this dynamic and context-dependent nature of meaning that confirms its role throughout an individual’s life span.

An additional perspective on the creation and experience of meaning through occupation posits that occupations are viewed as meaningful if they have concrete, symbolic and self-renewal value to the participant (Persson, Erlandsson, Eklund, & Iwarsson, 2001). Concrete value was described as the tangible products or characteristics of the occupation whereas symbolic value was perceived as the level of personal, cultural, and universal significance for the participant. Self-renewal value referred to rewards such as enjoyment, development and satisfaction that were inherently part of the occupation and provided a feeling of regeneration or refreshment. It has also been suggested that individuals are empowered to create meaning by relying on past experiences (Kuo, 2011). By consciously selecting occupations to engage in, those occupations become a means to create experiences that truly matter, promoting overall well-being. However, empirical evidence to support this relationship could be strengthened.

This study addresses the identified need for research on occupation (Bedding & Sadlo, 2008; Hocking, 2009; Wilcock, 2007) and adds to existing literature on the subjective experience of occupation (Jacob, Guptill, & Sumsion, 2009; Reed, Hocking, & Smythe, 2010; Scheerer, Cahill, Kirby, & Lane, 2004). Meaning and engagement were viewed as essential properties of occupation that could be explored through described experiences of ikebana practice. Thus, the objectives of this study were to discover the meaning and experience of ikebana among practitioners and to explore how the practice of ikebana may promote occupational engagement.

**Methodology**

The researchers adopted an essentialist worldview by allowing language to reflect meaning and experience in a unidirectional manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A descriptive phenomenological approach guided the study (Lopez & Willis, 2004), acknowledging that universal truths or ‘essences’ can emerge from the compilation of individuals’ accounts of lived experiences (Finlay, 1999; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Accordingly, detailed reports of experiences and meanings were solicited from participants through interviews. Overall descriptions were created that depict the intrinsic meaning of ikebana in the eyes of the practitioners. The researchers undertook a refined process of ongoing self-reflection and peer critique in place of traditional bracketing techniques (Finlay, 2009; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Writing field notes and periodic memos allowed the team to discuss potential assumptions and biases, and monitor the extent to which these perspectives influenced the analysis. This process aligned with views that traditional bracketing techniques are untenable (Carpenter & Suto, 2008; LeVasseur, 2003).

**Participant recruitment**

Purposeful sampling recruited practitioners with varied experiences (student to master), via personal and printed invitations to an ikebana association in Vancouver, Canada. Volunteer participants were ikebana practitioners aged 19 or over who could communicate in English. The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved the study and written informed consent was obtained before each interview occurred.

**Data collection**

Over a 2-month period, one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant,
scheduled at a time and location selected by participants. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The first authors (AW, CP) developed the interview guide and conducted all of the interviews together. The interview guide contained eight main questions and several focused questions that elicited further description (probes). Sample questions are listed in Table 1. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first authors (AW, CP). Further data were gathered via e-mail as part of the analytical process and a form of member checking.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used by the first authors, who are developing skills with qualitative methods, in consultation with the senior authors. This process accommodates ongoing, iterative data analysis to create an essential structure of the phenomena studied and retains participants’ unique experiences. Analysis began during the data acquisition phase and continued throughout all other phases of the project as outlined in Table 2. An inductive approach identified patterns arising directly from the data and themes were created on a semantic level, based on prevalent and related concepts throughout the data set (Table 3). Themes describe the essential meaning and experience of ikebana practice, explore broader meanings and offer implications for occupational science.

### Trustworthiness

The interviewers documented their observations, questions and ideas related to interviews in field notes and these data were discussed among the research team. Reflective journaling in the form of recording thoughts, feelings and interpretations encourages researchers to evaluate the changing nature of their roles as interviewers and interpreters of data (Ortlipp, 2008). Journaling and discussion supported the interviewers to identify personal values and experiences that could influence the research process such as their belief in the meaning and power of occupation to positively affect well-being. None of the research team members were of Japanese (or Eastern) origin. The interviewers differed in their previous exposure to ikebana practice: One was frequently exposed to ikebana arrangements through a social connection to a family of practitioners, while the other was newly-exposed to ikebana during this

### Table 1: Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Broad Questions</th>
<th>Examples of Focused Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about creating an arrangement?</td>
<td>What is the process from beginning to end with the materials, your body (physical experience), feelings, mind (thoughts)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does ikebana relate to other aspects/activities in your life?</td>
<td>How does ikebana fit into your life as a whole?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you continue with ikebana?</td>
<td>How would your life be different/stay the same if you no longer practiced ikebana?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a goal/purpose/reason to the practice of ikebana (in general)?</td>
<td>What does ikebana practice mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How have your experiences changed over time?</td>
<td>Are your experiences of practicing ikebana different now compared to when you first began to practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic questions</td>
<td>How long have you been practicing ikebana?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General and Member Checking Questions (mailed to participants)

- What does the practice of ikebana contribute to your life?
- What are the main aspects of ikebana that motivate you to continue with the practice?
- Are there concepts (within these themes) that do not fit with your experience?
- Are there any important aspects of your experience that we are missing?
study. Neither interviewer was familiar with the creative process or the perceived meaning of engagement in ikebana from a participant point of view. Accordingly, they embraced a learner role in relation to participants, who embraced a mentor role while sharing their ikebana knowledge. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, member checking involved e-mailing general and individualized follow-up questions to the participants and inviting comments on provisional themes (see Table 1). These data helped refine the themes.

Results

Participants were nine female ikebana practitioners (three teachers and six students) associated with three local ikebana schools. Participants were diverse in their cultural heritage
and their ikebana practice, ranging from few to over 40 years, with an average of 14 years. To preserve anonymity, participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Analysis resulted in a general description of fundamental aspects of ikebana that situate participants’ practice and provide a background for understanding specific experiences and meanings. Briefly, they positioned ikebana as a creative activity that is leisure for students and a component of work for teachers. They described an awareness of the history, culture, and traditions of ikebana as well as characteristics of specific ikebana schools and practice groups. Techniques were learned gradually through progressive lessons and ongoing practice. Ikebana was perceived generally as an enjoyable and beneficial activity that is imbued with meaning. Three themes were developed to describe the salient features of occupational experience and meaning in the context of ikebana practice.

Ikebana as an avenue to a richer life

“There are many ways to get a richer life with ikebana” (Amy). Ikebana created opportunities to enrich participants’ lives. Opportunities that characterized this theme were engagement in other activities, bringing beauty into the home, work, self-expression, connections to nature, social connections, and historical/cultural connections. In contemplating her possible engagement in future ikebana-related events, Gillian observed “There are so many avenues by which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Examples</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events/shows</td>
<td>Other activities</td>
<td>Ikebana as an avenue to a richer life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Opportunities for self expression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic expression</td>
<td>Connections to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gardener connection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-participants’ connection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Connection to outside surroundings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to plants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of “the eye”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Beauty in the home</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Journey of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past transcendence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present transcendence from bad mood/worry</td>
<td></td>
<td>Transcending a difficult experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-being</td>
<td>Health promotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relaxation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy of ikebana</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Data Analysis: Code Examples, Categories and Themes
one could proceed” while Frances exclaimed “It’s really opened my eyes to what’s available out there!”

From home decorating to gardening, photography and other activities, ikebana was perceived to “open up the idea to other things” (Gillian). Ikebana shows, meetings and conferences occur throughout the year and practitioners attend local and international events, providing opportunities to travel and meet new people. Many participants valued and enjoyed these activities, but for others this type of participation was less meaningful. Carrie observed “some are very enthusiastic about—going to the show—but I’m just happy with what I can make in my home.” Participants also described the pleasure of having arrangements at home, characterizing this as an opportunity to bring beauty into their lives.

Regarding opportunities for work, the more experienced practitioners described requests to design arrangements for special events such as weddings or funerals. Such requests could provide an opportunity to earn money and contribute something meaningful to important occasions in others’ lives. Ikebana was also strongly endorsed by all participants as creating opportunities for self-expression. Heather explained that, when one begins to study ikebana, “all your creativity that you didn’t know was in there begins to come out and it comes out through the materials…[the materials] help you to…express yourself.” At the time she began to practice, Amy found that ikebana was “a wonderful artistic outlet…knew that I was artistic—but never had the opportunity to do much.”

The concepts of developing connections with people, nature and culture through ikebana were strong and appeared in different forms throughout the transcripts. Heather suggested that “ikebana takes you that one—two, three steps more…it almost takes you inside nature.” Expanding on the link to nature Ingrid said, “I fell in love with cherry trees in a way I hadn’t before [involvement with ikebana].”

Participants acknowledged and appreciated opportunities to learn, share and develop friendships with others who had similar interests. Gillian observed that “there is this natural connection because…we all enjoy the same thing,” while Beth offered “you get to really appreciate what other people bring to the table.” Heather expressed peer appreciation when she exclaimed “these members of our club…aren’t they incredible?…I just love them! I get so much from them!”

Participants viewed sharing ikebana as a way, through actions rather than words, to facilitate connections to others. For example, Frances described some instances of sharing arrangements at work and church, noting “people appreciate it…so it’s opened up some communication.” Sharing ikebana was reported to “bring joy to other people” (Beth) and decrease quarrels (Evelyn), thus nurturing family relationships. Gillian described offering ikebana arrangements at graves as a form of remembering deceased loved ones. Several participants shared that having mothers, grandmothers and/or daughters who practiced ikebana facilitated inter-generational connections and that the continuity of ikebana practice over generations was a significant element of practice.

Some practitioners identified the importance of connections to the historical tradition of ikebana: “When I practice, there’s a connection with people centuries ago who studied” (Gillian). The cultural aspects of ikebana as a Japanese art form were appreciated by participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. For participants who identified with their Japanese heritage, ikebana was perceived as a way to maintain connection: “It is a cool way to keep in touch with your culture” (Heather). For others, ikebana was a way of learning about an unfamiliar and interesting culture. As Denise stated, ikebana helped “create more of an interest in Japanese culture in general, and Japanese arts in particular.”

Transformation of the self through ikebana

“ar expect to grow with it” (Amy). This second theme presents ikebana practice as a tool to transform the self. Four elements contribute to this theme and describe the changes experienced by participants: personal growth, transcendence
of difficult experiences, enhancement of aesthetic sense, and engagement with the learning process. Ikebana was perceived to promote and support personal growth. Amy explained: “I feel I can control myself better in difficult situations... we need to have patience to do ikebana and it has given me that for sure.” Gillian explained how ikebana played a role in her process of self-discovery. She took up the practice of ikebana at a time in her life when she was “starting to discover who I really was.” She reported thinking “how do I [her emphasis] want to arrange these flowers?” and exclaimed “it’s wonderful to figure out what I want to do!” Other participants observed that ikebana supports self-development through creativity. Denise described her experience: “I believe I am learning to be more creative and my sense of imagination has expanded not only in the art of ikebana, but in fashion, home decorating, and even food preparation.”

Participants also reported how ikebana practice became a tool to transcend stress and difficult life experiences. Amy explained “it’s very comforting when you feel a little bit down... your problems disappear – temporarily. You kind of relax.” Another participant said there was something about the contemplation of flowers that could “ease the pain” when she was unhappy. A couple of practitioners shared examples of how their practice had helped them through very difficult times. Heather recalled her practice around the time of her mother’s illness and death, and said:

That’s when I really stretched myself and I just went really deep inside to come up with stuff I didn’t even know... that helped me go through it... it helped my mother to feel better because I would do ikebana for her.

Gillian described ikebana as “a refuge” from disturbing memories of past events in her life, observing that:

It was only through the ikebana practice where I felt as if, there was joy... I think that for me, the remembrance... was actually somewhat relieved because I was creating beauty out of something and I figure that with ikebana you can’t fail.

The enhancement of aesthetic sense speaks to participants’ development of an artistic appreciation for line and form in nature and in other areas of life. Denise commented that ikebana “changes the way you see things... clothing, housing, decorating, colours, design in general.” The process by which this comes about was described by Beth:

You’re taught some of the rules of how a branch grows [then] you start to notice those things around you a lot more... and instead of thinking ‘oh, it’s a tree’ – you’ll recognize it for all the beautiful shapes and lines in it that you can see as a practitioner of ikebana.

Participants described an ongoing learning process that they recognized as transformative over time. Several referred to new experiences, exploring self, developing self by teaching others, and always learning something new while doing ikebana, attributing various levels of transformation to their ikebana practice. Carrie said, “I am learning... in each arrangement I find new findings – new experience... so I believe that I am exploring myself... I hope that I am growing (laughs).”

Ikebana supports harmony in life

“The main thing for ikebana is to have harmony” (Evelyn). Ikebana practice facilitates harmony in life, accomplished by improving the alignment of self in relation to others and the outer world. This theme is represented by four descriptive categories: flow experience, compatibility with life, health promotion, and philosophical/spiritual perspectives.

Flow is a type of self-motivating, rewarding engagement wherein people become intensely absorbed in an occupation that matches their competencies, to the extent of losing awareness of the passage of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Beth described her experience: “You don’t really think about anything else... you’re in your own little mindset for awhile and you can just focus on...
what you’re creating and everything else just sort of disappears out of your mind.” Other participants concurred, suggesting this experience of flow allows an altered perception of the world beneficial to practitioners, as Carrie observed: “Sometimes I am so rushed... but flower arrangement is something that you cannot rush. So it’s more like a feeling that I am jumping to a different time zone... so usually I am more relaxed when I am done.”

Practitioners commented on ways in which ikebana complemented their lives and enhanced experiences of other activities. There were several examples in relation to gardening, photography and other artistic pursuits. Carrie explained how the practice supported her working life:

“Healing is my very important theme when I work with the patients because I cannot cure them... they have to do their job; I can only help them to do it... doing the flower arrangement just keeps reminding me of doing those principles.

Ikebana was also seen to complement life if it contrasted with other aspects of practitioners' lives. This was the case for Beth, who perceived ikebana as providing “a little bit of artistic balance” in her life. Amy described the role ikebana played in helping her achieve a better fit with her life:

“For me it has been a very good way of balancing my life when I stopped working, moved to a new environment and I was not balanced. So, I needed something, just to keep my feet on the ground, to feel in control. And with ikebana I feel in control of what I do, what I decide to do.

Ikebana was perceived by participants as a means of promoting physical and mental health and well-being. Amy described some of the benefits of practice: “It is a wonderful outlet against high blood pressure... and I found that it’s good for arthritis too.” Denise observed that ikebana helped her take care of herself because it was relaxing, and Heather also spoke of health promotion: “It makes you get outside a lot more of course. So that's going to influence your health... walking or working with material hands on, pulling weeds in the garden, raking leaves, any of that kind of thing.” In addition to specific benefits obtained through practice, participants described how the flowers used in arrangements were perceived as beneficial, and that they gave flowers to others to acknowledge life events or help them feel better when recovering in hospital.

The philosophical and spiritual qualities of ikebana practice were mentioned by several participants as meaningful in their lives. Participants often used flowers and ikebana practice as symbols of their personal/spiritual beliefs. For example, Evelyn explained her perspective on the practice:

“I think ikebana is more or less kind of spiritual... you have to look into yourself, right? And look at the flowers... when you look into the flowers you also notice that life is also just like that... you can apply all the theory into your daily life.

Heather described how ikebana could influence a practitioner's life: “The philosophical balance of making an ikebana... the three main stems... heaven, earth and man and trying to create the balance and the harmony of those three things together... it flows into your lifestyle and makes it much healthier.” For others, this philosophical/spiritual aspect of ikebana practice was de-emphasised and held less personal meaning: “For me, religion is one thing, art is something else, and I don’t think of them together but I respect people who do” (Amy). These participants’ perspectives tended to be more strongly represented in other categories within this theme.

Discussion

This study explores the meaning of ikebana to students and teachers of the art, and elucidates the concept of meaningful occupation. Participants found ikebana practice to be transformative: it lead to a richer life, supported personal
growth, and represented harmony in life. These three primary (and inter-related) themes encompass and represent the characteristics of ikebana that were especially meaningful for participants, motivated their continued engagement in the occupational form, and subsequently enhanced their sense of well-being. We first discuss ikebana as meaningful occupation, followed by the attributes of ikebana that foster occupational engagement.

**Ikebana as a meaningful occupation**

Ikebana was perceived by participants as a meaningful occupation because it was enjoyed, appreciated and important in their lives. Ikebana practitioners become active agents in their occupational trajectory when they recognized the power of occupation to promote health and well-being (Kuo, 2011). Their continued participation in ikebana and descriptive qualities of ikebana practice substantiate participants’ experience of this practice as meaningful. Participants identified opportunities for other activities, self-expression, home enhancement and connections to others, culture and nature as meaningful characteristics of ikebana practice. They described how refreshing and valuable it was to explore their creativity. Occupations that promote utilization of creativity are meaningful because they empower humans to relate to themselves, each other and the world around them (Pollard, 2011). Consistent with other investigations, the meaning of occupation gleaned from the exploration of lived experiences is difficult to apprehend and far from simple (Reed, Hocking, & Smythe, 2010). Aspects of meaning are mutable, interacting with and influencing each other.

Participants described transformative experiences through ikebana. They identified personal growth, development of aesthetic sense, learning and transcendence as meaningful characteristics and as potential tools for lifelong self-development. These characteristics are consistent with Caldwell’s (2005) finding that leisure activities are meaningful because they promote knowledge, skills and self-development. Research on flow has shown that individuals are more inclined to achieve positive meaning from engagement if the ratio of challenge to skills is sufficient to prompt full use of their skills sets (Wright et al., 2007). The element of challenge supports active engagement by providing growth opportunities and the satisfaction of acquiring new knowledge, as well as the rewarding quality of external attention and feedback when one meets the challenge successfully (Tonneijck, Kinébanian, & Josephsson, 2008).

Humans’ innate desire to gain knowledge and explore — represented in this study by ikebana practitioners learning the history and philosophy of their occupation and enacting that knowledge in the choice of materials and design of their arrangements — generates connections between individuals and between individuals and their physical environment (Dickie, 2003). Ikebana encourages aesthetic sense through its creative requirements; practitioners are empowered to make aesthetic choices which in turn influence their pride in the final product. These findings correspond with experiences of practitioners of traditional Japanese tea ceremony (Sakuae & Reid, 2011). Engagement in the practice of tea ceremony promoted learning and personal development within the tea room and in the context of practitioners’ daily lives, and fostered connections to co-participants and to the physical environment in the near (tea room) and broader sense (nature and changing seasons).

Meaning can be elicited through transcendence (Griffiths et al., 2007) and this was illustrated by a participant who described ikebana as a refuge from disturbing memories of past events. Particular occupations promote harmony and allow seclusion from the rest of the world (Tonneijck et al., 2008), and creative occupations have been identified as a medium to nourish the soul and transcend daily experiences (Blanche, 2007). Participants in Blanche’s study described “losing themselves in the act of creation and later emerging from it having learned something valuable about their most intimate self” (p. 27). When one becomes absorbed in occupation, there is potential to lose self-consciousness and negative thoughts disappear (Wright et al., 2007).
Thus, transformation of self is achieved through elements such as refining one’s skills, developing aesthetic discretion, allowing transcendence, and experiencing a just right challenge.

Within the ‘Harmony in Life’ theme, participants described characteristics that facilitated improvements in self and alignment with their outer world, including flow experiences, the compatibility of ikebana with life, and health, spiritual and philosophical perspectives. Flow experiences have been frequently described as a meaningful aspect of participation in creative occupations (e.g., Hegarty, 2009) and were identified by all participants. Research participants also experienced meaning through valuing specific aspects of practice, as proposed by Persson and colleagues (2001). For example, ikebana practice produces flower arrangements as tangible products and facilitates the development of technical skills. Further, some participants experienced meaning through valuing ikebana as a symbolic activity, representing various levels of personal, cultural or universal significance. Symbolic meaning was discussed in the context of ikebana as extending beyond an arrangement to the beliefs and way of life behind the art. Participants explained that meaning arose through self-renewal, or rewards such as enjoyment or self-development, which provided a feeling of regeneration consistent with the findings of Persson and colleagues (2001).

**Ikebana as an engaging occupation**

Participants’ descriptions support ikebana as an engaging occupation that holds potential to facilitate feelings of high involvement and satisfaction, as did Lau (2010). Elements of the general descriptions and three themes in the present study are strongly aligned with positive meaning, regular involvement, related activities, and community involvement – characteristics of engaging occupations (Jonsson, 2008). As the previous section on meaning illustrates, the themes in the present study are replete with examples of positive meaning. The length of involvement varied among participants, from a few years to a lifetime of practice and all participants anticipated continuing with ikebana. Although participants were clearly committed to their practice, they spoke of ikebana as a pleasurable and freely chosen activity rather than naming it as a commitment or responsibility, although teachers spoke of their commitment to students.

Engaging occupations have been found to be analogous to work in terms of the seriousness and commitment with which they were pursued (Jonsson, 2008). In the present study, the opportunity for work is described within the ‘Richer Life’ theme and a few participants considered ikebana to be aligned with work through teaching or flower related businesses, but it was not a strong characteristic. This discrepancy may be due to differences between participant samples; on average, participants in the present study were younger than the sample described by Jonsson (2008) and the majority had work-related responsibilities other than ikebana. Nevertheless, the participants described ikebana as an expression of their identity and were sufficiently serious about their practice to suggest that Jonsson’s “seriousness and commitment” characteristic reflects an element of meaningful occupation.

**Promoting engagement through ikebana practice**

Participants were clearly enthusiastic about and fully engaged in ikebana. What promoted this level of engagement? First, ikebana may facilitate positive feelings (e.g., satisfaction) or fulfill an innate human need to discover meaning and support well-being through occupation (Stanley, 1995; Wilcock, 2007). From an atomistic perspective, features of ikebana may play a contributory role in promoting engagement. The themes offer a means to examine possible links between occupation and the promotion of engagement. Within the ‘Richer Life’ theme ikebana acts as a bridge, facilitating engagement in new opportunities that arise (Craik & Pieris, 2006; Griffiths, 2008). Also, success achieved in one activity may increase confidence to try other activities (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 1999). Optimal engagement in activity yields enthusiasm that helps individuals focus on a goal or vision to work towards (Wright...
The enthusiasm derived from ikebana may positively influence an individual's approach to alternate occupations.

Secondly, some participants indicated that their continued involvement in ikebana was facilitated through opportunities for creative expression. Researchers have suggested that creative occupations may promote engagement through fulfilling an innate need for creativity and self-expression (Bedding & Sadlo, 2008; Lloyd, Wong, & Petchkovsky, 2007; Reynolds & Prior, 2003). Thirdly, opportunities to connect with nature may positively influence psychological states and feelings (Heliker, Chadwick, & O'Connell, 2001; Jonasson, Marklund, & Hildingh, 2007). A study investigating gardening in women with cancer revealed a prevalent theme of participation based on connection with nature and interaction with living things (Unruh, Smith, & Scammell, 2000). Physical elements of the garden, such as visual pleasure, were motivating. Plants and flowers were meaningful because they became symbols of life, promoting continued engagement.

Similarly, social connections and encouragement from others (the sensei/teacher and classmates) were strongly endorsed by participants as promoting ongoing engagement in ikebana. Individuals are motivated to continue engagement as a means to maintain positive feelings (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 1999); this proposition is consistent with theorizing about occupation and belonging wherein inclusion and reciprocity may arise from sharing and interacting with others (Hammell, 2004).

The theme ‘Harmony in Life’ presents several aspects of ikebana practice that can promote ongoing engagement. It has been suggested that individuals experience anxiety and are ill at ease when they believe their outer world does not match their inner world, and feel confidence and peace when the two perspectives are consistent (Brehm et al., 1999). This feeling of authenticity may reinforce participation in occupations. Flow experiences can occur when one's skills match the demands of an occupation; such circumstances can promote feelings of vitality, satisfaction and joy that individuals are motivated to maintain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). People may feel satisfaction and gain temporary relief from unpleasant situations through ikebana, and this can reinforce participation (Caldwell, 2005). People may also continue to participate in occupations that they believe are beneficial for their health (Poole et al., 2001). Through participants’ descriptions of meaning and engagement, ikebana is depicted as an appealing occupation that not only fosters continued engagement with the occupation of flower arranging, but also promotes engagement in other occupations. The themes that emerged from participants’ descriptions represent qualities of ikebana practice that are part of a perpetuating cycle of occupational engagement. This observation advances occupational science: the qualities of meaning and engagement that draw participants to the specific practice/occupation (in this case ikebana) lead to ongoing involvement in it and other occupations, which in turn bolsters the personal meaning derived from engagement. Understanding that engagement in ikebana is fostered by features that continue to sustain participation, reflects the reciprocity that is found in the concept of self-perpetuating occupations (Carlson, 1996).

The concepts of ‘engagement’ and ‘meaning’ are key aspects of occupation that can influence health and well-being, yet remain underdeveloped (Garci & Mandich, 2005; Griffiths et al., 2007; Stanley, 1995). This small study contributes to the discourse on these concepts as they relate to a particular occupation, ikebana, itself imbued with cultural and historical significance.

**Strengths, limitations and future directions**

The purposeful sampling of participants, the use of semi-structured interviews, and member checking procedures all contributed to rich, credible findings that are reflective of participants’ thoughts and experiences. Study findings need to be interpreted with caution however, as the themes are not generalizable beyond the participants studied, who were female, drawn from a narrow social class, and highly involved.
Further, it is anticipated that elements within the themes, and their contribution to the promotion of engagement are interrelated and more complex than can be presented in this study, especially given the relatively short time in the field.

The context of practice and culture, important contributors to meaning and experience, were not fully explored in the course of the research, and may represent a valuable avenue for future investigations. Additionally, future studies might explore the meaning and experiences of people who have less intense levels of engagement in ikebana, which may provide valuable insight into the themes discussed here.

**Conclusion**

Ikebana is depicted as a meaningful, engaging occupation with capacity to promote well-being and practitioners' involvement in other occupations. The subjective experience of meaning and engagement in ikebana described here clarifies and informs the ongoing discussion about these concepts. The themes contribute to a holistic view of a specific occupation. Further, this study offers support for investigating other engaging occupations as a means to promote well-being within a broader population of adults.

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