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**Title:**

**‘Early hour, golden hour: An exploration of Slovenian older people’s meaningful occupations’**

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## **Abstract**

People are occupational beings and enabling older people to engage in meaningful occupations contributes to their health and well-being. Experiences of engagement and meaning in an occupation may differ in different socio-cultural contexts. The aim of this study was to explore Slovenian older people's individual experiences of engagement in occupation, with a particular emphasis on their meaningful occupations. The study employed a phenomenological research approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Slovenian older adults, living independently in their home environment. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to approach and analyze the data. The findings highlighted that meaningful occupations and daily rituals represented an important part of the participants' identities. The meanings they attached to their occupations were informed by Slovenian socio-cultural, historical and physical context. A range of people and places were identified as significant in generating and maintaining these meanings. Participants gave particular significance to the role of productive, health-promoting and family-related occupations. The study contributes new occupational science knowledge and the findings support the case for increased recognition of the importance of meaningful occupation for older people.

**Key words:** older people, occupation, meaning

## **Introduction**

Occupational scientists argue that people are occupational beings by nature, needing engagement in occupation for survival, health and well-being (Wilcock 2007).

Occupational science is considered a social science, focusing on an interdisciplinary exploration of humans as occupational beings (Yerxa 1993, Yerxa 2000). In this respect, the term 'occupation' refers to everything people do in their everyday lives (Clark *et al.* 1991); occupational science being concerned with exploring these occupations, their relationship to people's health and well-being and the impact of contextual factors on their engagement in occupations (Hocking and Wright-St Clair 2011, Wilcock and Hocking 2015). The link between occupational science and gerontology has been acknowledged, indicating the importance of research in the area of older people and their engagement in occupations, as they are often marginalized and denied access to everyday occupations (Perkinson and Briller 2009). Individuals' socio-cultural contexts inform and influence their experiences of engaging in occupations and the meanings they attach to these occupations (Phelan and Kinsella, 2009). As a result, older people's experiences of engaging in meaningful occupation may differ in different socio-cultural contexts.

The experience of meaning in an occupation is considered a key factor in promoting and maintaining health (Ikiugu and Pollard 2015); health being defined as 'a balance of physical, mental and social well-being, attained through socially valued and individually meaningful occupation' (Wilcock 1998: 110). The significance of 'perceived meaningfulness in life' for healthy ageing was identified in a cross-sectional study of older people in Thailand (Manasatchakun *et al.* 2016). The findings indicated the need for further research, including investigating activities contributing to older people's meaningful lives. A number of studies have linked engagement in meaningful occupation to older people's health and well-being. Randomized controlled trials by Clark *et al.* (1997, 2011) investigated the effectiveness of a preventive occupational

therapy program. Titled Lifestyle Redesign®, the study evaluated the impact of meaningful occupation as part of the intervention with American older adults. Results indicated that engagement in meaningful occupation contributed to participants' health, function and quality of life (Clark *et al.* 1997, 2011). Additional qualitative studies with older adults reported a positive sense of health and well-being when engaged in occupations that were enjoyable and meaningful to them. A study by Bedding and Sadlo (2008) highlighted that participating in a community-based art class had a positive impact on six British older adults' sense of well-being, enjoyment, learning and social contacts. Older women in a study by Reynolds (2010) highlighted the value of artwork for maintaining mental health and connecting with their families, friends and wider society. Similarly, engagement in art and craft activities fostered feelings of joy, connection with others, self-development and a sense of contributing to society for a group of older Australian women (Liddle, Parkinson and Sibritt 2013). Older American women who regularly engaged in volunteering experienced this occupation as positive, enabling them to maintain their social connections while contributing to their communities (Nesteruk and Price 2011). Nine older Australian computer users perceived this activity as challenging but rewarding in terms of developing new relationships and enhancing their confidence and self-esteem (Aguilar *et al.* 2010). A study by Harrod (2009) further indicated that a group of American older adults felt motivated to engage in computer use due to the fear of not being able to maintain social relations with family and friends. They wanted to learn how to use technology in order to maintain their social roles and a place within the society.

Although people's personal meanings are heavily influenced by individual's values and choices (Hammell 2001); meaning may also come from a shared sense of community

and/or culture (Hasselkus 2011). The analysis of the historical and contemporary literature by Reed, Smythe and Hocking (2013) highlighted that the meaning of occupation is deeply rooted in societal structure, values and political background. The influence of culture on older people's occupational engagement was evident in a study by Wright-St Clair *et al.* (2017). The findings of this study, conducted in New Zealand, identified cultural differences between Maori and non-Maori participants in terms of their activity preferences. Studies, focusing on traditional occupations found that meanings experienced during occupations such as preparing food or engaging in traditional art and craft work were informed by older adults' specific cultural contexts (Hocking, Wright-St. Clair and Bunrayong 2002, Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011). Moreover, participating in a particular traditional form of weaving (*basho-fu*) helped older Japanese women to stay healthy and productive members of their society, giving them a recognition and a status of being highly productive (Willcox *et al.* 2007). A Slovenian study by Čuric, Križaj and Pirnat (2013) highlighted that baking a traditional walnut-roll 'Potica' was perceived as part of the participants' national identity. The participants reported that this occupation represented connection to the past and was part of their regular routine during holidays and special family gatherings. Yet despite these examples, there is limited research on the extent to which socio-cultural contexts influence the meanings that older people attach to their occupations.

Alongside culture, the environments or 'places' in which people live also generate a wealth of different meanings, linked to their occupations (Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry 2006, Rowles 2008). Older adults may find their occupations meaningful because of their attachment to their living environments, including their home and neighborhoods. This meaning attached to home and its impact on older adults' everyday occupation

has been highlighted in the literature (Haak *et al.* 2007, Dahlin-Ivanoff *et al.* 2007). Moreover, connection to the land or geographical area may influence people's experiences of their everyday life. This was expressed by older Maori participants in a study by Butcher and Breheny (2016). They expressed a deep relationship with the land, which represented an important part of their identities. Slovenian older people's everyday lives may be informed by a unique geographical position, the country being located between the Alps and the Adriatic sea and being small in size (20,000 km<sup>2</sup>) (Štih, Simoniti and Vodopivec 2008). Limited evidence is available on the meaning of place in relation to older people's everyday occupations, and no identified Slovenian studies focused on this topic.

The importance of ensuring that older adults can continue to engage in meaningful occupations is important for their health and well-being. However, we need to understand their experiences of occupational engagement, including which occupations they find meaningful in their specific socio-cultural and historical context. Slovenian older adults, participating in this research were all born before the Second World War, when Slovenia was part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed to 'The Kingdom of Yugoslavia' (Štih, Simoniti and Vodopivec 2008). It could be suggested that their childhood was heavily influenced by the Second World War, when Slovenia was occupied by Nazi Germany and Italy. After the war, Slovenia became a constituent republic of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), with socialism being the economic system for the next 45 years. Slovenia became independent in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004 (Setnikar-Cankar 2006). Current older Slovenians' everyday lives were therefore impacted by the Second World War, the era of socialism, membership of the European Union, political reform

and growing capitalism (Piškur, Kinebanian and Josephsson 2002, Setnikar-Cankar 2006). Slovenian older people's unique socio-cultural and historical context may shape their individual values and experiences, as well as the meanings they ascribe to their everyday occupations. Therefore, the research question of this study was stated as follows: How do Slovenian older people experience engagement in their meaningful occupations?

## **Methodology**

Interpretative phenomenology (Heidegger 1953) served as a philosophical orientation, with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) being used as a research methodology (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). Originating from psychology, IPA draws on the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. People's experiences of a phenomenon lead them to reflect upon the significance of these experiences and IPA is used to explore these reflections (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The approach focusses on the subjective aspects of peoples' behaviors and lived experiences highlights the strong influence of phenomenology (Bogdan and Knopp Biklen 2006, Clarke 2009). However, Heidegger (1953) suggested that people's experiences can only be elicited through interpretation, as their realities are influenced by the worlds in which they live. IPA adopts a double hermeneutic (double interpretation) approach which involves the researcher making sense of the participants' own sense-making (Smith and Osborn 2008). The researcher in this study focused on older Slovenians' lived experiences, these being interpreted by both the participant and the researcher. This indicates the influence of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, Finlay 2011). What separates IPA



from other hermeneutic research approaches is its commitment to idiography; seeking to understand phenomena from individuals' particular perspectives in their particular contexts (Finlay, 2011). The researcher in this study was committed to explore and understand particular individual older Slovenian's experiences in their particular context. The depth and detail of this process enabled the researcher to capture the subtle nuances of human experience. Given this, the researcher's reflexivity is an important part of IPA studies (Finlay 2008), which was also adopted throughout the research process of this study.

### *Study Participants*

The study participants were recruited through gatekeepers at senior organizations and clubs as well as through the researcher's professional and personal contacts. Potential participants were given an information letter, outlining the research aim and process. Older adults who decided to take part gave the gatekeeper permission to forward their contact details to the researcher. The study included a purposive sample of ten older Slovenians, five men and five women, aged 75-85 years, all of them living independently in their own home environments. Although the sample was homogeneous in terms of the participants' age and all were living in their home environments, the variations between them enabled the researcher to explore the variety of their experiences. Both men and women participated, some lived in flats and others in houses, some in urban and others in rural areas of Slovenia. The study excluded older adults with cognitive frailty or difficulties with communication. Older adults with cognitive issues may not be living independently in their home environment

and those with communication issues might have difficulties elaborating on their experiences of engagement in meaningful occupations.

Insert Table 1 about here

### *Data Collection*

Semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one interviews were chosen for gathering the data, facilitating a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, resulting in rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The researcher developed an interview schedule in advance, with a list of open-ended questions to guide the conversation. These allowed the participants to express their unique experiences in their own words as well as enabling them to elaborate on the topic. Although the same guiding questions were used for all ten participants, each of them was encouraged to provide depth and detail by the use of probing questions. Eight interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and two in the participants' place of work. They were conducted in the Slovenian language and lasted approximately one hour. All the interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher in the Slovenian language.

Insert Table 2 about here

### *Data Analysis*

The interview transcripts were analyzed, following the guidelines provided in the IPA literature (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, Smith and Osborn 2008). The data analysis was conducted in the Slovenian language, enabling the researcher to maintain all the nuances of the participants' accounts, which could be lost if they were translated into English language (van Nes *et al.* 2010). After data analysis was completed, two interviews, together with the data analysis process, were translated into English language. This step was taken to enable the researcher to check the data analysis process with the co-researchers. For the remaining eight interviews, all of the emergent, super-ordinate and master themes were also translated into English.

The researcher read and re-read each of the interviews, whilst listening to the recordings, in order to re-enter and immerse in the participants worlds. At the same time, initial notes and comments were written in the margins of the study transcripts, relating to descriptive, linguistic and conceptual concepts in the written text. The descriptive comments focused on the content of the transcript, taken at face value. The linguistic comments considered such elements as participants' specific use of language, pronunciation, use of metaphors etc. In the third aspect of the initial noting process the researcher considered the data at a conceptual level; interrogating and questioning participants' accounts to record her own interpretations of this material. The initial, exploratory comments developed from the first transcript were then analyzed; searching for interrelationships, connections and patterns between them. A number of emergent themes were then developed and recorded. By searching for similarities and differences between the emergent themes, the researcher was then able to cluster the original themes into super-ordinate themes (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). The data from the first interview were analyzed before conducting the

next interview. The data analysis process was repeated with each interview transcript. This enabled the researcher to treat each case individually; considering fully the personal experiences of each participant at a particular point in time. Following the above, the researcher looked for shared patterns across all ten cases. A cross-case analysis was conducted (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009), to identify shared meanings for participants. This final stage of data analysis identified four Master Themes with sub-themes highlighting convergences and divergences of participants' experiences.

### *Trustworthiness of the study*

The researcher followed the guidance proposed by Smith (2011), focusing on ensuring the quality of IPA studies. To ensure the credibility of the findings, participants' verbatim quotes from each theme were presented, to illustrate the convergence and divergence of the participants' experiences, illustrating the breadth and depth of each theme. Each quote was followed by an interpretative discussion which is considered of significant importance in assuring the quality of IPA studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009).

The researcher stayed in the original language as long as possible as recommended by van Nes *et al.* (2010) in order to reduce the potential loss of meaning and to enhance the validity of study findings. As recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the translation to English language enabled the researcher to check the data analysis with co-researchers. In addition, back-translations were completed by an independent Slovenian native speaker in order to ensure the quality, accuracy and

trustworthiness of the translation process. Reflexivity was used throughout the research process and especially during the data analysis process (Finlay 2008).

## **Findings**

For the purpose of this article the subthemes were synthesized and will be discussed within each of the four Master Themes: 'What keeps me going', The meaning of everyday rituals, Doing things with other people, and The meaning of home. These will be discussed together with the researcher's interpretations; supported by participants' quotes.

### *"What keeps me going"*

The interviews highlighted that the ageing process had brought changes to all aspects of participants' everyday lives. When talking about what motivated them, they all referred to particular occupations that were the most important to them and gave them meaning as important parts of their identity. Often, these were lifelong occupations that they had begun as children. Such continuous occupational engagement perhaps contributed to the meanings that participants attached to their chosen occupations. For example, Kristina's most meaningful occupation focused on her regular theatre visits.

*'I think it's in my genes. My father was like that... and his two sisters were always taking me to the theatre on Sundays when I was 3 or 4 years old. I remember being at the*

*Opera house and I saw a play called “The White Horse” or something like that....’*  
(Kristina, 465-467)

Kristina was proud of her early engagement in cultural activities and of the cultural knowledge that she had developed later in life. She illustrated this by mentioning frequently a range of well-known plays and naming artists and directors, including some that she knew personally. In the past, play-going was seen as the preserve of educated and upper class people; perhaps suggesting that Kristina perceived herself belonging to this social class.

Outdoor occupations, such as gardening, walking and hiking were seen as the most meaningful by the majority of study participants; perhaps reflecting the study’s Slovenian context. For example, Tone, Meta, Mitja and Lidija all enjoyed gardening, although they gave different meanings to it. While Mitja and Lidija emphasized the health benefits of physical activity, whilst gardening, Tone and Meta enjoyed being out in their gardens and seeing the end results of their work, also providing them a sense of productivity. As Tone explained:

*‘I particularly enjoy taking care of fruit trees, because we had lots of fruit trees at home. My father taught me a lot, also how to propagate trees and I just propagated peaches this year. I tried to do the same with wild plums, and then I observe them...did I do well or not....? [whilst engaging in this occupation] I forget about everything. I even forget the things I should do but I don’t because I’m out [in the garden].’* (Tone, 206-212)

Although Tone found it important to continue his father's tradition of propagating trees, gardening's value reflected more than just carrying on a family tradition. Instead, Tone enjoyed the process of creating new things and its accompanying sense of immersion and satisfaction.

Participants considered health as their principal value, with most engaging purposefully in health-promoting occupations as a significant part of their everyday routines. Meta referred to gardening as her 'life', highlighting its value and importance to her.

*'Flowers mean the most to me. Yes, gardening is my life...even Dr. XXX [her GP] said it...your flowers and the music, that's what keeps you going.'* (Meta, 265-266)

Meta valued the fact that her doctor had noticed the benefits of her meaningful occupations, as she respected her doctor's professional opinion. She clearly valued productivity and daily physical activity and therefore chose to engage consciously in health-promoting occupations. While most participants had retired from paid employment, they all kept to their regular working routines, these productive occupations being some of participants' most meaningful occupations. Rozi perceived her daily farm work as strength-giving; illustrating the link with a Slovenian proverb.

*'Work strengthens the man. Ha, ha, ha...if you work, you're stronger, if you don't, you're no use...if you would just lie around....when I won't be able to work...that's when it'll be really hard.'* (Rozi, 885-887)

Rozi's words could be seen as judgmental, with regard to people who were less active and productive than she was herself. She had been a farmer for as long as she could remember, emphasizing she has been a farmer's daughter and had married a farmer. Her life was built around these roles and her most meaningful occupations predominantly associated with farming life. The same sentiment was also expressed by other participants. This may be due to the fundamental value of work, bequeathed to Slovenian society by its recent Socialist history.

Although all participants were still living independently in their own homes, they all cited keeping healthy as one of their most important occupations. Most were purposefully incorporating health-promoting occupations into their everyday routines and felt proud to be doing so. Kristina, Lidija, Meta and Jera each spent their mornings engaging in physical activity, which they perceived as contributing to their health and independence. Leon, Robert and Mitja also regularly engaged in sport, which they considered health promoting. Robert, who was a doctor, expressed this by saying:

*'No doubt, for instance, if we play golf or tennis, I mean, or if we go skiing, that's the best thing for health..... And also, I can see my friends who are involved in different sports or physical activity, they actually look better, they are healthier.'* (Robert, 227-229)

The above quote indicates that Robert's opinion was more than just a personal one. Instead, he placed himself as an expert; further highlighting the importance of his professional identity as a doctor.



Some participants in this study reported the need to adjust their occupational engagement to compensate for the decreasing abilities that came with old age. None expressed irritation at this situation, however; voicing pride they had been able to find their own solutions. For example, Kristina carefully developed strategies in advance to manage her ongoing trips to the city center.

*'I take a taxi to Drama (Slovenian National Theatre)...because I'm able to walk from there...I can walk that much. Otherwise you know if I go to the city center I always think about where are the places to rest and to sit down...'* (Kristina, 253-256)

Although she had to rest, whilst she was walking around the city center, Kristina had turned this necessity into a pleasurable experience. Her determination to make her everyday life as meaningful as possible, despite any necessary adjustments, was reflected throughout her interview.

#### *The meaning of everyday rituals*

All the participants in this study highlighted the importance of engaging in their regular everyday routines and meaningful rituals. This point was clearly conveyed through participants' use of language and non-verbal communication. Early morning rituals were seen as especially important; relating to a Slovenian cultural link between early rising and hard work. The latter is also being reflected in a well-known Slovenian proverb *"Early hour, golden hour"*. The 8-hour working day, in former Socialist Yugoslavia, started at 6.00 or 7.00am, which was also the usual working day for the

ten study participants. Tone acknowledged the influence of working days on his everyday early morning routine:

*'Well,... in the morning when I get up, pretty early, I still feel like when I was still working... It seems I can't give that up...'* (Tone, 11-12)

Tone's emphasis on his inability to give up his early rising habit, suggested his pride in it. As noted earlier, early rising was also linked to hard work in Slovenia, and productivity was seen as one of the most important aspects of occupational engagement by study participants. When Kristina explained she generally awoke later in the day, she almost seemed to be apologizing for it:

*'...I don't get up very early, because I'm more of an evening type of person...I rarely go to bed before midnight and then in the morning I don't get up at 6, but between 7 and 8...it sometimes happens that even later...not often, but it happens. After that it's time for my morning ritual. When I'm still in bed I stretch my legs and arms, I do my exercise in bed. Then I get up and I meditate for 10 minutes. After I finish meditating...I take the time...I have this wonderful book "The opening of inner doors." In this book there are thoughts for 365 days and every day I read a thought for that day...and it's like guidance for that day.'* (Kristina, 8-15)

Kristina's morning ritual was both consistent and carefully planned, preparing her for her day and gave her a sense of health and well-being. In similar fashion, Meta explained how she danced a little in her kitchen every morning; giving her strength for

the rest of the day. Participants' engagement in their chosen morning rituals could reflect their retired status and a consequent abundance of time at their disposal.

Participants' everyday routines gave an enjoyable sense of certainty and predictability to their lives. Some of them had strict schedules for each day of their week. Robert and Leon followed a weekly sporting routine. Leon explained:

*'...on Mondays I start in the morning with swimming, then I go to the office to do some admin work, and in the afternoon I have table tennis and that's how I end my sport day. On Tuesday,...again getting up, breakfast, 2 hours of tennis...working at home in the afternoon...'* (Leon, 12-15)

Leon was proud of the variety of his weekly sports activities and his high level of engagement. In contrast, Peter enjoyed the days that he spent looking after his grandchildren on a regular basis. However, he did not voice a need for constant activity, but instead enjoyed the chance to laze around or spend time in the company of people who made him feel good. He explained:

*'On some days I go down town...and there we have 'čevapčnica' [a traditional Balkan place to eat] and there's this really friendly waitress there. They're from the South, don't know exactly from where [referring to southern ex-Yugoslavian republics], I never asked, but we have a nice banter...and I usually eat 'čevapčiče' [traditional Balkan food] and a salad...then I smoke a cigarette and wait for my grandson to call.'* (Peter, 49-54)

The above quote reflects the ease of Peter's *'some' days*. Although the events described happened infrequently, it was evident that Peter found them a delight. His enjoyment of his interactions with the waitress may reflect the extent to which Peter missed women's company since the death of his wife. It is also possible that his delight is linked to a lack of perceived pressure to rush anywhere; enabling him to enjoy having the time to talk to the waitress, eat a delicious meal and/or smoke a cigarette.

### *Doing things with other people*

All ten participants stated that other people played a vital role in their lives; especially valuing good relationship and regular contact with their families, most of which lived nearby. Rozi felt proud of the well-established relationship that she had with her children and grandchildren, which was also reflected in their regular help on the family farm.

*'Family means everything to me...I usually say it's like gold...children are the gold of every house.'* (Rozi, 935-938)

By comparing them to gold, Rosi sought to emphasize the value that she placed upon them. Rozi's comments could also illustrate the vital part played by successive generations in the continuity of family farm work.

Other participants also emphasized that they spent much of their free time with their families, especially at weekends and holiday times. Slovenian older adults are quite often involved in their children and grandchildren's lives, which may be part of

Slovenian cultural expectations as different generations sharing a house is quite common practice. For example, Peter's daughter and son-in-law built their house next to his to enable Peter to look after their children. Although Peter enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren, he sometimes felt overwhelmed by it. Similarly Jera, whose daughter moved in with her after her divorce, felt that she would organize her day differently if she lived alone.

Participants also maintained regular social connections, at times with lifelong friends and at others with acquaintances who served as pleasant company, such as sports partners. Meta regularly spent time with two friends who shared her passion for flowers and gardening, Kristina joined friends to visit the theatre and Jera's friend accompanied her on her daily walks. In similar fashion, Mitja reported that he and his wife shared celebrations and/or regular walking trips with a group of other couples.

*'... we [with his wife] spend a lot of time with this group...celebrating birthdays, sometimes go to exhibitions, or city trips...We published a booklet 10 years ago [showing me the booklet]...short introduction, and then three photos for each year...this was our first trip.....sometimes we took grandchildren with us or some other friends, but those weren't our "formal" walkers ha, ha, ha...'* (Mitja, 210-214)

The above quote suggests that the social activities described held varied meanings for Mitja; enabling him not only to socialize, and thereby to maintain his life-long friendships, but also to do so alongside of his wife.

Although all participants engaged in regular social activities, they also faced losing their life-long friends due to ill-health or death. For example, Leon explained that some of his hiking companions had had to interrupt their regular weekly hiking trips due to ill-health. Similarly, Tone explained that two friends who shared his interest in joinery had died.

*'My age [friends],... some of them died, there were two in our street, both joiners as well, we were very close. Otherwise I go to XXX [nearby town], to the supermarket and there's a meeting place. There's a small coffee shop where we go for a cup of coffee, and we talk about different events, we discuss politics sometimes...'(Tone, 309-313)*

The above quote shows that Tone had tried to find like-minded people with whom to talk. Peter also explained he conversed with other older people when he took his grand-daughter swimming. Both Tone and Peter clearly sought and valued these conversations. The importance that Tone and Peter ascribed to these casual social interactions might also suggest that they felt lonely.

Most participants belonged to different clubs and associations; giving them a sense of belonging and enabling them to contribute to their local communities. Leon, Robert and Mitja all held key positions within their chosen organizations, suggesting that they particularly valued such membership. Leon spent much of his time at his local Seniors' Association; holding several different formal roles. His involvement might suggest that he valued the status conferred; an important aspect of Slovenia's previous communist political system. The interview also highlighted that he enjoyed these roles and

occupations, at the same time as enjoying the status. Other participants enjoyed their club membership solely for the socializing opportunities offered. For example, both Meta and Jera valued the regular monthly trips organized by their local Seniors' clubs.

### *The meaning of home*

Participants' occupational engagement was linked to their enjoyment of their home environments; the latter offering both a sense of comfort and safety. Although most participants did not express an overt attachment to their home environment, several interviews suggested such a link. Kristina described the nature of her daily afternoon rest:

*'I wash the dishes and then I take a short rest. In the summer time, I love to go to the balcony and enjoy...it's interesting, I prefer lying on the floor, I don't sit. I unfold the blanket and I have my own balcony beach...and I also do a bit of snoring...ha, ha, ha...'* (Kristina, 124-127)

Kristina described this summer ritual in a vivid manner, reflecting her feelings of comfort while enjoying her balcony. Her use of the term *'my balcony beach'* suggests that she valued her imagined beach more than the opportunity to visit a real one. The familiarity of her home environment enabled her to master her daily occupations, including her afternoon rest.

In contrast, Lidija and Meta expressed their affection for their homes in the context of their daily occupations. They both valued productivity and enjoyed being busy in and around their homes. As Meta noted:

*'I like doing everything...cleaning...I'm so happy...washing the windows...I like doing everything...in my own home...I don't know how to explain this. Everything, absolutely everything...I'm really enjoying my home.'* (Meta, 613-615)

The above quote shows that it was not only the productive occupations that Meta valued; enjoying everything about being the activities undertaken at home. Her repeated use of the term *'my home'* also suggests a degree of pride that she and her husband had built their house; thereby creating a home for their family.

All participants owned their homes and most had even built them; a standard practice under the previous socialist system. Several study participants raised the meaning of their home ownership, perhaps reflecting Slovenia's previously socialist system, which enabled working-class people to build their own homes. For example, as Lidija said:

*'We all left our home [she and her siblings] and all nine of us have our own houses...all nine of us...(Lidija, 127-128)*

The above quote highlights the importance to Lidija that she and her eight siblings had all been able to build properties. This sentiment may also reflect older Slovenians' common comparison of quality of life under the previous socialist system with the current economic situation. Whilst Lidija and her siblings had all been able to build



their own homes, financial stringencies force most modern young Slovenians to live with their parents or to rent. Older Slovenians sometimes perceive this situation as a systemic failure.

Several participants expressed patriotic sentiments and appreciation for their home country in describing their everyday occupation. Mitja explained:

*'I was mountain-climbing more in the past, and I also visited some high mountains, I'll say....Slovenian mountains...from Triglav, Ojstrica and Jalovec and all that.'* (Mitja, 101-103)

By emphasizing '*Slovenian mountains*' Mitja suggested his special attachment to the peaks concerned. He also drew attention to the value of his achievements, since the mountains mentioned are Slovenia's highest. Similarly, Peter who had spent most of his life travelling around the world, expressed his affection for Slovenia. Several participants voiced distress about current political affairs, highlighting their concern for the future of their country, their children and their grandchildren.

## **Discussion**

The study explored Slovenian older people's experiences of occupational engagement, with a particular focus on their meaningful occupations. A variety of occupations and routines shaped their everyday lives; emphasizing that their most meaningful occupations were an important part of their identities. Participants'

individual experiences of engagement in occupation, together with existing literature are now discussed.

All participants described occupations that were particularly meaningful and which shaped who they were as people. Christiansen (1999) proposed that people's unique identities were built through their occupations; enabling them to create meaningful lives. The social science literature defines identity at personal, relational, collective and material levels; reflecting the complexity of individuals' personal identities (Vignoles *et al.* 2012). Discussions about the link between occupation and identity led to the concept of 'occupational identity' (Kielhofner 2008: 106); defined as 'a composite sense of who one is and wishes to become, as an occupational being, generated from one's history of occupational participation'. In the current research, participants reflected upon the significance of their occupational identities, with particular emphasis on their personally meaningful occupations. People maintain their identities throughout their lives through their experiences of meaning in occupation (Ikiugu 2005). This meaning may be informed by people's personal values and choices (Hammell, 2001) and/or derived from their socio-cultural contexts (Hasselkus 2011, Pierce 2014).

Some participants said that engaging in personally meaningful occupations gave them a sense of inexplicable enjoyment, relaxation and total immersion. This indicates that this engagement at times resulted in the experiences of 'flow'; 'a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 4). Participants' experience of meaning contributed to this optimal experience; a significant factor when considering older people's occupational engagement (McHugh 2016). Some of these findings were similar to previous studies exploring

older adults' engagement in meaningful occupations such as creative art (Bedding and Sadlo 2008, Reynolds 2010, Liddle, Parkinson and Sibbritt 2013) or leisure (Sellar and Boshoff 2006).

Although every individual's experiences of engaging in meaningful occupation is unique (Ikiugu 2005, Hammell 2004), this study found similarities in the activities that participants prioritized and the meanings that they attached. It is likely that these similarities were based on participants' shared socio-cultural context. For example, participants perceived maintaining a sense of productivity, through paid or unpaid work, as significantly important. This may be specific to the Slovenian context, where work has always been considered a core value. Productive occupations and the importance of working class dominated everyday life in the former Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) (Constitution SFRY 1974). Only in 1965 did the concept of 'leisure' become a reality for Yugoslavians, with the Federal Labor Act's introduction of a 42-hour working week and work-free weekends (Grandits and Taylor 2010). Although occupational identity theory suggests that individuals control the formation of their identities (Phelan and Kinsella 2009), cultural groups may influence the construction of individuals' occupational identities (Laliberte Rudman and Dennhardt 2008). A Chinese study by Liang (2011) reported that past years and historical events played vital roles in shaping older adults' perceptions of a meaningful retirement; echoing the findings of the current research.

All of the participants in the current research described taking up their meaningful occupations in past years; with some even beginning in childhood. The past was therefore seen to represent a foundation for their current occupational engagement

and well-being. The same link was reported by older adults in a study by Nilsson, Lundgren and Liliequist (2012). Ikiugu (2005) argued that it is continuity that makes engagement in a particular occupation meaningful. A sense of continuity between the past and the present has also been seen to contribute to people's sense of identity (Riley 2008). Studies in which older people engaged in traditional occupations also linked such engagement to a continued sense of identity (Čurič, Križaj and Pirnat 2013, Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011, Hocking, Wright-St. Clair and Bunrayong 2002). Some of the current research participants described similar experiences, noting that occupations that they had been following since childhood had become embedded as part of their identities.

The participants purposefully engaged in a range of health-promoting occupations; perhaps influenced by the media's promotion of the benefits of 'active ageing' (WHO 2002). For example, most participants linked maintaining health with regular physical activity, such as a regular morning exercise routine or sport. This finding concurs with the findings of Stenner, McFarquhar and Bowling (2010) where a group of older British adults most commonly linked physical activity to active ageing. Several participants in the current study engaged regularly in sports activities; seeing these as a good way to overcome the challenges of old age. Similar findings were reported elsewhere (Eman 2012, Dionigi, Horton and Baker 2013), with varied groups of older adults seeing sports activities as a way to change their perceptions of old age and negotiate the ageing process. A group of hikers in a study by Steadman, Nykiforuk and Vallianatos (2013) perceived the activity of hiking as helping them improve their health, challenge the aging process and strengthen their relationships. In the current research, all ten participants included elements of physical activity, in their everyday lives; seeing these

as health-promoting. Links between meaning and sustained physical activity, in older adults, has also been highlighted elsewhere (Janssen and Stube 2014). In the context of health, people's experiences of life meaningfulness has been indicated as a key factor (Manasatchakun *et al* 2011) and occupation being a significant source of meaning (Hasselkus 2011). A randomized controlled trial by Clark *et al.* (1997, 2011) found a link between meaningful occupation and older people's health and well-being. Several qualitative studies have echoed these findings, reporting feelings of health and well-being amongst older people engaged in personally meaningful occupations (Hocking, Wright-St. Clair and Bunrayong 2002, Bedding and Sadlo 2008; Liddle, Parkinson and Sibritt 2013, McHugh 2016). The Slovenian older adults who took part in this study also felt that engaging in productive occupations helped them to cope with current and future challenges of old age. Similar conclusions were reached by Reynolds, Farrow and Blank (2012), whose older adult participants also linked continuing to work to enhanced physical and mental health.

Older Slovenians, participating in this study reported they sometimes had to compensate for challenges such as fatigue or pain when they were engaging in their chosen activities. A study by Wright-St Claire, Kerse and Smythe (2011) found that the challenges that older adults experienced, during their occupational engagement, made them realize their age and declining abilities. In contrast, the ten older Slovenians interviewed in the current study expressed pride about their age, their ability to develop strategies to remain independent and their engagement in varied everyday occupations. The theory of Selective Optimization with Compensation (Baltes and Baltes 1990) states that older people act to optimize their general abilities and compensate for lost ones; concentrating on those domains of greatest importance

to them. This was also the case with the participants in this study, who were content to adjust their occupational engagement in order to retain their most meaningful occupations. As previously noted, continuing to engage in meaningful occupation helps people to maintain their occupational identity (Ikiugu 2005, Hasselkus 2011), with older people using adaptive strategies to this end (Reynolds 2010, Tatzler, van Nes and Jonsson 2012).

The importance of routines in their everyday lives was also expressed by the participants of this study. Older people may use routines as adaptive strategies to help them to manage unfamiliar life challenges (Bouisson 2002), maintain a sense of control and predictability (Bouisson and Swendsen 2003) and master their everyday occupations (Larsson, Haglund and Hagberg 2009). Studies investigating the temporal patterns of older people's daily occupations (Chilvers, Corr and Singlehurst 2010, Björklund *et al.* 2014) found that they spent more time engaged in routinized occupations. In this research, all participants valued an early start to their days; linking early rising with the previously mentioned value of productivity. In former Yugoslavia, when the study participants would have been of working age, the working day usually began at six or seven in the morning (Lydall 1984); a timeframe that still appeared to influence participants' current morning routines. A study of people going through the process of retirement highlighted that they adopted a slower pace of life, post-retirement (Jonsson, Borell and Sadlo 2000). However, the participants in the current study kept to their morning routines, echoing the findings of work by Björklund *et al.* (2014), which highlighted that older adults organized their daily routines in the same ways as people of working age. Participants' descriptions of their routines suggested that they perceived themselves as following not just a mere set of tasks, but a series

of carefully planned and meaningful rituals. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably within the literature, 'routines' usually represent instrumental aspects of engaging in occupation, while 'rituals' are symbolic and linked to people's emotions (Fiese, Foley and Spagnola 2006, Hasselkus 2011). Similarly to the current study participants, older adults studied by Wright-St Claire, Kerse and Smythe (2011) ascribed deep meanings to their regular everyday occupations.

The current study participants often linked their meaningful occupations to specific people; echoing similar research findings from other studies (Čurič, Križaj and Pirnat 2013, Lebar *et al.* 2014, Bedding and Sadlo 2008, Liddle, Parkinson and Sibbritt 2013, Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011). Occupation is increasingly being explored through concepts such as belonging, interdependence and interconnectedness (Kantartzis and Molineux 2014, Hammell 2014, Hammell and Iwama 2012). A transactional perspective on occupation suggests that individuals maintain a close connection with their contexts through their occupational engagement (Dickie, Cutchin and Humphry 2006). In the current research, all participants kept close ongoing relationships with their families; as noted in previous Slovenian studies (Piškur, Kinebanian and Josephsson 2002, Petrič in Zupančič 2012, Čurič, Križaj and Pirnat 2013, Lebar *et al.* 2014). In order to maintain these relationships, the participants described engaging in such occupations as spending family celebrations, holidays and/or weekends together, as well as offering mutual help when needed. Similar reciprocal relationships were reported by older adults in other studies (Bonder 2006, Kantartzis and Molineux 2014), indicating that sharing family events helped to maintain and reconfirm the family's identity. In Slovenia, older people are often involved closely in the lives of their children and grandchildren, because the generations commonly live near to one

another or even share a house (Piškur, Kinebanian and Josephsson 2002). Building houses with several floors was common practice in Yugoslavia, with the purpose of two family generations living in the same house (Archer, 2018). Although participants generally enjoyed being involved in their children's' lives, some perceived these activities as an obligation that stopped them from engaging in more personally meaningful occupations. Similar findings were reported in a study by Menks Ludwig *et al.* (2007), where grandmothers' well-being was affected by having to provide care for their grandchildren. The participants in the current study did not complain about having to provide such care; seeing it as something that was simply expected of them. The latter could relate to the findings of Kantartzis and Molineux (2014), which highlighted that Greek older adults had to sometimes negotiate their personal needs with other family members, due to the family unit's cultural pre-eminence.

The participants also emphasized the value of sharing meaningful occupations with spouses and/or long-life friends. The concept of co-occupation; referring to two or more people engaging in an occupation together, has been discussed within the occupational science literature (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow 2009, van Nes *et al.* 2013). Such sharing involves 'shared physicality', 'shared emotionality' and 'shared intentionality' (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow 2009: 151). A significant aspect of these co-occupations is the meaning shared by the people concerned (Pickens and Pizur-Barnekow 2009). Engaging in meaningful occupations together enabled these participants to build new memories, share experiences and develop a sense of belonging. Similar outcomes were reported in a study by Nyman, Josephsson and Isaksson (2014) in which older adults generated meaning together through their shared experiences and culture. Individuals attach meanings to their occupations



based on their connection with other people, promoting a sense of belonging (Wilcock 2006, Hammell 2014). The importance of belonging to both formal and informal activity groups was described by several of the current study participants; echoing the findings from previous Slovenian research (Piškur, Kinebanian and Josephsson 2002). Hammell (2014) linked this concept of belonging to the African concept of 'ubuntu'; meaning, 'I am human because I belong, I participate, I share' (Murithi 2007: 281).

Participants linked their occupational engagement closely to their sense of 'home'; the latter meaning both their domestic environment and Slovenia. Environmental gerontology explores the relationship between older people and their physical and social environments (Lawton 1982, Golant 2015). From the way that participants described their everyday activities, it was clear that these familiar places gave them a sense of independence and autonomy. Although coming from a different socio-cultural context, older adults in other studies (Haak *et al.* 2007, Wiles *et al.* 2012) perceived their home environments as a prerequisite for maintaining their autonomy and independence. Occupational scientists argue that the place in which occupation is conducted can be a source of meaning (Rowles 2008, Heatwole Shank and Cutchin 2010, Hasselkus 2011, Ikiugu and Pollard 2015). Several participants in this study linked their experience of gardening to their own home gardens, creating a sense of belonging to accustomed physical environments (Hitch, Pèpin and Stagnitti 2014).

Having lived in their own homes for several decades, often the majority of their lives, led participants to attach myriad meanings to particular occupations (Heatwole Shank and Cutchin 2010). In 2008, Rowles (2008: 129) wrote that 'the spaces of our life are given meaning as they are transformed into the places of our life'. This meaning is

generated through people's occupational engagement (Heatwole Shank and Cutchin 2010). The majority of older Slovenians who took part in this study had built their own houses; creating lasting family memories, a sense of home and ownership. In Yugoslavian times, working-class people would be encouraged to construct homes independently as they were less likely to receive a socially owned flat than skilled workers (Archer, 2018). These houses were predominantly built with their own labor, with the help of families, friends and neighbors, which further contributed to their sense of ownership. Participants in a study by Wiles *et al.* (2009) similarly expressed attachment to their homes due to their sense of ownership and pride in having built the properties by themselves.

The participants' attachments to their homes went beyond their own front doors to encompass their local geographical areas, the landscape and Slovenia as a country. Most participants described outdoor occupations, such as gardening, hiking, farming, climbing mountains and skiing as their most meaningful; all of which are undertaken outdoors. The potential relationship between landscapes and occupation has been addressed in the literature (Hudson *et al.* 2011). The concept of 'occupationscape' has been derived to describe landscapes' formation through a history of human usage (Hudson *et al.* 2011). The findings of the current study indicate that landscapes can, in turn, influence people's meaningful occupations. Older people's relationship with the land has been acknowledged by older Maori participants (Butcher and Breheny, 2016). Living closely connected with the land gave them a sense of security and autonomy in later life, contributing to maintaining their Maori identity. The participants in this study linked some occupations to their Slovenian identity; for example, hiking or climbing in a particular Slovenian mountain range or reading Slovenian literature.

Given that Slovenia only became an independent country in 1991 (Pleskovič and Sachs 1994), this may be the reason for pride in their national identity, which was also reflected in the interviews with the participants of this research.

## **Conclusion**

This research has enhanced the understanding of Slovenian older people's engagement in occupation, including their most meaningful occupations. The study is foundational, considering the general absence of Slovenian studies on the topic. The findings add to the occupational science body of knowledge; exploring occupation and meaning in one particular socio-cultural context. Meaningful occupations and daily routines represented an important part of older Slovenians' identities, contributing to their sense of health and well-being. This reaffirms occupational scientists' argument that people are occupational beings, emphasizing the importance to engage in personally meaningful occupations for as long as possible. The meanings that older Slovenians attached to their occupations, were informed by their unique socio-cultural, historical and physical context. The participants gave particular importance to the role of productive, health-promoting and family-related occupations. They also remained closely connected to their living environments, highlighting the importance of place in generating meaning in occupation. The study indicates the need for further research in the area of older adults and their engagement in occupation, hopefully adding to older people's opportunities to engage in personally meaningful occupations, as a way to enhance their health and well-being.

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Ethical approval for this research was obtained from The National Medical Ethics Committee in Slovenia and from the [blinded for review]. The participants signed consent forms, confirming voluntary participation, confidentiality and their understanding of the right to withdraw from the study.

## **Declaration of contribution of authors**

All authors have made a substantial contribution to the drafting of this article and have approved of the version to be published.

## **Statement of conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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