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Achieving Balance In Everyday Life

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Achieving Balance In Everyday Life

Carita Håkansson, Synneve Dahlin-Ivanoff & Ulla Sonn

Abstract

There is growing interest in developing a conceptual understanding of the experience of balance in everyday life, from an occupational perspective. The purpose of this study was to gain insights about balance in the everyday lives of women with stress-related disorders. Data were gathered from 19 women who were past the first phase of recovery from a stress-related disorder and participated in one of five focus groups. Analysis revealed that the participants experienced a continuum between imbalance and balance in everyday life. The themes that emerged were image of occupational self, strategies to manage and control everyday life, occupational repertoire, and occupational experience. Balance in everyday life was achieved through a dynamic interaction between these themes, which the women characterised as respecting their own values, needs, and resources; having strategies to manage and control everyday life; having a harmonious occupational repertoire; and engaging in personally meaningful occupation. Engagement in personally meaningful occupation appears to be a mechanism that enables people to achieve balance in everyday life by enabling them to develop a successful occupational self-image, manageability, control, and a harmonious occupational repertoire. Well-being seems to be the outcome of balance in everyday life, and lack of balance is experienced as overload.

Key Words

Balance in everyday life
Working women
Stress
Occupational science

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The prevalence of stress-related disorders has increased dramatically throughout the Western world in recent years. For instance, in Sweden in 2002, 19.7% of the absences from work due to illness were due to stress-related disorders (Riksförsäkringsverket, 2004), including stress reactions, anxiety syndromes, depression, burnout, fatigue, and overwork. Since the beginning of the 1990s stress-related disorders have increased especially among women aged 50-64 years with women 30-49 close behind (Riksförsäkringsverket, 2003). Previous studies of women with stress-related disorders have mostly highlighted work-related factors, but in this study the focus is on the experience of balance in everyday life, concentrating on all the occupations the women engage in: at home, with their families, at work, and as recreation in their leisure time.

While there is growing interest in developing a conceptual understanding of balance in everyday life, this concept continues to be used in a variety of ways. Christiansen (1996) reviewed the literature on three perspectives of balance and found that methodologically a time-budget approach dominated. With a time-budget approach, the researcher surveys how people spend their time in different occupations. The occupations are classified according to their characteristics, such as work, leisure, and self maintenance, with the assumption that work, leisure/self maintenance, and sleep should be spread equally over the day in order to achieve well-being. Velde and Fidler (2002) developed this concept further stating that the number of occupations or amount of time spent in each kind of occupation does not have to be equal. Instead, the experience of balance or harmony depends on the individual's perception of a pleasurable arrangement or combination of parts.

Other ways of investigating balance in everyday life include studying the complexity of people's occupational pattern (Erlandsson, Ragnvaldsson & Eklund, 2004) and whether they experience conflict or harmony between their personal projects (Christiansen, Backman, Little, & Nguyen, 1999; Christiansen, Little, & Backman, 1998). An additional way of understanding balance in everyday life focuses on whether people exercise their physical, mental, social, and spiritual capabilities in proportions that are satisfying and health-promoting, which will be entirely individual (Wilcock, 1998). Wilcock has also advocated a balance between and within intrinsic and extrinsic factors, that is a balance between desired occupations and occupations a person feels obligated to undertake in order to meet family, social, and community commitments. Finally, Kielhofner (2002) noted that rather than being a certain amount of work, self maintenance, leisure, or rest, balance in everyday life would reflect a dynamic interdependence of these occupational domains and their relationship to internal values, interests, and goals, and the external demands of the environment.

Most studies of balance in everyday life have focused on the interplay of work, self-care, and leisure, especially time-budget studies, which have investigated how different populations spend their time in different occupations (Farnworth, 2003; Fricke & Unsworth, 2001; Pentland, Harvey, & Walker, 1998; Stanley, 1995; Zuzanek, 1998). Using a different approach, which means a survey of main, hidden, and unexpected occupations, Erlandsson, Ragnvaldsson & Eklund (2004) showed that the complexity of women's daily pattern of occupations varies.

Few studies focusing on people's experiences of balance in everyday life could be located. One such study focused on how men with spinal cord injuries spend their time in different occupations. When they experienced satisfaction with how time was spent, they experienced health and well-being (Pentland et al.). Another study of personal projects (Christiansen et al., 1999) showed that people experience balance in everyday life if they do not perceive conflicts between their occupations. A third study, which focused on the use and development of capabilities, showed that a perceived ideal balance in everyday life means approximately equal involvement in physical, mental, social, and rest occupations (Wilcock et al., 1997). No studies investigating a balance of values, interests, and goals with the demands of the environment, as suggested by Kielhofner (2002) or the balance of desired and obligatory occupations, as suggested by Wilcock (1998) were located.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into balance in the everyday lives of women with stress-related disorders. The research question was: how is balance in everyday life achieved and what does it mean to have balance in everyday life? The goal was to develop empirical knowledge about balance, from an occupational perspective, which would contribute to theory development and have potential application in health promotion and rehabilitation.

Method

The study was undertaken using a focus group method, which is a form of group discussion in which people with relevant life experience discuss different aspects of the topic of interest (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Kitzinger, 1994). To ensure that the selected topic will be thoroughly addressed, a moderator guides the discussion. The moderator's task is to invite all participants to communicate their views on the topic (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). The methodology deliberately uses the interaction between the participants, and the group process makes it possible to obtain several different views on a chosen topic. Moreover, focus groups allow participants to change their views after discussion with others (Barbour & Kitzinger). Focus groups are considered ideal for exploring attitudes, wishes, opinions, and experiences in a selected group and generate a broad understanding. They highlight the participants' framework of understanding and provide insight into their articulation of knowledge (Barbour & Kitzinger).

Participants

The moderator, who is the first author, asked doctors and occupational therapists at four primary health care centres in a defined geographical area in Southern Sweden to identify women with stress-related disorders. Criteria for selection for the study were women 30-59 years old, who were past the first phase of recovery from a stress-related disorder. Ideally participants are recruited until nothing new emerges in the data (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). However, in this study 17 of 23 people who indicated that they were willing to participate were recruited at the same time from one occupational therapist, although focus groups were convened until nothing new emerged. Four recruits did not participate because they forgot the time, were on a journey, or were ill, leaving 19 participants.

In order to obtain people with relevant experiences of the phenomenon on concern and at the same time create an atmosphere that would facilitate discussion, it is necessary to consider the homogeneity and the heterogeneity of the group (Dahlin-Ivanoff, 2002; Krueger, 1994). The focus groups were homogeneous concerning gender and disorder, and sharing a disorder is sufficient to stimulate discussion (Krueger). In order to obtain heterogeneity in the study, the women were purposively selected to represent as wide a variation as possible in age, civil status, family situation, education, and time taken off work. The participants worked in the areas of education, computer support, media, gardening, medical service, social services, and childcare systems, or as clerks or managers. All of them had been or were off work because of illness for more than six months and all except one had gone through rehabilitation. Six of them were working again between half-time and full-time hours. The demographic variation of the participants in the focus groups is presented in table 1. Amongst the 19 who did participate there was a high level of concordance in their experiences.

Procedure

The moderator met all the women who agreed to take part in the study before the focus group sessions to give them oral and

Table 1. Demographic Variation of the Participants (n=19) in the Focus Groups

Demographics	n	(%)	Group I (n=4)	Group II (n=4)	Group III (n=4)	Group IV (n=4)	Group V (n=3)
Age							
30-39	3	(16)	1	1			1
40-49	6	(31)		1	2	1	2
50-59	10	(53)	3	2	2	3	
Civil status							
Married/cohabiting	12	(63)	2	3	2	4	1
Single	7	(37)	2	1	2		2
Family situation							
Children at home	10	(53)	3	2	1	3	1
Children but not at home	6	(31)	1	1	3	1	
No children	3	(16)		1			2
Education							
University	14	(74)	2	4	2	4	2
Other	5	(26)	2		2		1
Employers							
Public	11	(58)	2	3	3	2	1
Private	8	(42)	2	1	1	2	2

written information. On this occasion the women also answered a demographic questionnaire and questions about their illness and recovery situation. All were fully informed of the research purpose and the way the information would be used. They were informed that they were free to participate and could withdraw from the study at any point if they wished. Confidentiality was ensured as raw data were handled only by the research group and kept confidential, and the demographic data did not identify participants in any way. Informed consent was obtained from them. The research ethics committee of the Medical Faculty, Lund University, Sweden, approved the study.

Focus group discussions

Five focus groups were formed, and each consisting of 3-4 participants. Each group met twice, with a week interval between the sessions, and each session lasted about two hours. This was planned in advance to be sure to have time enough to discuss the phenomenon. All groups had the same moderator, the first author, who played an active role in guiding the discussion and encouraging each participant to talk freely. The moderator began each group by clarifying the purpose of the study, and reiterating the topic. Two grand tour questions (what does it mean to have balance in everyday life? and how is balance in everyday life achieved?) were used to explore the participants' experiences of balance in everyday life. Further questions, arising from the discussion, were used to clarify or deepen the discussion.

Data analysis

All sessions were audio taped and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. The data was analysed, based on the method

described by Krueger (1994), by the first author with assistance of the two other authors. Reflective notes, which were made by the moderator after each discussion, formed part of the analysis. However the transcripts comprised the richest source for analysis. The analysis of the data began by listening to the tapes and by reading the transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole for each focus group. Then the whole was broken down into parts and all sections relevant to the research topic were identified in each focus group. The next step was to systematise the raw data into categories that corresponded to the meaning of the material. The last step was to summarise the categorised raw data, combined with an interpretative step that aimed to provide understanding (Dahlin-Ivanoff, 2002; Krueger). When all the focus groups had been analysed using these steps, higher level themes began to emerge that showed constituent parts as well as the relationships among them. During the analysis, the process was circular, moving back and forth between the parts and the whole. Categories and themes were continuously compared with the data to ensure that they were in fact based on the data. Consensus was reached between the authors regarding all categories and themes. This was accomplished by repeatedly checking and discussing the data, the categories, and the themes. Quotations are provided to illustrate the categories or themes.

Findings

When the participants described how balance in everyday life was achieved, and what balance in everyday life meant to them, it became evident that what they experienced was a

continuum between not having and having balance in everyday life. Their experiences of not having balance before their disorder were integrated into later experiences of balance. In that respect they experienced the past in the present, but they had not reflected on balance in everyday life until they lost it. For this reason, both having and not having balance are included in the findings. The themes that emerged in the analysis were 'image of occupational self', 'strategies to manage and control everyday life', 'occupational repertoire', and 'occupational experience'. It is proposed that these factors interact in a dynamic process resulting in balance or overload in everyday life, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Dynamic Interaction that Leads to Overload or Balance in Everyday Life

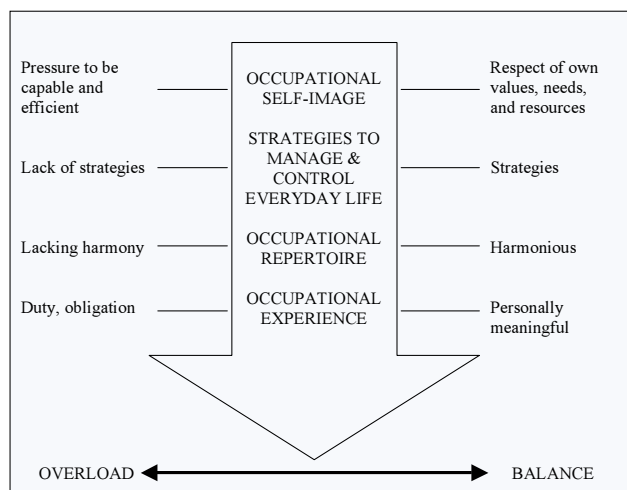


Image of occupational self

Self-image is defined here as the image of oneself in relation to occupation and it is therefore called image of occupational self. The participants in this study lived and shaped their lives through a complex interplay of choosing and performing occupations of high value to themselves or others. Their occupations were the primary means through which participants were able to communicate their image of their occupational selves to themselves and to others. They used occupations in order to achieve a sense of being the person they wanted to be. Two meanings were attached to the theme occupational self-image: pressure to be capable and efficient, and respect for one's own values, needs and resources. Both of these affected engagement in occupations.

Pressure to be capable and efficient

The participants had previously experienced a need to be capable and efficient in every situation, which meant that they felt they had to be competent, accomplish what they had to do, and help and support others. They experienced themselves as tremendously ambitious, loyal, and hard working. They did as well as they could, many things at a time, and they maintained a high pace both at work and in private life. The participants mostly provided support in their relationships and they struggled to be perfect in caring for everyone else's needs. They perceived that they had to manage on their own, and they

had difficulty accepting help and support from others. Not managing to achieve this was experienced as a threat to their image of a capable and efficient occupational self. Sustaining this self-image took a lot of time and energy and demanded considerable adjustments in the participants' own lives, to the point where they neglected their own values and needs. It also directed what occupations they engaged in, and this engagement gave them a feeling of being important and needed. However, the participants also experienced an imbalance between their engagement in occupation and their resources. They did more than they had resources or capabilities for.

Person 1 (P1): I have always prioritised others' needs at the expense of my own needs.

P3: I have taken care of others my whole life ...

P4: I recognise that my needs always came last and they almost didn't exist.

P3: I have been very dutiful and careful, I want everything to be perfect and I'm pedantic with details...

P2: Somewhere you have to feed your self-esteem, more and more achievement and you become "high".

P1: I think that I myself am the worst slave driver.

Respect of own values, needs, and resources

The participants were self aware and knew which occupations were valuable for them, and respected these occupations. However, they were also aware of the limitations of their own resources and used this knowledge to achieve a balance in everyday life between their engagement in occupations and their resources. The participants' own values, needs, and resources directed what occupations they engaged in. They also emphasized the need to always be aware of their own values, needs, and resources in order to not lose the balance in everyday life.

Strategies to manage and control everyday life

The women expressed the need to have sufficient resources to meet the demands of everyday life and to have opportunities to decide what to do. To manage and control everyday life, the participants identified various strategies. The strategies they used were: to allow themselves to be fully present, to change their level of ambition, to prioritise reciprocal relationships, and to get a grasp of the structure of everyday life. Before the participants developed strategies to manage and control everyday life they had difficulty saying no to demands and setting limits on their engagement in occupations and relationships, due to feelings of guilt and fear of hurting another's feelings. They also experienced everyday life as uncontrollable, meaning that they were unable to choose the amount of time and energy put into different occupations and relationships. Once they did use strategies to manage and control their involvement in occupations and relationships, they demanded that others respect what they really valued or experienced as important, and their time. The strategies helped them to meet the demands of everyday life, as well as making choices about how much time and energy they should put into different occupations and relationships.

The strategy of *allowing themselves to be fully present* meant that the participants were focused and aware in the present, and relaxed, rather than carrying on a debate about what they should really be doing, or planning for or worrying about what was coming next. To *change their level of ambition* meant that they questioned their high level of responsibility at work and at home, and managed to reduce it. The participants experienced that they could ignore things, not worry about appearances, leave things half-done, put off things that had to be done, and still think that they would be all right. They allowed themselves to do one thing at a time in their own pace, and gave themselves time to do things for themselves.

A third strategy was to leave one-sided relationships and *prioritize reciprocal relationships*. For the participants, reciprocal relationships meant satisfying and stimulating social relationships and relationships in which they got support. Their responsibilities for other people also decreased. This meant, for example, still listening to other people but not taking over their problems and setting limits for their involvement. Another example was that they still liked doing things for other people but without the feeling of being exploited. This was a marked change from their earlier behaviour, when they had tended to prioritize the one-sided relationships at the expense of close ones. The participants who had close relationships valued them more and the participants without any close relationships became aware that they missed such relationships. The participants continued to write in their diaries what they planned to do and whom they planned to meet, but now they also booked time for things they wanted to do as well as their obligatory occupations. The purpose of using a diary was to get *a grasp of the structure of everyday life* as a strategy to consider whether their daily schedule was in accordance with their values, needs, and resources.

Occupational repertoire

In everyday life the participants engaged in a lot of occupations at work, for the family and at home, and during leisure time, and these occupations formed their occupational repertoire. The occupational repertoire was unique for each of them, and could be experienced as lacking harmony or harmonious.

In an occupational repertoire *lacking harmony*, the work role was very important and the participants allowed work to take most of their time and energy. Having an occupational repertoire that lacked harmony also meant that the participants responded to all perceived demands and that they had no time for desired occupations and rest.

Having a *harmonious* occupational repertoire meant, for the participants, having variety in everyday life. The participants felt that they had time for their obligations as well as for considering and choosing things not primarily to please anyone else but themselves, that is enjoyable occupations and rest. Which enjoyable occupations the participants chose to do varied a lot between the participants, but doing something they perceived as creative or utilising their physical capability was

important for them. Rest could, for example, mean sitting for hours just looking at the sea or alone at a café. In contrast to most of their obligatory occupations, the characteristics of enjoyable occupations and rest were that they could control these occupations and they were clearly defined in time. But the participants also experienced they had to sandwich all occupations, including the enjoyable ones, with rest to experience the occupational repertoire as harmonious.

Occupational experience

Occupational experience is defined as the participants' own interpretations of the meaning or emotional content of the occupations they performed in everyday life. The participants experienced their occupations as duties and obligations, or as personally meaningful occupations.

Experiencing the occupational repertoire as a *duty and obligation* meant that the participants perceived that they constantly had to meet the spoken and unspoken demands of others and themselves, and that both the employers and others in the environment traded on their willingness to meet this combination of demands. They perceived demands for educational and professional achievements, for self-realisation, and for doing a good job. They also had to manage a high workload, work hard, and do more than one person's work. For the participants, it also meant taking on demands from the employer and keeping up with recurring workplace reorganisations over several years, which required them to handle an indistinct work organisation and indistinct role expectations, with little opportunity to influence their workload and important decisions. Moreover, they had to take on a high level of responsibility for both their own and other people's assignments at work, never taking long vacations, and before and after vacations working extra hard and overtime. The participants felt that they had to assume a high level of responsibility for getting everything to function at home too, and they experienced demands to be responsible for the family, elderly parents, grandchildren, friends, and colleagues. The participants felt that they did not have sufficient resources and capabilities to handle everyday life and that what they did mostly had value for others. Overall, they experienced no feelings of pleasure, everything was a burden, and everyday life was overwhelming.

That an occupation was defined as *personally meaningful* indicated that the participants experienced it as coinciding with what they find valuable. Their personally meaningful occupations were described as important, challenging, and intrinsically gratifying. That is, they experienced pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction, self improvement, or found the occupations to be extrinsically rewarding, for example as achieving a satisfactory concrete result. Personally meaningful occupations were also experienced as sources of energy. Furthermore, in order for the participants to experience an occupation as personally meaningful, it was important that it challenged their limits, that it was something that they were good at doing, or their performance was improving.

The participants stressed that all kinds of occupations, for

example cleaning and washing, could be experienced as personally meaningful, but having sufficient resources, that is time, energy, and support, for everyday life as a whole were prerequisites for experiencing meaning. Enjoyable occupations, and rest, were the occupations in which participants felt at peace, and these occupations were typically undemanding, gave them a feeling of freedom, and contributed to their recovery. Enjoyable occupations and rest also provided participants opportunities for reflection.

P2: I try to create and it is a great and important part for me...it is more about pleasure and joy. I have also started to work out, because it is for fun, not for fitness or to lose weight...

P1: I have also started to work out, and it is great fun and I was surprised that it was real fun. I haven't been there every time but it doesn't matter and I don't feel guilty. I only go there when I want to. I have also started singing in a choir. There's no prestige and you can come as you are and I enjoy it very much.

P2: I recognise enjoyment and pleasure but it is also a form of satisfaction and replenishment.

P1: I agree with you, it is a form of replenishment, it used to be that everything I did drained me.

The process of achieving balance in everyday life

The process the participants described of moving from overload to balance was not as straight as an arrow; on the contrary, it moved backwards and forwards on a continuum, and where participants were on this continuum varied over time unless something became 'the last straw' and being overloaded made them ill. When the participants experienced overload they could not control how much time and energy to put into different occupations and relationships, and in spite of their efforts they experienced a lack of adequate reward for their efforts. When the participants were engaged in occupations or relationships and were experiencing overload, they had difficulties being pleased with anything they were doing. Everything was overshadowed with anxiety about what was coming next, not doing the right thing, not doing enough, not being good enough, and failing. They experienced lack of energy, fatigue and ill health, and everyday life became cheerless. This in turn led to sick leave, which the participants experienced as a failure, and about which they had feelings of guilt. Being in such a state triggered a process of critical reflection about the personal significance of different occupations and relationships among the participants, which in turn led to awareness of what occupations and relationships they experienced as valuable and meaningful. In this process they also became aware of how important it is to really pay attention to personally meaningful occupations, and of the importance of having strategies to manage and control everyday life in order to reach a harmonious occupational repertoire and achieve balance in everyday life.

When the participants experienced balance in everyday life they could manage everyday life, and control both the time and energy put into different occupations and relationships. This

led to experiencing their occupations and relationships as personally meaningful. In addition to occupations and relationships, the participants had breathing space, that is time to be themselves and reflect on their everyday life. Demands in everyday life were experienced not as hindrances, but rather as challenges worthy of engagement, and everyday life was a source of energy and well-being.

Discussion

The present study developed knowledge and understanding of the experience of both balance and overload in everyday life. Balance and overload turned out to be complex and multidimensional concepts that included image of occupational self, strategies to manage and control everyday life, occupational repertoire, and occupational experience.

The findings of this study showed that balance in everyday life is the result of a dynamic process between respecting one's own values, needs, and resources; having strategies to manage and control everyday life; having a harmonious occupational repertoire; and engaging in personally meaningful occupation. Well-being seems to be the outcome of balance in everyday life. No previous studies or theories of balance in everyday life appear to have included all these dimensions, having focused mainly on peoples' occupational repertoire, that is, how people spend time in different occupations (Farnworth, 2003; Fricke & Unsworth, 2001; Pentland et al., 1998; Stanley, 1995; Zuzanek, 1998), on the meaning of complexity in the occupational repertoire (Erlandsson, 2003), and on satisfaction with time use (Christiansen et al., 1999; Pentland et al.; Wilcock et al., 1997). The present study illustrates that the experience of balance or harmony in a person's occupational repertoire depends on that person's perception of a pleasurable arrangement or combination of parts. These findings are comparable to the findings obtained in the studies on satisfaction with time use (Christiansen et al.; Pentland et al.; Wilcock et al.). However, the present study did not show how much time the participants spent in the different occupations and the experience of harmony seemed not to relate to the amount of time participants spent in different occupations. Rather, the findings indicated that there must be some sort of harmony between work (work and self maintenance) and recreation (rest and enjoyable occupations). The participants also emphasised the meaning of variety in the occupational repertoire but Erlandsson and Eklund's (2006) discussion warns that the variety or complexity should not be too great.

The present study also illustrated that there had to be some sort of harmony between self-chosen occupations and occupations that mainly respond to demands or expectations of others. According to theory (Fidler, 1996; Kielhofner, 2002) each person's lifestyle comprises engagement in an occupational repertoire congruent with individual needs and with the socio-cultural norms of that person's society. Society exerts a strong influence on how occupations are perceived (Velde & Fidler, 2002). For example, in Western culture, work is valued extraordinarily highly, and the participants in the present study had feelings of guilt when they could not work. Obligation is

also a powerful determinant of the use of time and energy in occupations (Westhorp, 2003) and when participants experienced overload in everyday life they had a tendency to work for others and their demands, instead of working for their own values and needs. The participants tried to gain acceptance, approval, and validation as worthwhile persons by doing this, and by being capable and efficient in every situation.

Overload in everyday life can also be seen as an imbalance between people's engagement in occupations and their resources and capabilities (Wilcock, 1998). When the participants in the present study experienced overload, they did more than they had resources or capabilities for. According to Wilcock overload also occurs when people allow themselves insufficient time for their own occupational interests and growth. When the participants had realised their individual needs and values, that is who they were, and which occupations and relations were valuable to them, this seemed to influence their occupational self-image to a greater extent than socio-cultural norms. This new occupational self-image also influenced people around them and allowed participants to make meaning in their lives.

The term self-image is used in this study to indicate that it primarily concerns an image of the self in relation to occupation. The concept 'image of occupational self' (Nygård, Borell, & Gustavsson, 1995) is used. More comprehensive concepts, such as 'self' and 'identity' were seen as less preferable because they were only partly reflected in the participants' experiences.

The present study also showed that engagement in personally meaningful occupation was perceived as central in the reconstruction process of the occupational self-image. A number of studies provide support for this idea, for example among well elderly persons (Jackson, Carlson, Mandel, Zemke, Clark, 1998), women with disability (Magnus, 2001), people with disabilities who need assistive devices (Larsson Lund & Nygård, 2003), seniors, wheelchair users and persons with schizophrenia (Laliberte-Rudman, 2002), and women with mental health problems (Rebeiro & Cook, 1999).

The present study also pointed to the role of meaningful occupation in making people agents rather than victims of their everyday lives. The participants' valuable or personally meaningful occupations appeared to validate a sense of being able to manage and control the demands of everyday life. This is in accordance with Schultz and Schkade's (1992) assertion that meaningful occupation is the vehicle for mastery. Various research projects have given support to this proposal. Piskur, Kinebanian and Josephsson (2002) in a study of a group of Slovenian people, showed that enjoyable and valued engagement in occupations seemed to be connected with the sensation of manageability and having the situation under control. Holmgren and Dahlin-Ivanoff (2004), in a study of women on sickness absence, showed that one strategy to control everyday life was to find meaningful occupations. Another critical feature to manage everyday life seems to be a

strategy to balance the effort put into meeting demands and the rewards gained for the effort (Siegrist, 1996). During times of overload/imbalance, the participants in the present study experienced no adequate reward in response to their efforts. According to the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist), lack of adequate reward contributes to high stress levels and elevated risks of experiencing stress-related disorders.

A strategy used by the participants in the present study to manage and control everyday life was to prioritise their reciprocal relationships, in which they both provided and received social support. Social support has a well-documented positive effect on the recipient as well as the provider of support (Bower & Greene, 1995; Rebeiro & Allen, 1998; Reid & Reid, 2000). Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that social support is not always positive (Reifman, Biernat, & Lang, 1991; Thomas, 1995). The outcome of giving such support depends on the experience of manageability and control in everyday life (Malterud, 1992). This is in line with the findings of the present study, which showed that manageability and control in everyday life was a prerequisite for a positive experience of providing social support.

Conversely, lacking strategies to manage and control has been identified to contribute to stress-related disorders where manageability and control of everyday life is closely tied to engagement in occupation (Wilcock, 1998). This study suggests that participants' manageability and control of everyday life, to some extent, can only be understood in relation to their experiences prior to the disorder. That is, their current understandings of how to achieve and maintain balance in their everyday lives were developed through the experience of being out of balance. Further research is needed to explore the relation between people's life histories and their ways of managing everyday life in order to better understand the ways people achieve balance and what causes overload.

Limitations of the Study

Focus group methodology has its strengths and limitations. All the participants in this study shared a health problem (stress-related disorders) and this created a group identity that facilitated the discussions, as suggested by Krueger (1994). One of the main strengths of the method is that it gives an insight into the perspective of a selected group (Barbour, & Kitzinger, 1999; Kitzinger, 1994). The method is based on discussion, which makes it impossible to indicate the exact number of participants for or against a perception. A focus group study gives a hint of the situation and should not be interpreted quantitatively. However the data reveal that the concordance between the focus groups in this study was high.

There is a possible bias in the data of this study given that the researcher who gathered the data is an occupational therapist and thus represents the providers of support to this client group. Attention was given to overcoming this problem by the use of open qualitative questions. Further, the researchers are all occupational therapists and, to follow the criteria for validity (Depoy & Gitlin, 1996), they looked for a balance

between prior understanding of occupational therapy theory and an open approach to the texts of the transcripts, but hazards connected to the research process cannot be neglected and should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants indicated that for them balance in everyday life is achieved through a dynamic interaction between respect for their own values, needs, and resources; strategies to manage and control everyday life; a harmonious occupational repertoire; and personally meaningful occupation. Engagement in personally meaningful occupation as defined in this study appears to be a mechanism that enables people to achieve balance in everyday life. Personally meaningful occupation also seems to enable people to develop a successful occupational self-image, manageability, and control. In addition manageability and control seem to be prerequisites for achieving a harmonious occupational repertoire and to influence how personally meaningful occupation is related to balance in everyday life.

The present study indicates relationships between personally meaningful occupation and balance in everyday life with manageability, control, and a harmonious occupational repertoire as mediators as well as between balance in everyday life and well-being. However, further studies are needed to test these relationships.

Another urgent area for future research would be further elaboration of how meanings become attached to occupations, in order to gain better knowledge of the characteristics of meaningful occupations, and thereby a better understanding of how they can be employed to promote health and well-being.

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