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The Meaning of Social Activism to Older Adults in Ireland

Jackie Fox & Sarah Quinn

Jackie Fox, MSc (Occupational Therapy), BSc (Occupational Therapy), Pg Cert (Clinical Teaching), Practice Education Coordinator, School of Health Sciences, Aras Moyola, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

Sarah Quinn, MPhil, BSc (Occupational Therapy), Lecturer, Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity Centre for Health Sciences, St. James' Hospital, St. James' Street, Dublin, Ireland

Correspondence to: Jackie.fox@nuigalway.ie

There has been an upsurge of social activism amongst older adults in Ireland, which was particularly evident during the 'medical card' protests in Dublin in October 2008. This study used phenomenological interviews to explore the occupational meaning of social activism to seven older adults in Ireland. Social activism was found to be an occupation that firstly, is meaningful, valued and embedded in a wider pattern of leisure and social interests; secondly, develops over a lifetime and is chosen for a multitude of personal, social and political reasons; thirdly, is defined differently by participants, but is unanimously reported to be a

vital component of how one sees oneself in the world and finally; is a complex occupation that has many benefits including improved well-being, a more powerful and respected status in society, fulfilment of spiritual goals, development of skills and providing a life of busyness and purpose in retirement. The study contributes to the understanding of the occupational participation of older adults and expands the study of occupation by exploring the meanings, benefits and challenges of social activism for these participants.

Keywords: Occupational identity, Social activism, Older adults, Collective action, Political engagement

While there has been a decline in engagement in politics by populations in Western Europe, shown by a decline in voting (Komito, 2004), participation by older adults in extra-parliamentary action, campaigning and direct democracy is on the increase (Postle, Wright, & Beresford, 2005). In Ireland, older adult lobby groups such as the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament and Age Action have memberships of over 100,000, and they campaign on issues relating to health, benefits and equality for older adults.

Much of this activism work by older adults received little attention from the media or general population in Ireland until October 2008, when the Irish Government announced that people over 70 years of age were no longer automatically entitled to a medical card; eligibility would have to be means tested. Older adult action groups such as the Senior Citizens Parliament, Age Action and active retirement groups mobilised their response rapidly and unequivocally. Their social activism comprised of letter writing, interviews on TV and radio, picketing, active engagement with politicians, and culminated in a mass street protest of thousands of older adults. These activities brought to the public awareness that political engagement among Irish older adults was alive and well.

The term 'social activism' is used somewhat interchangeably with terms such as "civic engagement" (Ahern & Hendryx, 2008), "political participation" (Schussman & Soule, 2005) and "citizen participation" (Ohmer, 2007). Common to all terms is the idea of voluntary effort of individuals and/or groups in bringing about social change that is generally

independent of any particular political party; in fact, it is more often a symptom of disillusionment with traditional party politics (Postle et al., 2005). The focus of this study was on individuals who participate in what has been called small “p” politics (Postle et al., 2005); that is, making their voices heard on issues that concern them, and using methods such as campaigning, lobbying, protesting and advocating. In this study, “social activism” is defined as “persuasive communication by a collective for the purpose of benefiting the common interests of both members of the group and the broader society” (Brashers, Haas, Neidig, & Rintamaki, 2002, p. 114).

Social Activism as an Occupation

Occupation can be defined as “the daily activities that can be named in the lexicon of the culture and that fill the stream of time” (Clark, Wood, & Larson, 1998, p. 13), and have form, function and meaning. Research suggests that social activism can comprise different occupational forms, including demonstrating, letter writing campaigns, speaking at meetings, and hunger striking (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). It serves a function, especially for older adults who have spoken about their activist work as a means of adapting to retirement (Hardill & Baines, 2009), and has great meaning for participants, especially as a source of empowerment and self-efficacy (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007). For instance, members of the “Raging Grannies” group in Canada spoke of fighting to create a new, powerful identity for themselves, contradicting the social stigma they experienced as older women, of “being past, useless and not really being involved” (Narushima, 2004, p. 30). Protesting was a way of

broadcasting their identity through action and demonstrating their power to affect change (Drury & Reicher, 2005, p. 312). As an occupation, social activism appears to be inherently connected with a person's identity and 'being', and is related to other occupations in his or her life. Activists have generally progressed further in education, choose professional or intellectual careers, are more politically engaged generally, are registered voters, generally do not hold orthodox religious beliefs, get married later in life, and have fewer children (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997).

Social Activism among Older Adults: Benefits, Risks and Motivations

Studies conducted with people of varying ages have found that the benefits of social activism include empowerment (Drury & Reicher, 2005), especially for female activists (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007), decreased helplessness, improved self-esteem (Hays, Chauncey, & Tobey, 1990), and the development of leadership and community development skills (Ohmer, 2007). In one of the few studies on older adults' participation in social activism, older Canadian women in the Raging Grannies group ascribed many benefits to their social activism; "an enhanced ethic of self-care, sense of purpose/value in life, confidence, competence and perceptions of personal control over their personal and social environment" (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007, p. 108). Social activism may also potentially involve occupations that are time-consuming, unpopular and even illegal (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). However, occupations that include risk, challenge, learning, choice and new opportunities have been

shown to improve physical and mental health, occupational functioning and life satisfaction in older adults, when compared to general social occupations (Jackson, Carlson, Mandel, Zemke, & Clark, 1998). Participants in groups such as the Raging Grannies have reported how running the risk of ridicule by their protests led to “transition and liberation” and a “breaking-free” from conservative constraints and expectations about older women (Narushima, 2004, p. 36).

Older adults may have particular motives for their engagement in activism including generativity, or the desire to provide for the next generation (Adler, Schwartz, & Kuskowski, 2007), a sense of disillusionment with the mainstream political process (Postle et al., 2005) or solidarity with a group that is experiencing perceived injustice (Klandermans, 1997). Social activism is, for some older adults, an occupation that allows the use of their life experience, skills and knowledge for community and social transformation and that provides opportunities to move beyond occupations traditionally viewed as appropriate for older adults (Narushima, 2004). In contexts where older adults face discrimination and are characterised as inherently problematic, where the “problem of aging” and the “crippling burden” of older people are frequently invoked, and they are represented by groups run for them, not by them, social activism is an important way to be part of the “struggle for participatory, rather than solely representative democracy” (Postle et al., 2005, p. 183) and for their voices to be heard.

Social activism has not been explored in detail in the occupational science literature, although some authors have begun to debate the political aspects of occupational participation

(Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005). Greater exploration of older adults' participation in "personally compelling" occupations that provide meaning and occupational identity across the lifespan has also been called for (Wright-St Clair, 2012). Therefore, the aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the participation in social activism by older adults in Ireland, defined as those aged 65 and over. The research question was "what is the meaning and value of social activist occupations for the older adults that participate in them?"

Methodology and Methods

This qualitative study was informed by the interpretative phenomenological paradigm, which assists with understanding the contextualised, lived experiences of individuals (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Since social activist occupations can only be understood with reference to the broad social and political context in which they are situated (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997), that approach was appropriate. The researchers' theoretical orientation was occupational science, and interpretative phenomenology allows for such theory to be considered in decisions about sampling, subjects and the research question (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Smith, 2011b).

Sampling

To ensure that participants had experience of the phenomenon of interest in this study, an inclusion criterion was that they had taken part in the Medical Card protests in October 2008.

Two older adult lobby groups were asked to act as gatekeepers for this study, and five activists expressed interest in participating. Two further participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby word of mouth is used by the research participants to find more information-rich individuals in their social networks (Patton, 1990). Ethical approval was gained through the Faculty of Health Science's Ethics Committee at the University of Dublin at Trinity College. Participant information leaflets were distributed via the lobby groups, giving full details of the study. Interested participants were invited to sign an informed consent form prior to being interviewed.

Data gathering and analysis

As recommended for interpretative phenomenological studies, the data gathering method was semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2011a) which were conducted by the first author and took place in a setting of the participants' choice. The interviews were based on four occupation-focused concepts. 1). How participants defined social activism. They were asked questions like; "When you take part in your activities with X organisation, what do you call that activity?" and "How do you describe it to others?" 2). The meaning they attributed to participation in social activism and particularly in the medical card protests in 2008. Questions included; "What motivated you to take part in the medical card protests?" and "Did you feel your protest was effective?" 3). Why participants were motivated to participate in social activism. They were asked "What does being a social activist mean to you?" and "Why did you become involved in activism?" 4). How participation in social activism impacted their lives. Typical questions were "Do you perceive any benefits from taking part

in social activism?” and “Are there any negative implications of being an activist for you?” Interviews were between 40 and 90 minutes in duration, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants C and D are married and were interviewed together at their request.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis has been described as a process by which “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, 2011a, p. 10). For this research, the first author read the interview transcripts in detail, making notes of the emerging key points and her own assumptions and reflections. A structure was provided for the emerging themes by highlighting codes, which were grouped into subthemes, and eventually four overarching main themes. An example of this development of the hierarchical relationships between themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008) is presented in Table 1.

<Insert table 1 about here>

Interpretative phenomenological analysis encourages the involvement of the research participants in the cogeneration of understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). For this reason, the emerging themes of the study were returned to the participants for member checking. All participants were happy that the transcripts and provisional themes reflected their position on social activism and two participants added additional information that was incorporated into the data for analysis. An audit trail was

maintained by keeping a research journal, including interview schedule development notes, reflections following the interview process and data analysis notes (Chwalisz, Shah, & Hand, 2008).

Findings

Four main themes emerged from the analysis. The presentation of the findings follows the recommended method for presenting the themes derived by interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2011a). The social, political and cultural background of each of the seven participants is provided in Table 2, with particular reference to their experiences of social activism.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

Occupational engagement in social activism

For the participants in this study, participation in social activism influenced, and was influenced by a rich social life, and was intertwined with their working lives.

That takes great commitment, and each month we're down on the helpline. Each month we're down with the [lobby group], and every second month there's a meeting with the [Irish Police], the councillors, the politicians. And then there's [lobby group], I've a meeting every month with them. You know, it's part of your life. (Participant E)

Some interviewees indicated that their leisure interests were also related to their activism e.g. that they read books on related subjects, and were politically engaged and aware. One social activist felt so embedded in this occupation, both during his work hours and outside, that he spoke about the importance of looking after himself and taking breaks from activism from time to time.

I would like visiting Lourdes every year, those places, you know? I think I'd find it very relaxing and quiet, get away from the phones. But I find to get away from all these things here, it's a lovely refreshing thing. (Participant G)

Social activism is, by its very nature, more about action than words or thoughts. The participants emphasised that being an activist is more about 'doing' than about just verbalising or having thoughts of discontent.

When people are in possession of a justified grievance, when they see an injustice being done to others and they don't do anything about it, then their anger turns to frustration. So they end up cursing the darkness instead of striking a light...But it's hard; it's very hard to stop oneself joining in the general chorus of complaining and bitching about 'the state of the country'. I find myself doing it from time to time. But then I catch myself at it and remember; 'If you're not doing something to help change things then shut up.' It's a good rule to try to keep. (Participant A)

The activist identity

This active engagement in social activism illustrates the concept of occupational identity; that is, a personal identity created through engagement in meaningful activity. Kielhofner has described this identity as a view of the self which “serves both as a means of self-definition and as a blueprint for upcoming action” (Kielhofner, 2002, p. 120). While the participants were doing broadly similar activities, some viewed themselves as social activists, while others did not like that title.

Social activism is to improve the well-being of others, that is, knowing their rights, because I think that it is unfortunate, the numbers of people who do not know their rights. (Participant B)

To me, an activist is ... kind of a dictator. And I wouldn't call myself a dictator.... We lobby on behalf of senior citizens. (Participant E)

There were also differences in how the participants defined their identity in comparison to non-activist older adults.

No, I don't feel different to ... the freelance activists as I call them. But, from the 'mainstream' I couldn't be more different if I was from Mars. (Participant A)

Now, as everybody knows, it's a very small percentage of people who participate for any bloody thing because, as a matter of fact, they won't upset

the apple cart. They're afraid to protest. They're afraid. And they never became involved or never want to become involved. (Participant B)

An important point raised by participants was that, despite some common understandings, there is a lack of homogeneity among activists. They described differences in outlook, actions and ideology. This illustrates that, while people may all engage in social activism, each person may be motivated differently, may hold different attitudes, and may use different methods to achieve their aims.

You may find yourself marching or picketing with people you don't approve of you know, that sort of thing, characters carrying banners you don't like; that aren't quite the same as your idea of what they should be there for. (Participant D)

Participants also held different views on whether activism as an individual, or as part of a group is more effective or preferable.

I wouldn't have the resources or the energy to be able to speak up on the issues nationally. Neither would someone in Dungarvan or Caherciveen or whatever, but if we came together nationally, you would have them.

(Participant G)

I don't join (groups) and I'll tell you why. To me, to belong to any kind of organisation means that, sooner or later, the majority are going to invest power in the few and that's the road to Sovietism and Fascism; rule from the top. (Participant A)

One common thread between the participants was a feeling that social activism should be independent of party politics, and that activists should remain open-minded and free from political influence.

Now I have to agree the actions of the [lobby group] are political but they're not party political and that's the key. (Participant G)

I'm not political in the party-political sense of the word and that frees me to be forthright in my estimation of all political parties and personalities and to speak my mind without worrying about what the party will think. (Participant A)

Having an occupational identity as a social activist appears to require certain attitudes and beliefs. These included the strength to question established practices, or the dominant ideology, a strong sense of commitment and persistence, and for one participant, a clear moral sense of purpose.

One time you were told something and you had to believe it because it was expected of you to believe it. You weren't supposed to question it. And I think we became very questioning as we went on in life. (Participant B)

I don't get discouraged really if I feel I've to go to somewhere, I'll make my way to it. The outcome of it, I don't know what's going to be the outcome of it, a particular object or scheme I take up. I just keep plugging it and plugging it. Maybe it might come to something. (Participant F)

I am coming from a Christian perspective which I think has not been tried in society, and it was Gandhi or someone who said that Christianity would work but it hasn't been tried. God had a special message and gave us the Ten Commandments; they are parameters in which people can live, principles which we can live by and react to one another without doing harm to one another or maligning one another. So I think we could have a different world if Christian values were practiced. (Participant G)

Becoming an activist

The participants in this research developed their interest in social activism through life experiences, the influence of other people, and issues and beliefs that motivated them towards action. For all participants, childhood and life experiences were a significant influence on their development into activists.

All that; the injustices of my childhood, seeing my mother reduced to tears by hypocrites from St Vincent de Paul, and so-called 'relief' officers, all that is the fuel on which my life and my protests run. (Participant A)

Now, I'm one of a family of 12 whose parents died when we were only – I was an orphan at 11, we'll say, and there were 12 kids. As a matter of fact, I may be proud in this respect that we bloody well survived because it did take a bit of surviving. (Participant B)

This early exposure to injustice, hardship or inequality was a strong motivating factor for some of the interviewees to become involved in social activism. Others were more influenced by the contemporary political or social injustices they were trying to overcome.

They went into Afghanistan because they said they were going to liberate women. Women are no more liberated but yet the UN resolution of 2000 ... says women should be part of the peace process and they're not, so that's what we were [protesting against]. (Participant C)

That activism developed despite the general perception that older adults in Ireland are inherently stoic, and thus more likely to tolerate difficult times.

Older people are saying well, 'I'm better off than my parents were and I can sort of live frugally and with not too much hardship'. They also have grand children who they want to see educated. So I would say older people in general are not too greedy and are not too demanding.

Another motivating factor for participation in social activism, which relates to a perception of societal injustice, was a strong desire to make a difference. Individuals spoke about feeling a sense of duty to help other people, especially older adults, and some saw themselves as advocates for people who may not be able to fight for themselves.

I think we should be duty bound, those of us, let's face it, who have an interest. I think it would be desperate if it was a thing that we did not. And I hope in your life to come you'll be likewise. (Participant B)

Activism was seen as a means to improve the wider community, and some were involved in setting up groups or activities or otherwise trying to change their communities for the better. Many of the interviewees had a strong philanthropic sense and helping others was their main reason for being involved in activism. Some also mentioned that they wished to make changes that would benefit the next generation and leave a positive legacy.

Then they end up and their relatives are all enamoured and angry because my mother's on a trolley [awaiting hospital admission] but if we want to get rid of the trolleys for the years to come, we'd want to start doing something now, but I keep saying that to the younger people like yourself. Support what we're doing today because it will be there for you tomorrow. (Participant G)

Notwithstanding the positive outcomes that the activists were working towards, the participants recognised that their various occupations were not always popular. They spoke about having to deal with the disinterest of members of the public when trying to raise the profile of an issue. Sometimes negative comments or reactions were quite overt.

That is what I think prevents people from being socially engaged because you're all enthusiastic and then somebody goes 'Oh, wa, wa, wa, it's alright for you ... you're just wasting your time'. And so all the time it's a battle against the negativity of people's feeling of hopelessness. (Participant C)

Interestingly, Participant C felt that older adults are particularly able to deal with the challenges, since they would have faced many adversities over their lifespan. She felt that, in some ways, older adults are an untapped resource that could be a force for change.

All their experiences that they've had of battling, you know, to get the proper prescriptions or to get houses or looking after their children or education - they have so much knowledge of actually being able to change the world and this is what has got to be focussed on. We can change the world. (Participant C)

Activism and the older adult

The final theme explores the consequences, good and bad, that social activism has had for the participants, as well as the unique mindset of older adults in relation to social activism. It was acknowledged that the older activist faces certain challenges, including health problems or declining energy, which may interfere with being as active as they would like. For Participant D particularly, health problems had prevented his engagement with social activism, among other occupations.

I'm really not very mobile these days. I mean, I've got a creeping paralysis due to a tumour in my backbone which makes it rather difficult for me to get out and about now. (Participant D)

Participant B, a lifelong trade unionist, described how he viewed older activists at the beginning of his career.

I often saw them sleeping comfortably while the meeting was on, and I said God almighty, if ever I arrive at that stage, I'll know when to pull out, for I amn't (sic) going to be asleep on duty above at those meetings. Since I became of age, I have pulled out of a lot of the activities that I belonged to. I do not go to Dublin now to attend quarterly meetings like I used, or any of them kind of things. And I put this plainly to the [lobby group], that I would not be a party to it, unless I was very well able, because there's no point, I think, in hanging on to a position where a younger man, or a younger person [could do better]. (Participant B)

While almost all the participants felt that social activism was a positive part of their lives, it was evident that these occupations had some costs. The main sacrifices were time and energy, but there could also be financial, legal or social/family costs.

I could do without going to those protests because my wife and I had to stay overnight in Dublin and everything else, at our own expense. (Participant B)

It does get in the way at times, you know, but we just do it and that's it.

Maybe family suffer a bit. They wouldn't see you maybe as much as they'd like to. But at the same time, if mine say 'Mam, you're never in,' I say we'd be worse if I was sitting here on my own. (Participant E)

Because I wasn't living in London, I didn't get involved in their later [protests] when they went and invaded a military air field near London. They

all got quite long prison sentences so I was quite glad to get out of that one... I'm always a bit nervous about the possibility of getting arrested.

(Participant D)

You will drink a lot when you're in a situation where you think, 'This is a terrible, dead-end existence. I'm not doing this, man! I'm a slave and I'm not going to do it! I'm not allowed to say what I think here.' So you quit the job. And you go to Canada, and you go to America and all the time the marriage is breaking down because my wife is thinking, 'Why can't he just keep a job like everybody else? And be quiet and keep his mouth shut.' And then finally the marriage breaks down. (Participant A)

Three of the participants took part in activism solely in response to older people's issues because they felt that there can be negative societal perceptions about that age-group, and that older adults can be susceptible to having their rights violated by various agencies. This was one of the main reasons that individuals attended the medical card protest in 2008.

Did he think we were all gone senile, that we didn't understand what was meant by the protection of the vulnerable? To take the medical cards off us, like? (Participant B)

Most, like Participant B, felt that those protests had improved society's perception of older adults.

They never expected it. That was the big problem. As far as they were concerned, we were in the corner, like, and the women were in the corner like

they were 60 years ago. But I think that that display that day gave an entirely different concept to the ordinary people that they never expected. Now there are people, needless to say, that it's at home having the rosary beads we should be, rather than protesting, that we were gone beyond that, and how dare we, and the devil knows what. (Participant B)

All those interviewed indicated that the rewards of their social activism outweighed the costs or risks. Activism had brought them new experiences, and given them a new outlook on life. It had allowed them to develop skills in areas that they may not have otherwise, including editing a paper, speaking in public, or learning about legislation and rights.

I suppose [I learned] skills in talking on the radio and meeting people and explaining our point of view and that. I suppose skills in maybe listening to people and how to deal with people who are affected in the margins. I would have maybe some skills in that, yes. I have no qualifications in those but I would have an enormous skill set. (Participant G)

Activism was also felt to have a positive impact on health, especially emotional health. As found in previous research (Ahern & Hendryx, 2008), it was the female respondents who most benefited from social activism in this way.

Yeah, I really do feel that it has a big impact on our health. You don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself, you know; you're just out there.

(Participant E)

The basic thing that old people need to keep themselves alive is to be able to articulate in a public way their feelings about how society is going or how they're being treated ... Actually social engagement is the thing that keeps people alive. (Participant C)

Discussion

Social activism is, for many people, an occupation that is ongoing and develops over the lifespan (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). The development of an individual's interest and participation in social activism can be understood as a means of fulfilling the individual's occupational potential (Wicks, 2005), whereby individuals gradually become activists as they become more and more involved in their chosen causes (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991).

Occupational potential, or the individual's capacity to become who they have the potential to be through the engagement in meaningful occupation, is highly individualised, and influenced by both environmental and personal factors. The development of occupational potential begins in childhood, and it is those who continue to reinvent themselves and fill their lives with personally meaningful occupations who continue to develop as occupational beings into their later years (Wicks, 2005).

Two participants in this study described the positive moral influence of their childhood, which gave them a sense of duty and responsibility to help those less fortunate. Three others described rigid religious constraints, large families, poverty and being orphaned. Although these negative experiences could have constrained the individuals' development, it appeared to have the opposite effect. They viewed their participation in activism as a form of transcendence, of rising above the obstacles in their background with a sense of pride. Their stories, characterised by poverty, large families, and religious power, reflected those of many individuals born in rural Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s. Those experiences influenced their occupational "becoming" as social activists, as it invested them with a strong sense of social justice and drove them towards occupations which enabled them to feel they were improving the lives of other people.

Against a background where "older people tend not to act collectively or vote together, even though many share common experiences of dashed expectations of income and support in old age" (Vincent, 1999, p. 101), the participants were also motivated to be activists by the contemporary social context, and their perception that there was a negative and damaging discourse in the mainstream Irish society about older adults, their rights, and their abilities. This negative stereotyping, and the undervaluing of older adults' opinions and skills, has been identified by activists in other Western countries also. This perceived injustice, along with wanting to leave a meaningful legacy for the next generation (Hutchinson & Wexler, 2007), were important motives for many of the individuals in this study to take part in age-

related social activism in a very public way, and they welcomed the chance to “*come out of the corner*” as Participant B stated, with reference to the medical card protest in 2008.

In consequence, most of the participants felt that the medical card protest in 2008 had displayed the political power of older adults, and many felt a strong sense of achievement. Although older adult lobby groups have been criticised in the literature as having limited effectiveness in influencing policy (Binstock, 2006), the majority of participants perceived the day of protest and the subsequent government back-down as a victory achieved by the collective, and they felt more self-efficacious and powerful as a result.

This research paints a very clear picture of the participants’ occupational identity being enacted in the real world. Occupational identity is constructed and developed over the lifespan, as one adapts and participates in occupations that reflect a sense of who one is and wishes to become (Kielhofner, 2002). As Gergen and Gergen wrote, “one’s present identity is thus not a sudden and mysterious event, but a sensible result of a life story” (as cited in Christiansen, 1999, p. 255). Sometimes, a crisis or unexpected life event in the life story can be the catalyst for a reformulation of how one sees oneself (Unruh, Versnel, & Kerr, 2002). For Participant A in particular, a spiritual emergency led to an emerging occupational identity as a social activist. Emerging spiritual awareness such as this has been found to lead to a transformational crisis whereby the individual’s daily functioning is affected, as “the person’s identity becomes overwhelmed, disorganised, immensely confused and anxious” (Collins, 2007, p. 505). For this individual, as for many people, this experience led to a period of

emotional ill-health, followed by a period of self-renewal. Forging a new occupational identity enabled this individual to feel that his internal beliefs were reflected in his external actions, which aligns with Collins' (2001) description of occupations facilitating adaptation between a person's inner life and his or her actions, thus creating coherence and meaning. Achieving a sense of coherence does not always have to involve crisis. For some other participants in this study, social activism was an important channel to express their religious beliefs, as it allowed them to fulfill their sense of spiritual responsibility (Faver, 2001).

In the past, retirement did not hold a moral imperative to 'keep busy'. This is a modern development; governments are increasingly encouraging individuals to work longer and to volunteer productively in their old age. In the US, older adults have been described as the "nation's only growing natural resource" (Bradley, 1999, p. 45). This drive to encourage volunteerism in older adults has been criticised by some authors as releasing governments from their responsibility to provide fully-resourced health and social services and potentially ignoring or devaluing the many millions of older adults who cannot or do not wish to participate in volunteerism or social activism (Martinson, 2006; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). In subscribing to an expectation of productivity in old age, society runs the risk of denying the experience of older adults who are striving to "find coherence and purpose in the face of frailty and disability" (Holstein, 1999, p. 376), and who may experience poverty, lack of occupational choices and discrimination. Although the older adults in this study were active

in a voluntary capacity, they perceived themselves as defending the rights of the vulnerable and advocating on behalf of less able older adults.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The purposive and snowball sampling methods meant that those who agreed to be interviewed might have had other reasons for participation or were particularly vocal members of their lobby groups. The gatekeeper organisations explained that their members were in high demand for research; thus a larger sample was not attained and, once inclusion criteria were met, all those who volunteered for the study were accepted. In addition, because of the small sample, data saturation was not reached.

Conclusion

This small-scale qualitative study explored social activism from an occupational perspective. While demanding of time, energy and financial resources, social activist occupations were a site of resistance to societal attitudes towards older people. They contributed to an identity as someone who gave back to the community, or was concerned for the future welfare of older people. Participating in the occupations of social activism in older age was the culmination of earlier experiences of social injustice, overcoming life's challenges and caring about others. That finding is consistent with and supports the concept of occupational potential. Some participants associated the level of activity demanded by these occupations as contributing to

health and well-being. Further research into the social activist occupations of older people, including its high risk and more controversial forms, has potential to add to the literature on human engagement with risky and controversial occupations that is beginning to emerge.

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Table 1: Example of the Data Coding Process

Transcript Section	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
<p><i>“An American professor of economics has written that he’s been all over the world, and he’s never been in a country where, in a specific hotel in the capital city, you can find barristers, property speculators, politicians and bankers, all drinking out of the same bottle.”</i> (Participant A)</p>	Perception of corruption	Society as a catalyst for social activism	The story of becoming an activist
<p><i>“I hate injustice and I hate lack of respect. It just boils down to morals. I feel strongly about that.”</i> (Participant E)</p>	Perception of injustice		

Table 2: Biographical Information on Participants

Participant	Social Activism Experiences
A	In his 70s with a varied work history, a lifelong social activist, generally initiates and engages in social justice campaigns independently of any particular lobby group.
B	In his 80s with a long history of trade union involvement, part of many different lobby groups mostly campaigning for older peoples' rights and local social improvements.
C	In her 70s with a lifelong history of social activism, particularly involved with social justice and anti-war campaigns.
D	In his 80s with a long history of activism in the civil rights and anti-nuclear movements.
E	In her 70s, became a social activist following retirement, a long history of volunteerism, campaigns for older peoples' rights, improving her local area and social justice.
F	In his 80s, became a social activist following retirement, a long history of volunteerism, campaigns for older people's rights and local improvements.
G	In his 70s, lifelong history of activism, in a leadership role in many different lobbying and social justice groups, continues to work on a full-time basis.