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'Colour and communion': exploring the influences of visual art-making as a leisure activity on older women's subjective well-being

Abstract

Research into the subjective experience of art-making for older people is limited, and has focused mostly on professional artists rather than amateurs. This study examined older women's motives for visual art-making. Thirty-two participants aged 60-86 years old were interviewed. Twelve lived with chronic illness; twenty reported good health. Nearly all had taken up art after retirement; two had since become professional artists. Participants described their art-making as enriching their mental life, promoting enjoyment of the sensuality of colour and texture, presenting new challenges, playful experimentation, and fresh ambitions. Art also afforded participants valued connections with the world outside the home and immediate family. It encouraged attention to the aesthetics of the physical environment, preserved equal status relationships, and created opportunities for validation. Art-making protected the women's identities, helping them to resist the stereotypes and exclusions which are commonly encountered in later life.

Key words: Creativity, art, older people, well-being

1. Introduction

Within the field of ageing research, there is an increasing interest in studying positive development in later life, rather than emphasising its problematic aspects. There is evident willingness to challenge the 'narrative of inevitable and lengthy decline over the life span' (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p.417). 'Positive' ageing is defined not simply by objective indicators such as physical health and longevity, but by various subjective experiences including life satisfaction, competence, choice, generativity, personal growth, and reciprocal social relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Ryff et al,1998). Some older people define successful ageing in terms of having positive future goals and adaptable coping strategies (Brandtstädter, 2006; Fisher, 1992). Valued activities also play an important role in promoting positive enjoyment of later life, and resisting depression, even in a context of deteriorating health (Benyamini & Lomranz, 2004; Howie, 2007; Williamson, 2002).

There is a risk of assuming that positive ageing must necessarily be associated with culturally valued behaviours such as striving and productivity, but Gergen & Gergen (2006) argue that alternative indicators should include older people's achievement of contentment, and confidence to resist others' expectations.

Whilst subjective well-being in later life may be valued for its own sake, it may also promote better physical functioning and longevity. Glass et al (1999) found that productive and social activities were associated with lower mortality rates of older people, especially among the least physically active. However, clearly there

are multi-directional influences between physical activity, social engagement and subjective well-being (Bowling et al, 1993; Diener et al, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2006).

This review now focuses on the contribution of leisure activities to subjective well-being in later life, particularly activities that may be described as cultural and creative. Physical, social and leisure activities constitute a person's 'engagement with life', a core feature of positive or successful ageing according to Rowe and Kahn (1998). Leisure activities, particularly those that promote social contacts, and informal learning or cognitive effort (such as cultural visits and evening classes), may be associated with improved cognitive functioning, although caution is needed about the direction of cause and effect (Salthouse, 2006). Leisure activities may provide benefits in addition to cognitive stimulation. Zoerick (2001) found that satisfying leisure was associated with mastery and self-esteem in a sample of adults aged over 61 years who lived with pain and mobility problems. In a study that distinguished between the influences of physically active and other types of leisure on subjective well-being, Lampinen et al (2006) found that greater participation in leisure activities (such as arts, handicrafts, participation in social organisations and religious activities), was associated with greater subjective wellbeing. However, this study also confirmed that there are complex inter-relationships among leisure participation, well-being, mobility and physical health, making it difficult to specify causal influences.

Silverstein and Parker (2002) conducted a study that disentangled relationships among older people's engagement in activities, their subjective well-being, and their physical health. Their study identified older people (aged on average over 80 years old) who had increased, maintained or decreased their activity participation (such as gardening, hobbies, and reading) over the previous 10 years. Those who reported increasing the number or variety of their activities tended to perceive their quality of life as increasing. The research noted that leisure activities had a particularly powerful positive compensatory effect among older people who had lost companionship or who had suffered functional decline. However, further research was recommended to understand the processes and meanings whereby engagement in recreational activity protects and promotes subjective well-being among older people. The authors suggested that self-efficacy, social integration and physical exercise might all be involved.

Atchley (1999) provided a further perspective on the positive influences of leisure activities in later life, suggesting that they maintain continuities of identity over the lifespan. This theme has also been elaborated by Kleiber et al (2002) and Caldwell (2005). Fisher (1995) also argued for the importance of identity maintenance and development in positive ageing. Identity is vulnerable in later life, for example through loss of work roles after retirement and the independence of adult children, and it is possible that leisure activities may offer alternative sources of self-definition and self-esteem. Offering some support, Fiske & Chiriboga (1990) found that older people were more likely than younger people to

define the self in terms of their activities, roles, and group memberships rather than personality and intellectual attributes.

According to these perspectives and findings, leisure activities do more than simply fill time after retirement. Stebbins (1992) classified activities that invite challenge and commitment as 'serious leisure', and linked such activities with the experience of 'flow'. 'Flow' describes an experience of deep engagement when the person applies high levels of skill to master the exacting demands of a task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Whilst quantitative studies linking leisure activities to positive well-being in later life cannot usually provide definitive explanations about the underlying psychological processes, certain qualitative studies have probed the meanings of favoured leisure activities from older people's own perspectives. Gabriel and Bowling (2004) supplemented a large nation-wide quantitative survey of older people's quality of life with in-depth qualitative interviews of a smaller group of participants, all aged over 65 years. Most participants rated their quality of life as good or very good. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry highlighted the value that older people assign to social relationships and social activities, a safe home, positive outlook, and good health or functional ability, for quality of life. Of great relevance to the current study, over 90% described solo leisure activities and hobbies, such as attending educational classes, as contributing to well-being. Qualitative enquiry into the meaning of such activities,

found that participants derived well-being through keeping busy, feeling useful and valued, experiencing mental stimulation and relaxation, and meeting others.

Whilst there is increasing theorising about the broad role of active leisure activities in maintaining a positive identity and well-being in later life, the meanings that older people attribute to *specific* leisure experiences, such as creative activities, have been little explored. Do cultural and creative occupations have a distinctive role to play in maintaining well-being in later life? Nimrod (2007) surveyed nearly 400 relatively young retirees with a mean age of 64 years, and relatively high levels of health, education and income. Participants reported engaging in many cultural activities and this particular leisure domain had the highest statistical relationship with life satisfaction scores. Furthermore, an intervention study, forming part of a wider Creativity & Aging Study, compared older participants who volunteered for either a cultural program or a 'usual activity' group (Cohen et al, 2006). Participants had an average age of 79 years, and experienced some overall deterioration in functioning in the subsequent 12 months, yet those who took up the cultural programme (chorale) showed better maintenance of health, morale, and weekly activities. The 'highly engaging and sustaining quality' (p.728) of the programme was thought to encourage these outcomes, although participants' original motives for volunteering for the cultural programme also need to be considered (as participants were not allocated randomly to intervention and control groups). A review of older people's experiences of music confirms its varied contribution to well-being (Hays et al, 2002).

The effects of engaging in visual arts discussions have also been studied experimentally. Community dwelling women, with an average age of 83 years, gave consent to participate in weekly visual arts discussion groups about the paintings of well known artists, or a control discussion group based on interests and hobbies (Wikström, 2002). Participants in the two groups were matched closely in terms of their usual social activities and personal factors. Those participating in the visual arts group were found to report increasing levels of social interaction with family and friends in their daily lives, a benefit that persisted even 4 months after the end of the group. However, why the intervention group gained these longer-term benefits could not be definitely answered from the data collected.

There is evidence that later life can be a time for creativity (Hickson & Housley, 1997; Simonton, 1990) but older people's motives for creating visual art as a leisure pursuit have not been fully explored. Relevant studies have tended to recruit professional or semi-professional artists rather than amateurs. For example, Rodeheaver et al (1998) reviewed the motives for art-making among several older female artists, and noted that deep engagement in art may follow on from retirement or release from family obligations, rather than being an expression of a long-standing artistic identity. The study demonstrates that later life is not a barrier to continuing personal development and creative exploration. Lindauer (1998) examined the development of creativity over the life course based on reviewing the work of artists of different ages, and concluded that aesthetic

sensitivity and art-making can blossom in later life, and that 'involvement in the arts may have a positive, healthy and therapeutic effect' (p248). Professional artists aged 53-75 interviewed by Reed (2005) mostly perceived their creativity as increasing with age. They perceived certain continuities in their creative self-expression whilst also enjoying ongoing growth of skills and self-discovery. A content analysis of written accounts by older acclaimed professional artists (aged 60 to over 80) similarly revealed that they perceived their artwork as flourishing both in quality and quantity (Lindauer et al, 1997).

The study Fisher and Specht (1999) suggested that visual art-making in later life contributes to well-being in several ways. They carried out interviews with 36 people aged 60-93 years who were presenting their artwork in a Senior Art Exhibition. Participants regarded their art-making as an important aspect of successful ageing, and described gaining numerous psychological benefits such as a sense of achievement, continuity, connection with others, purpose in life, and distraction from everyday problems. Many also described experiences during visual art-making that approximated to flow, as identified in other studies. As participants were creating art at a level that was skilful enough for exhibition, their expertise may have had some bearing on the benefits derived from this activity. Howie et al (2004) interviewed six older people who engaged in various forms of art-making (such as painting, woodcrafting, and weaving) at various levels of expertise including exhibition standard. Creative activities provided a means of 'crafting the self', through for example, expressing continuities of self in past, present and future projects, maintaining family traditions, engaging in self-reflection, gaining affirmative

responses from others, and acquiring a valued identity as an artist. Regardless of age and any physical decline, they were able to define themselves in positive terms as *‘craftspeople, people who made things’* (p.452). Resonating with these findings, a qualitative study of older people facing terminal illness found that they experienced craft workshops as a means of retaining the experience of self as an active person, and maintaining connections to normal daily life (La Cour et al, 2005).

Taken together, the evidence reviewed suggests that high investment, effortful and self-expressive leisure activities are associated with subjective well-being in later life. Whilst quantitative studies suggest associations between positive leisure activities, health and subjective well-being among older people, the underlying experiences deserve further enquiry using qualitative methods. Regarding artistic activities specifically, studies indicate that creativity need not decline in later life and that some older people gain many personal and social advantages from participation, including meaning, purpose, challenge and a positive identity. A limitation of most studies of visual art-making in later life is the almost exclusive focus on professional and semi-professional artists, who create artwork of exhibition standard.

The aim of this study was to explore, from a phenomenological perspective, how visual art-making contributes to the subjective well-being of older women living in the community. Almost all of the participants regarded themselves as hobbyists or amateurs, rather than professional artists. In this study, visual art-making was

interpreted broadly to include various forms of painting (on paper, canvas, lampshades, or tiles), pottery, textile art, card-making, weaving, lace-making, and other arts and crafts made primarily for aesthetic rather than 'practical' purposes.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

A qualitative study was appropriate as previous literature reveals relatively little prior understanding of the meanings of art-making for older people who engage in art at a non-professional level. The study focuses on the experiences of women, as men and women experience rather different challenges and opportunities in later years, such as different patterns of poverty and loneliness, and different values regarding leisure (Iwasaki & Smale, 1998).

Firstly, ethical approval for the study was given by the host institution.

Consideration was given to data security and confidentiality, and therefore pseudonyms are used when quoting from interviews. Participants were recruited by a letter published in a magazine which targets an older readership. The letter invited participants for a '*project that is exploring the reasons that older adults have for engaging in the visual arts (e.g. painting, pottery or textile art such as quilting and embroidery) in retirement*'. All those enquiring about the project in the first 6 weeks were sent full information sheets and consent forms. Most who were sent information volunteered to be interviewed. In total, 32 women aged 60-86 years were interviewed (median age 70 years). Four men were also interviewed but have not been included in this analysis. Twenty-six of the women

interviewed had worked in a full-time or part-time capacity until retirement; the others had been homemakers. Those who had retired had mostly occupied professional positions (nursing, teaching or scientific posts), or had worked in secretarial/administrative roles. All were Caucasian. Twenty reported good health; twelve were living with chronic physical health problems such as arthritis.

Semi-structured interviews followed a flexible topic guide, exploring participants' motivation for engaging in visual art-making. The participants were also asked to select 3 or 4 pieces of personal art or craft, photographed prior to interview, for more detailed reflection. In line with the suggestions of Harper (2002), this aspect of the method deepened the interview. It encouraged participants to reflect on the personal meanings of their artwork, eliciting detailed narratives about specific episodes of art-making, and their motives for creating the item photographed. The interviews generally lasted for 1-2 hours, and were fully transcribed. A reflective account was made after each interview and during the process of analysis, to capture emerging themes, both common and idiographic.

2.2. Data analysis

A phenomenological approach was appropriate, given that the research aimed to appreciate the personal meanings of art-making, specifically in relation to subjective well-being. The study followed guidelines for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as presented by Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999), Smith and Osborn (2003). IPA generally begins with analyzing the specific and broader themes within one particularly rich interview transcript.

These themes are then corroborated, or refined and elaborated, as the subsequent transcripts are analysed. A lengthy reiterative process of immersion in the data and refining the essence of the experiences that participants describe is essential. The approach invites interpretation of participants' meanings by the researcher, accepting that meanings are inevitably co-constructed. Some IPA studies are highly idiographic, based on detailed analysis of a small number of cases (e.g. Smith and Osborn, 2007). Others report the common or recurring experiences described by larger numbers of participants (e.g. Cartwright, 2007). The latter approach was adopted in this study.

3. Findings

Of the 32 women who were interviewed, most had worked in professional or administrative posts prior to retirement. In this regard, the social class of the sample was similar to that of Fisher and Specht who reported 83% of their older artists as retired from professional occupations. Fisher and Specht described about three quarters of their sample as tracing their interests in art back to adolescence and childhood. Reflecting perhaps the greater proportion of amateurs or hobbyists in this sample, very few (3) described a lifelong interest. Most had taken up art for the first time in retirement.

“With any sort of arts, really, I felt a philistine”. (Sarah, 71)

Some reflected that they could only return to the interests of their youth once they had retired, when other responsibilities became less time-consuming:

“I belong to a group and quite a number of us in the group were artists, started becoming artists, and then life got in the way ...it’s our time [now] and we’re determined to keep that time even when other pressures interrupt, we’re still going to do it”. (Monica, 69).

Even the two participants, Alice and Zoë, who regarded themselves as having become professional artists in recent years, did not report a lifelong interest but had taken up their vocation after retirement:

“I didn’t touch a paintbrush until 68 years old” (Alice, 75)

Some participants took up art to cope with specific stressful events:

“It all began about six years ago. My husband was suffering from senile dementia and became difficult. I used to get 2 hours respite once a week and discovered a painting class... it makes me feel alive” (Jan, 86)

For others, turning to art after retirement almost seemed serendipitous:

*“But it just sort of came to me as something I could do. Not what old women were supposed to do. I just didn’t want to sit around rotting”.
(Alice, 75)*

3.1 Contributions of art-making to subjective well-being

Two key overarching themes emerged from the data analysis. Art-making provided a variety of experiences that enriched the participants’ inner mental life, and also promoted feelings of connectedness with the wider physical and social

worlds. Both sets of experiences helped to replace the sources of well-being previously provided by paid work. A number of recurring themes have been grouped under these two broad headings, as shown in Table 1, and these will be explored subsequently.

Insert Table 1 here....

3.2 Looking inwards: Gaining a rich mental life

Art-making was valued for its capacity to stimulate thought and learning. Everyday life was enriched by sensuous experiences, challenges, playful experiments, and the pleasures of developing new skills and expertise.

Enjoying the sensuality of art-making

An important source of well-being described by nearly every participant concerned the sensuality of art-making. The great variety of colours and textures associated with artistic pursuits was experienced as energizing the mind and bringing other subjective benefits:

“Weaving is splendid. You know the sky’s the limit with what you can do with the colours. And the different textures It’s a very sensual thing isn’t it, you know the feel of it” (Brenda, 75).

Physically and metaphorically, sensual aspects of visual art-making brought colour and texture into daily life, and lifted mood:

“I think colour has a psychological lifting effect really...” (Sue, 61).

The sensuality of art-making also captured attention, sustained creative effort, and offered distraction from negative experiences for those living in difficult circumstances. For instance, Monica (69) had finally retired after breaking her hip when she was 61 years old:

“I tried to retire twice but it hadn’t worked. Because I (pause) I got so bored. And the third time when I knew I’d got to [retire], then I knew I’d got to find something to do”.

She explained how her newly discovered artistic pursuits help to sustain her since retirement:

“All senses are involved except hearing. Even the nose is involved with the smell of paint in the room which stimulate the taste buds. Sounds mad! Art is very touchy-feely...Rhythm enters the equation, I want to make my drawings move, dance across the page! You can get the movement if the line is right and this can happen. Art gives me a reason for living and forgetting less pleasant things”.

For those with health problems, such sustained mental absorption helped to alleviate concerns with pain and discomfort, and provided alternative self-definitions. One participant with severe breathing problems and pancreatitis explained:

“I value it, well, because I lose myself in it. The only hardship ... my mind will work with the [art]work but I do find it hard [hunched] over a sewing machine... But it’s OK for short periods and then have a break. Stand up,

walk round, go back to it. ...I don't want to become geriatric (laughs). I don't want to be an invalid. So I try ... damned hard not to" (Olivia, 73).

Because colour and texture held the participants' attention so strongly, these experiences also seemed to promote deep immersion in the activity, which in turned increased skill and confidence in creativity:

"I was starting to get a feeling for working with colour and different fabrics and patterns and shapes and that sort of thing, ...that was the start of it. And feeling that maybe I could create something myself", (Jessica, 66).

The sensual aspects of art-making were experienced as dynamic, bringing a rich inner life, and thereby enhancing well-being:

"I like colour and light and pattern. And so I was fascinated to find that here's a series of skills that you can develop over a period of time. ... I feel that there's constant change and I like change, I like the variety that you can ... making a black and grey quilt one month and next month you'll be doing something in purple and green and ... it's just that there's a huge variety. Same with the textures" (Jessica, 66).

A few participants reflected on the deeper, symbolic meanings of colour, which increased their sense of vitality and self-expression. Such interpretations were rare and appeared to be facilitated by familiarity with psychotherapy or counselling. Linda (64), a psychotherapist who had recently retired following a stroke, reflected on a particular piece of art:

“This piece encapsulates a feeling or a symbolic meaning, a spiritual sense held in the form and colour”.

Other biographical influences also shaped the meanings of colour for individuals. For example, Sybil (aged 70) believed that her current hunger for colour was related to growing up in a drab war-time London environment:

“I don’t know whether being a child brought up during the war ... I love colour, intensely love colour. And I think maybe that comes from having rather dull things during the wartime”.

Gaining new challenges

Linked closely to its sensual pleasures, was the capacity of art-making to challenge thinking processes and skills, again enriching participants’ inner worlds:

“The thing that fascinates me most is the challenge. It’s two things, it’s colour and challenge. It’s a journey and you want to get there. That’s the goal. And when you get there, there’s always something else to challenge you beyond it. It takes you forward”, (Zoë, 74).

The value of challenge was emphasised through the needs of some participants to take up new forms of art-making once they were satisfied with their current standards of workmanship:

“I don’t see myself as having a huge imagination and admire people who do. I like the challenge of learning a new skill and once I know how to do it

I tend to get bored and I want to move on to the next difficulty”.(Monica, 69).

Other family members sometimes recognized the participants’ needs to stretch their creativity:

“I do like a challenge, I mean my husband’s bought me [needlework] kits and he’s said, ‘I’ve bought you a challenge” (Megan, 66).

Creative challenges were valued for providing stimulation and opportunities to experience mastery. Some perceived these benefits as substitutes for the satisfactions that used to be derived from work. For example, Sarah (71) had retired from a senior nursing position. *“I’d always been busy. Whatever work I’d done it had all my attention”*. Since retiring, her artistic projects had become important for providing a new source of satisfaction:

“That sense of challenge and learning...it’s helped me through a lot of what could have been very dead periods, you know. To have something constructive. To me it’s all important that you do something...and not just sit and watch television”.

Playing and experimenting

Many participants in this study valued the discovery processes inherent in art, and the interesting psychological journeys that they were making with each artistic project:

“I’m still experimenting really. I’m aiming for a somewhat looser style of

painting. That's a style that attracts me, yes" (Sue, 61).

"It is very exciting I think... All the things you can do with fabrics and so on. Because I don't just stitch them, I try and do other things like origami – fold them and burn them and crunch them. You know, develop it a little bit, see what I can come up with" (Louise, 65).

Some felt less constrained by convention and more able to experiment now that they were perceived by others as 'older':

"I feel more free to do more bits and pieces, you know. If you're going to make a mess of it, it doesn't matter. It is very much a discovery" (Brenda, 75).

Art was experienced as having playful qualities, with participants gaining feelings of mastery when they steered their projects to a satisfactory completion. This was valued in its own right, but had special meanings for those, such as Linda, who experienced many other activities as effortful because of physical impairment:

"Creative activity is seeing something transform, paper, colours, fabric, shape, form, and knowing that I have made that happen...Creative activity is essentially playful, like a child. If I do this, that happens. I love the unexpectedness of what appears when I put paint on paper or pieces of fabric together...It gives my inner child the freedom to play and to feel competent" (Linda, 64).

Developing new skills and ambitions:

Linked with enjoying art-making as a discovery process, many participants described ongoing personal development, in the form of new skills, ambitions, and aspects of self, emerging through their artistic endeavours. The life stage of retirement was valued as the beginning of a new life phase rather than mourned for its losses, and art-making was given a central place in promoting personal development.

“My husband died four years ago. I eventually found a needlework class and an art group. I have even been on a course on abstract painting which really got the old grey matter going! ...It makes me feel alive and someday when I sell a picture, an ambition will have been achieved” (Jan, 86).

Most participants were explicit about the need to remain open to new experiences, although certain barriers were recognised that tend to affect older people specifically:

“And I still go on [embroidery] courses. I’ve been on two this year, two last year. All doing totally new things, using new materials...But there’s difficulty getting to classes. Another difficulty is the cost of classes, which is constantly rising. If you can find them in your area” (Imogen, 72).

For some, professional and non-professional alike, art-making had enabled a new identity to emerge in later life:

“When I came here I was just a little old widow. Right? Nothing ... just a little old widow. And now I’m an artist. And I know it shouldn’t make a

difference with people ... but it does. [They're thinking] 'that helpless little old thing with a quarter of a pound of something in her basket'. Horrible. It quite transforms your sense of yourself" (Alice, 75).

3.3 Looking outwards: Finding connection

Whilst later life is not necessarily associated with loneliness (Victor et al, 2005), retirement from work tends to limit opportunities for contact with others outside the immediate circle of family and friends. The second over-arching theme in participants' accounts related to the opportunities afforded by art-making to enjoy meaningful connection with the wider world. Art-making catalysed mutual social contact as well as fostering connectedness with the outside environment (in all its social, physical, and spiritual aspects). Moreover, social connections were valued for being on equal status terms rather than implying dependency, or care-giving.

Attending to the aesthetics of the physical environment

Art-making was experienced as heightening participants' attention to their physical surroundings. This presented new possibilities for artwork, and more generally increased their engagement with everyday life. Sue (61), for example, took up watercolour for the first time when she retired from teaching:

"I think it [art] does enhance the way you look at things. You know when I was keen on painting trees it did make me reappraise trees. You know tree-trunks aren't always brown, look at them carefully and you'll see that, you know, there's bits of moss and green and white and black ...all mixed together. I think taking up painting has made me look again and look how

the light, I like the light effects on water, or through trees. It increases one's enjoyment of life, to be giving more attention to these things".

Attention to the details of nature increased enjoyment of everyday scenes that might otherwise be taken for granted:

"It [art] makes you look at the world quite differently I think. I mean we've got an enormous garden, but it isn't the tree I look at, it's the bark and whether I can copy the pattern of the bark to stitch in embroidery" (Olivia, 73).

Close attention to the environment, including observation of colours, textures and shapes, and taking inspirations for new designs, also helped participants who were living with adversities to distract their attention outwards, away from pain, symptoms of ill-health, or grief.

Maintaining reciprocal relationships with friends and family

Considerable segments of most of the interview transcripts focused on family relationships. At first sight, this appeared to distract attention away from the meanings of art-making. Yet with greater immersion in their accounts, it became clear that participants were describing their artistic endeavours as occurring within a web of valued social relationships, and also as contributing to their maintenance. Some participants used their creativity primarily to make presents for family and friends. The satisfactions came not only from finishing an

aesthetically pleasing article, but from making a gift that was meaningful to the recipient.

“I gave my daughter the [embroidered] quilt for her baby. [The other children said] ‘Oh make us one, please make us ...’. ‘No’, I said. The next thing I heard myself saying, ‘Well, what colours do you want?’ Well I didn’t know what I was taking on. And then my daughter was pregnant again. And I thought ‘Oh God, that’s another quilt’. It wasn’t the attitude I should have at all! And then it [interest in embroidery] took off. And by then I was hooked” (Sarah, 71).

Even though artistic activities were mostly carried out within the home, they nevertheless brought participants into contact with others, and helped to maintain reciprocal relationships, based on mutual interests and care-giving rather than age or dependency. Art provided shared topics of conversation and also exchange of skills and materials with family, friends and (for some) fellow students in adult education. A few, like Zoë (74), had discovered that they had developed sufficient skills to create saleable artwork. The benefits were not only financial but social:

“You get involved in other people’s lives...you’ve got the option to go to college for classes and meet other people. And it’s so exciting to see other people’s work....I’ve got a feeling that a lot of elderly people that haven’t got my interests are on their own, and get more and more morose. And it [depression] becomes a battle”.

Some created their own groups of like-minded friends, with art-making activities providing the mutual focus of their meetings together:

“Several people from the spinning group, there are about four of us ... we get together and just sit and draw in the garden once a week. So it’s quite a sociable activity really. You know that you’re very much doing it in the company ... of friends. Well you have to when you retire, you have to make an effort to do something. At least it’s a way of getting out and meeting people....Everyone focusing on something together is sort of pleasant” (Brenda 75).

Continuing membership of society

Art-making offered feelings of connectedness through enabling participants to experience continuing membership of the wider society, rather than feeling excluded into a ‘ghetto’ of older retired people, or left in isolation at home:

“If you’ve got a skill that’s marketable, you can get out there and you’ve got contact with people. It’s not just money. You’re still part of the world” (Zoë, 74).

Some felt that their art forged wider connections with nature and the environment, as well as the social world outside their home. These achievements were especially valued when ill-health, such as arthritis, made travel and visits outside the home more difficult:

“I don’t go on holiday any more ...I feel I’m getting quite isolated just because you know I don’t have a car, I don’t have family around. Um, so

actually the going to pottery ... I can get the bus at the door and ...I can cope with it, where I can't ... I can't walk that far to other things. So actually it is a very important thing because it's something that actually gives me a social life, keeps me part of society really... You know you're just one of the group really. You're not in a kind of social ghetto there ...you're still a useful part of society and not sort of, you know, an old burden that is useless. That you could very easily feel when you're old", (Deidre, 66).

Another participant who was limited in her mobility through a spinal tumour explained:

"I got my act together instead of going down the route of 'no-one comes round any more', you know the usual thing. To be honest, I did go down that path for a while. You have plenty of friends when you are mobile and can entertain and go places. All of a sudden, no friends...and I was left alone for 11 hours a day... I took up art so I had my window into the world"" (Molly, 74).

Those in poor health felt especially vulnerable not only to social isolation and activity restriction, but to the stereotypes of old age. They felt that their engagement with art helped them to maintain acceptance within the wider world as a person of value, rather than being categorised by age or disability.

"I actually want to be a useful part of society. And acceptable as me, not as a sort of old woman. Art does that" (Deidre, 66).

Appreciating validation by others

Participants valued positive feedback from others about their artwork, finding that this enhanced self-esteem. Praise from fellow artists (whether amateurs or professionals) was experienced as offering a specific and potent source of validation:

“You get a real sense of achievement from what you’ve produced [at art college]. And companionship, you know. The whole place is buzzing really. Yes, the social side is important”. (Deidre, 66).

Particularly for those with health problems, or whose husbands had died, feedback from others about their artwork strengthened a positive self-image, as well as motivation to continue:

“[At the patchwork group] there’s a feeling of companionship and encouragement ... I go once a week to the group, and somebody holds up a quilt that they’ve just made and everybody goes ‘Oh that’s lovely!’ (laughs). It does a lot for your self- esteem”, (Jessica, 66, widowed).

Preserving identity through adapting creative activities

Later years of life can present the challenge of coping with loss of function and chronic illness. A few participants expressed anxiety that ill-health and social circumstances might force them to give up the creative activities that were so central to their identities and well-being:

“It [art] is so important and I always say in my prayers, if you ever have to take a part of me, Lord, take my legs, don’t take my hands, or my eyes or my brain, because I’d go bonkers, I really would... I’ve said to Jackie [daughter] ... ‘if I go in a home, or I can’t speak for myself, please make sure that I’ve got some sewing to do’, because I couldn’t bear it if I didn’t, I really couldn’t”, (Maria, 68).

Some participants had already faced such losses and described a process of adapting their creative activities to accommodate changes in their eyesight, stamina and dexterity.

“I love taking photographs of things I think are beautiful ... because I think one day I might like to paint them, you know. So I’ve got a collection of things [to do] for the time when I will not be able to get around. I shall hate it I know . But I’m ready in case ...” (Bel, 80)

Colour and communion

Many participants alluded to the two over-arching themes in their accounts, pointing out that their creative activities offered mental stimulation and feelings of connection with the wider world. One summarized the benefits she experienced from painting as follows:

‘The colour that’s brought into our lives and the communion with nature when painting landscapes are very therapeutic’ (Yvonne, 76).

4. Discussion

This phenomenological study identified a number of themes similar to those presented in a previous study by Fisher and Specht (1999). The earlier study found that older artists (who were all exhibiting their artwork publicly) regarded their creativity as enabling them to stay involved and connected to others, and confident about meeting new challenges. In the current study, like the earlier one, participants revealed an openness to life, perceiving their later years as providing opportunities for further learning and development, rather than as a time for reflection on the past, or regret.

This study provided new insights as it found that the benefits uncovered by Fisher and Specht (1999) are not confined to older artists with high levels of expertise and lengthy commitment to art-making. The mostly amateur artists who participated in the current study had (with very few exceptions) not created artwork between their school years and retirement, and did not identify themselves as being 'artists', yet they too derived considerable satisfaction from their artistic activities. This study also offers additional phenomenological detail about the experience of art-making, compared with the previous study which included enquiry into participants' more general understandings of the term 'successful aging'. The sensuality of art-making, its playful experimental possibilities, and its intricate role in maintaining the women's identities and 'equal status' reciprocal involvement in others' lives have been highlighted.

Participants' accounts revealed experiences that can be characterised as 'flow',

including immersion in the sensual qualities of art-making and positive attitudes towards the challenges inherent in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Participants could also be understood as manifesting 'vital engagement', a construct proposed by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) to describe the experience of being deeply involved in activities that are meaningful to the self and that promote feelings of aliveness or vitality. These constructs provide additional understandings of why activity restriction in later life is so damaging to well-being in later life (or, indeed, at any stage in life), supplementing the findings of previous studies (e.g. Williamson & Shaffer, 2000).

The subjective value of being a member of a wider community of fellow practitioners has been noted among people engaging in creative types of paid work (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and 'serious leisure' activities (Stebbins, 1992, 1996). Similarly, Howie et al (2004) noted that older people engaging in creative occupations experienced the recognition of others as helping to forge their occupational identities as artists and craftspeople. The study by Howie et al differed in that participants reported life-long interests in their creative leisure activities, making frequent references to activities that they had 'always' participated in. This study makes a further contribution by showing that older people may derive considerable subjective benefit from leisure activities taken up for the first time *after* retirement.

The creative activities of visual art-making and music seem to share certain functions in older people's lives. Hays and Minichiello (2005a) found that music

offered older people valued opportunities for 'sharing and connecting' (p265), mental stimulation, and playful escape. In the current study, there was greater emphasis on the ways in which visual art-making forges connections with the wider physical as well as social world, through, for example, sharpened awareness and attention to details of colour and form. Participants in the study by Hays and Minichiello (2005a, 2005b) described life-long interests in music, and found music to evoke memories of significant life events, promoting integration and life review. The participants in the current study differed in that very few described a long personal history of involvement in arts and crafts, and perhaps for this reason, their accounts focused more upon the contribution of art to their current psychological vitality and future personal development rather than its potential for integrating past and present selves. Like the acclaimed older professional artists studied by Lindauer et al (1997), participants reported feeling increasingly confident to play and experiment with their chosen media, appreciating social validation when it was offered but not needing social approval to continue with their art.

The study has certain limitations that are usual in qualitative research, namely a fairly small self-selected sample. Participants were reflective and articulate. Not all had been well educated but most had enjoyed relatively advantaged social circumstances as adults. Only women's accounts were analysed here. Further study could be made of the resources, personal, social and financial, that enable both older men and women to take up art in their later years. There is also scope for exploring the meanings of artistic activities for older people from ethnic

minorities, and for those living in more restricted social circumstances such as nursing homes.

Some participants alluded to a process of adapting their arts and crafts to changing function (such as loss of fine dexterity) in order to preserve well-being. Other writers have commented on the emotional consequences of having to give up meaningful artistic activities in later life and the challenges that this creates for their sense of self. For example, Scott-Maxwell (1968; p48) reflects at the age of 82: “It has taken me all the time I’ve had to become myself, yet now that I am old there are times when I feel I am barely here, no room for me at all”. Further research might illuminate the experiences of adaptation and resilience that help older people to maintain subjective well-being in such circumstances of changing health.

Positively, the qualitative method empowered the participants to share the meanings of creative art-making in their lives. They revealed that creative art-making introduces a rich occupational texture into daily life, resulting in cognitive stimulation, social connectedness and ultimately a positive identity resistant to the stigma that is too commonly attached to ageing and ill-health.

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Table 1: Contribution of art-making to subjective well-being in later years

Looking inwards: Gaining a rich mental life

- Enjoying the sensuality of art-making
- Gaining new challenges
- Playing and experimenting
- Developing new skills and ambitions

Looking outwards: Finding connection

- Attending to the aesthetics of the physical environment
- Maintaining reciprocal relationships with friends and family
- Continuing membership of society
- Appreciating validation by others