

Role of Leisure in Meaning-Making for Community-Dwelling Adults with Mental Illness

Inspiration for Engaged Life

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Abstract

This qualitative study intensively examined the role of leisure in meaning-making with 33 community-dwelling adults (18 females, 15 males; aged 24 to 78) from diverse cultural backgrounds (10 African Americans, 10 Caucasians, 9 Latinos, and 4 Asian Americans) with mental illness. Analyses of the interview data identified several key themes of meaning-making through leisure including the role of leisure in promoting (a) *a joyful life*, (b) *a composed life*, (c) *a connected life* (e.g., socially, spiritually), (d) *a discovered life*, and (e) *a hopeful and empowered life*. Supported and contextualized by these specific themes, an overarching leisure meaning-making theme, which emerged from this study, is *inspiration for an engaged life*. The findings based on the participants' voices/insights suggest that leisure gives strength, peace of mind, inspiration, and more depth and color to one's life and makes it more well rounded in the journey to recovery.

Keywords: *disability, meaning of life, purpose of life*

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The pursuit of a meaningful, enriching life is a central agenda for humans (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1985) and is essential for happiness and subjective well-being (Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Raskin, Bridges, & Neimeyer, 2010; Wong, 2012). Meaning-making refers to a process by which a person derives meaning(s) from an activity (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). Among many activities, leisure is considered a key domain of life that can help people gain valued meanings of life (Iwasaki, 2008; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). Research has shown that various forms and contexts of leisure can promote meaning-making in a number of different ways (e.g., psychologically, spiritually, socially, culturally) (Chick, 2009; Trussell & Shaw, 2009; Watkins & Bond, 2007). Such leisure-generated unique experiences and meanings appear particularly salient to marginalized population groups, including persons with disabilities, because they are often provided with limited opportunities for active and meaningful engagements (e.g., educational, occupational, community) due to social exclusion, discrimination and oppression, negative stigma, and access issues (Fullagar, 2008; Lloyd, King, & McCarthy, 2007). Potentially, leisure may play a key role in the process of meaning-making among people with mental illness (Craik & Pieris, 2006; Davidson, Borg, & Mann, 2005; McCormick, Funderburk, Lee, & Hale-Fought, 2005; Nimrod, Kleiber, & Berdychevsky, 2012).

A meaning-oriented approach to leisure research has a long history (e.g., Freysinger, 1995; Henderson, 1990; Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Shaw, 1985). However, meaning-making through leisure is a unique, distinct concept, compared to the meaning of leisure *per se*. The former refers to how or in what ways leisure contributes to making one's life more meaningful or how people find meanings within life through leisure pursuits. On the contrary, the latter deals with what and how people define or perceive the meaning of leisure to be. For example, Schulz and Watkins (2007) developed the Leisure Meanings Inventory to measure the meaning of leisure (the latter concept), a multi-dimensional scale for measuring four qualitatively different ways of experiencing the meaning of leisure: passing time, exercising choice, escaping pressure, and achieving fulfillment. In contrast, Porter, Iwasaki, and Shank's (2011) comprehensive literature review identified several overarching leisure-generated meaning-making themes (the former concept) such as connection/belonging, identity, and freedom/autonomy. Also, researchers such as Shaw and Henderson (2005) and Iwasaki described how leisure provides spaces for meaning-making from gendered as well as cross-cultural perspectives, respectively. Specifically, Iwasaki's integrative review of the literature highlighted the processes of meaning-making through leisure engagements, contextualized within a specific culture, that involve both remedying the *bad* and enhancing the *good*, in people's quest for a meaningful life. The present paper focuses on meaning-making through leisure (i.e., the role of leisure in making one's life more meaningful).

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of leisure in meaning-making among people with mental illness, by appreciating their voices and lived experiences. The rationale for this exploration is based on the notion that there is significant stigma associated with mental illness (Phelan & Link, 2011) and that the process of recovery in mental illness depends on personal strengths and environmental resources that support living life fully despite illness (Whitley & Drake, 2010). In addition, understanding meaning-making through leisure is important for practitioners to gain knowledge about their role in partnering with individuals who live with mental illness to maximize opportunities for more positive, constructive, and meaningful activities. This is especially important because of the preponderance of social isolation and sedentary lifestyles of individuals with mental illness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, 2013).

Meaning-Making through Leisure Engagement

Role of “specific” leisure activities in meaning-making. Examining the meaning-making role of leisure is an emerging area of research. Researchers have started to explore specific leisure activities or forms/functions of leisure in meaning-making. For example, using a grounded theory approach, Svarstad (2010) explored hiking through forests, mountains, and cultural landscapes as a popular leisure activity in Norway ($n = 84$ hikers) and found three categories of meaning constructions: a recreation category (re-creating the ability to achieve and function), a category of the simple outdoors discourse (an alternative to modern society), and a belonging category. Hegarty and Plucker (2012) conducted a phenomenological study of creative leisure for adults and found the relevance of self-expression to this leisure experience as a way of meaning-making. Ness’s (2011) anthropological study on rock climbing in Yosemite National Park illustrated the emergence of symbolism into and out of bodily experience, specifically meaning-making as inscriptive and emergent signs of place and self, including both inward and outward movements of significance. Wensley and Slade’s (2012) phenomenological study explored the role of walking in meaning-making among regular walkers and identified the four main themes: social connectedness, well-being, connection to nature, and achievement from a challenge. Stebbins (2013) discussed serious leisure as a meaning-making activity to illustrate the central role of leisure in research and theory on positiveness in the social sciences. Pavlidis and Fullagar’s (2013) qualitative study of roller derby in Australia examined leisure as a negotiated space of transformation, creativity, and difference by stressing leisure meaning-making. In their study, narratives recounted the complex affective relations (passion, frustration, pride, and shame) that women negotiate in forming leisure identities and meaning-making in relation to the social context of their lives, specifically, the meaning of playing, belonging, and becoming “derby grrrls” were recounted.

Role of “general” leisure in meaning-making. Understanding the role of leisure, in a broad sense rather than specific types of leisure, in meaning-making, has been guided mostly by reviews of the literature. For example, according to Newman, Tay, and Diener’s (2014) literature review based on 363 research articles linking leisure and subjective well-being (SWB), meaning-making was identified as a core psychological mechanism to promote SWB. Their literature review covered a wide range of leisure activities such as: running (Major, 2001), quilting (King, 2001), aboriginal dancing (Iwasaki, MacKay, Mactavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006), and volunteering and storytelling (Wearing, 1998), as well as leisure concepts including serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

From a more practical, applied perspective, the role of leisure in meaning-making has been emphasized in some of the therapeutic recreation models. For example, Carruthers and Hood (2007) developed a Leisure and Well-being Model (LWM), based on literature from positive psychology, leisure research, social work, and youth development. They claimed that “The profession of Therapeutic Recreation (TR) has the opportunity to play an important role in supporting clients to create a life of meaning, in spite of challenges and limitations” (p. 276). Heintzman’s (2008) leisure-spiritual coping model contains meaning-making (e.g., life purpose, transformation, growth) as a key concept, illustrated by his case study to uncover the specific pathways that link the various spiritual and leisure constructs.

In particular, meaning-making seems to play an important role in the lives of people who experience barriers to full participation such as people living with chronic conditions and/or disabilities. Drawing on the model of Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC), Hutchinson and Nimrod (2012) examined leisure as a resource for successful aging by older

adults with chronic health conditions. Their study identified several key themes including “more than managing—living a life of meaning.” The study participants “recognized various ways [leisure] participation could help in not only managing their health condition, but also how it could continue to be a source of meaning, satisfaction, and enjoyment in their lives” (p. 50). Chun and Lee (2010) explored the role of leisure in the experience of posttraumatic growth (PTG) for people with spinal cord injury (SCI). The emergent themes included making sense of traumatic experience and finding meaning in everyday life, and building companionship and meaningful relationships through leisure.

Phinney, Chaudhury, and O'Connor (2007) conducted a phenomenological analysis of multiple interviews and participant observation with eight community-dwelling elders with dementia. The single most important driving force in their lives was being active, doing as much as they possibly could to be involved in a wide range of activities including leisure pastimes and social involvements. These activities promoted meaning-making in three ways—participants experienced feelings of pleasure and enjoyment, felt a sense of connection and belonging, and retained a sense of autonomy and personal identity. Finally, from international and multicultural perspectives, Iwasaki's literature review and content analysis and synthesis identified several key pathways linking leisure pursuits to meaning-making. These include the promotion of (a) positive emotions and well-being; (b) positive identities, self-esteem, and spirituality; (c) social and cultural connections and a harmony; (d) human strengths and resilience; and (e) learning and human development across the life-span. More generally, in people's quest for a meaningful life, the processes of meaning-making through leisure engagements seem to involve both remedying the bad and enhancing the good (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Iwasaki, 2008).

Role of leisure in meaning-making among people with mental illness. More specifically relevant to the target population of the present study, Davidson et al.'s intensive, international study (in Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the United States) with 12 individuals recovering from mental illness, stressed the role of “naturally occurring social and recreational activities” (p. 198) in their lives. These were seen as “normal activities” that gave meaning and purpose (e.g., self-exploration, self-expression, enjoyment/pleasure, self-worth, and belonging) to those persons with mental illness:

Such activities appear to be important not only because they help to structure and fill the person's otherwise empty time, but also because they provide opportunities for the person to explore and express aspects of his or herself, give meaning and purpose to the person's life, offer enjoyment and pleasure, contribute to a positive and effective sense of self-worth and belonging, and, finally, help to counteract symptoms. (p. 189)

McCormick et al. (2005) used an experience sampling method to examine the daily life of people with severe and persistent mental illness including activity characteristics and emotional experiences. They found that the everyday lives of those individuals were characterized by very little stimulation, implying some connection between the experience of boredom and anxiety and meaningfulness/meaninglessness. Nimrod et al. (2012) explored how people with depression perceive and use leisure in coping with their illness. While showing differences in healthy versus unhealthy use of leisure, their findings demonstrated the role of leisure in addressing the need for a sense of purpose/meaning-making in life, especially by engaging in physical and creative leisure activities and volunteering.

Despite the growth in researchers' attempts to examine the role of leisure in meaning-making, further efforts are needed to gain a greater understanding of such role by appreciating the voices and lived experiences of community citizens, including those who are often marginalized

and socially excluded (Berry, 2014; Phelan & Link, 2011). Informed by the review of literature, the specific research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

RQ1: What role, if any, does leisure play in making the lives of individuals with mental illness meaningful?

RQ2: What are the key functions or characteristics of leisure that are conducive to this meaning-making role?

Methods

A National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded research project was conducted to examine the role of leisure and active living in recovery, health promotion, and life quality of community-dwelling individuals with mental illness. This multi-year project consisted of several phases with the use of a mixed-method design. Phase I of the project involved structured interviews using several standardized measures of recovery, psychiatric symptoms, active living, and a myriad of leisure variables (Iwasaki, Coyle, Shank, Messina, & Porter, 2014).

Data Collection

From a pool of 101 Phase I participants recruited from five mental health agencies in a northeastern United States city, 40 individuals were invited to a Phase II qualitative study, which this current paper is based on. A purposeful sampling was used to ensure the diversity of participants. First, cultural backgrounds were considered; thus, we attempted to recruit ten adults (five men, five women) from each of four ethnic/racial subsets (i.e., African American, Asian American, Latino, and Caucasian). Second, we considered other personal variables (e.g., age, types of mental illness) and responses to standardized measures (e.g., active living, leisure) during Phase I to recruit as diverse participants as possible (e.g., those with low to high leisure participation levels).

Each interview followed an institutional review board (IRB) approved protocol including voluntary participation, informed consent, as well as procedures to protect confidentiality and anonymity of data. Initially, each study participant met with a research assistant (RA) for up to an hour to be oriented to the study purpose and procedures, and to establish rapport between the RA and the participant. Three semi-structured individual interviews (to be described below) were conducted once each week for three consecutive weeks. In order to keep interest, motivation, and engagement as high as possible, the RA maintained telephone contacts in between interviews at least once with each participant prior to each interview scheduled. These informal contacts provided an opportunity to demonstrate continued interest in the individuals and to help resolve any problems or issues that might have arisen such as rearranging appointments for interviews.

Each interview was conducted by the RA, audio-recorded, and occurred in a private office on a university campus or at a mental health drop-in center. The interviews were conducted by three RAs who had been involved in administering the structured interview protocol during Phase I. Thus, all Phase II study participants were already familiar with the RAs. One RA was a native user of Spanish language, which was particularly useful in conducting interviews with Latino participants and in transcribing and translating interviews when appropriate. The RAs were oriented and trained by the principal investigators and followed an interview protocol that had been developed and refined by the entire research team for clarity, demand, and relevance. In addition to academic researchers and graduate RAs, the research team included a professional

provider of community behavioral health services and two individuals who were consumers of mental health services. These individuals assisted the team in refining the interview guide both prior to and subsequently after being interviewed themselves, as a form of pilot test.

The semi-structured interviews followed a participant-friendly format developed by the research team and approved by a university IRB. Each of the three interviews in Phase II lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Each was unique although similar themes including active living, leisure, and recovery were explored and revisited each time. The first interview was used to further build rapport, following the earlier initial meeting, and primarily to allow the individual to tell his or her life stories including childhood and family experiences, major adulthood events, and history with mental health services. This interview also provided an opportunity to initially explore the meanings of active living, leisure, recovery, and life quality held by the participant. The first interview included questions such as: "In your life, what kinds of activities are interesting for you and make you happy and enjoyable? Do you think engaging in these interesting and enjoyable activities may promote a sense of meaning or a sense of purpose in your life? Any examples?"

The second interview allowed the individual to elaborate on active living and the perceived or experienced connection between leisure, health, recovery, and life quality. This second interview provided an opportunity to probe more deeply into those factors that influenced recovery and things that provided meaning to one's life. Specifically, the second interview included questions such as: "What things or activities make you happy, enjoyable, and meaningful in your life? Please describe how or in what ways these enjoyable things or activities make your life meaningful. Any specific examples such as the role of actively engaged leisure in this 'meaning-making' process?"

The third and final interview was used to review and gain further insights into the key issues or perspectives that were revealed in previous interviews, especially the personal and contextual factors that reportedly contributed to recovery, as well as personal views on access to and use of existing mental health services. Expanding from each participant's responses at the earlier two interviews, the third and final interview gave more in-depth insights into the meanings of active living, leisure, recovery, and life quality; its interrelationships; and meaning-making processes. As such, the series of interviews provided complete or comprehensive opportunities to listen for and capture consistency and nuances of each person's lived experiences. In addition, photovoice (taking pictures to illustrate life events or stories) and journaling were used. The purpose of using photovoice and journaling was simply to help articulate each participant's perspectives in between the interviews; thus, the data from these methods are not reported here. Each participant received a \$30 stipend for each completed interview and a \$10 stipend for participation in the member-checking group meeting once all other interviews had been completed.

Data Analyses

The interview data were initially organized according to each major section of the interview protocol (Morse & Field, 1995). That is, questions regarding active living, leisure, and recovery were segmented/grouped for content analysis. Accordingly, content analysis began with line-by-line review of verbatim transcripts and coding of key words within each major section of the three interviews per each participant. Next, a within-participant analysis across the three interviews was used to identify themes that emerged within each content area for each participant. This was followed by cross-participant analyses using a constant comparison technique (Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for all the participants. From the qualitative data collected from the participants, key points were directly extracted from the text (voices of the participants) as

a series of codes. These codes were grouped into similar *concepts* in order to make them more meaningful and workable. Broad groups of these concepts were then formed into categories or major themes. This constant comparison approach enabled the researchers to work gradually and logically from direct quotes (participants' voices) and to begin to identify groups of concepts and then broader categories as major themes to be supported by the data. Preliminary findings from transcript analyses were exchanged and discussed by three members of the research team who have expertise in qualitative analysis to reach consensus on the identification of themes. Then a member-checking group meeting was held with study participants in order to provide them with opportunities to review and comment on the results (with no specific change suggested to the themes identified but further voices to articulate these themes were noted) and enhance trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

Study Participants

All procedures, including the three personal interviews described earlier, were completed with 33 individuals (18 females, 15 males; aged between 24 and 78, mean of 49 years; 10 African Americans, 10 Caucasians, 9 Latinos, and 4 Asian Americans¹) with such diagnoses as bipolar disorder (10), major depression (10), schizophrenia (8), and schizoaffective disorder (5). Most (24 or 72%) had at least a high school diploma or higher, but only six were either fully or partially employed (two and four, respectively). These individuals had little income—nineteen (57%) had incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000, and eight (24%) had incomes less than \$5,000, whereas seven (21%) had incomes over \$10,000 (\$10,000-\$15,000, two; \$15,000-\$20,000, two; \$20,000-\$30,000, two; and \$30,000-\$40,000, one).

Themes on Role of Leisure in Meaning-Making

The study participants provided a number of examples and illustrations to describe the role of leisure in meaning-making. For example, such activities as going to movies, listening to music (e.g., "worship music"), reading books (e.g., "spiritual books"), visiting art museums, and participating in "cultural events" (e.g., "karaoke" group), provide "a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose in life. These give my life meaning!" (#86; Participant ID Number²). Another participant spoke about the benefits of creative leisure (e.g., arts, crafts, and collages) including "painting" to draw "pretty pictures" that make her life "meaningful" (#38). Specifically, several key themes of meaning-making through leisure were identified from the data including the role of leisure in promoting (a) a joyful life, (b) a composed life, (c) a connected life (e.g., socially, spiritually), (d) a discovered life, and (e) a hopeful and empowered life. While the themes and data supporting them are being presented as distinct themes, multiple meanings can be gained from a single experience, and these meaning themes can be interconnected.

Joyful life. First, leisure was seen as a way of, or context for, making one's life joyful and enjoyable, exemplified by the following comment: "Everybody needs some type of leisure to fall back on, because it's what makes us human. It is the ability to enjoy things—life really isn't worth living if you can't enjoy it" (#41). Through going on "different trips," "socializing with friends," taking a walk, going to church, reading books, and participating in a "mural arts program," one "gets real enjoyment out of it" (#10). Also highly valued was "being around positive people" as

¹ We were able to recruit only four Asian American participants; the difficulty of recruiting those participants was perhaps due to significant stigma attached to mental illness among this cultural group.

² Study participants were assigned numbers according to the timing of starting interviews from #1 to #101 at Phase 1 of our research project.

a source of generating enjoyment and meaning: "It's good people out there. When I am around a lot of happy, inspiring people, I'm feeling good... Enjoyable and meaningful leisure, that's the main point—enjoyment, because I like to enjoy myself, and meaningful" (#32). Another person spoke of "peace of mind" gained from a "fun" activity—"they (arts and crafts) give you time to regain your peace of mind. They play a role of keeping me in good spirits. You have something fun to do" (#38). The involvement with a church group was seen as "active leisure," which means "something that's challenging, totally enjoyable, but yet curiously demanding. It has to be something that's not atypical; it's human development" (#6). Interestingly, this person linked enjoyment to human development through being involved in active, challenging leisure, along with connection of a "fun" activity with "peace of mind" shown earlier, both of which imply positive consequences (i.e., peace of mind and human development) of enjoyable/joyful experiences through leisure more than just "fun" experiences per se.

Composed life. Another key theme was the role of leisure in making one's life more composed, focused, collected, and/or in control. Referring to dancing and singing, listening to music, drawing and writing, and bingo and movie night, it was commented that "my leisure time keeps me out of trouble and keeps my mind focused. It makes me happy and it keeps me calm, cool, and collected. It motivates me to keep going. It keeps stabilized and intact with everything" (#19). Activities such as shooting pool, ping pong, playing cards, basketball, and walking around/sightseeing help keep one "from negativity" and "feel at peace" and "meaningful":

Keep my mind from wandering, you know, keep my mind from thinking about things that I'm not supposed to think of, the negative things, you know ... It's a safe environment for me, finding a comfort zone. It eases my mind, my emotions, my feelings. I feel great and feel at peace; it's meaningful to me. (#27)

Another person concurred on the role of leisure in keeping one's mind occupied and focusing more on positive aspects of life: "It (leisure) keeps my mind occupied and don't let it focus on stupid things... Arts, crafts, crocheting, and needlepoint, making stuff makes me very happy... It makes you focus on good things in your life" (#75). A comment was also made about the role of music and the library in feeling focused and peaceful and even a positive behavioral change:

I think I can focus and concentrate better when I'm listening to music... Yea, it (library) is like a quiet, relaxed setting, atmosphere, yea. It's very peaceful in there. I feel safer there at the library, yea. I think my behavior changes when I'm at the public library. I'm more calm and relaxed (#70).

Connected life (e.g., socially, spiritually). Contribution of leisure to making one's life more connected (with self, others, and spirituality) is another key theme. One participant spoke of "the harmony and social connections," which are "important because I got a connection between my friends here and the things I do in my life" (#10). It was noted that leisure provides "a social outlet, having more friends, people to talk to" (#14) and "having people that care about me as well as having people to care about" (#41). The role of leisure/free time in promoting a socially connected life was elaborated further:

Free time is good—that's when your mind starts to unwind, and when you're with people and you're talking and you're enjoying something outside of the everyday rut and fast-paced society and stress, you know. You need to release your mind and be with people and network that way, you know? ... My journey through recovery is that I've gotten the right connections, and I have a social network, and I have support, and

that's important in recovery... The groups that are connected in the community, being a part of the community that you live in, you know, that's key there. (#45)

Speaking of travelling, hiking, sports, girl scouts/camping, and gourmet cooking, these are "important to involve yourself in something that evokes positive emotions. It keeps your mind sharp and keeps you socially engaged with others. They're important for a well-rounded life... It's definitely a component of connection with active leisure. They give your life more depth and color" (#14), implying the role of leisure in promoting connectedness to self. In addition, inspiration can result from helping others and being around and connecting with "positive" people: "For fun, I help people out because I can see some of myself in them—feed the homeless and donate clothes... Going to groups, being around positive people, not negative—they inspire me to keep me glowing" (#32).

Another way to promote a connected life through leisure is via spirituality: "I go for walks for my spirituality, express my spirituality. I like to see Mother Nature: the trees, the pond, the bushes, the birds, the squirrel, and the sky—it's all connected" (#63). The notion of a "spiritual facet" was introduced: "Leisure activities are integral. These include a spiritual facet where you have some kind of connection to something that involves a spiritual connect there" (#14). Another individual spoke about "spiritual leisure":

I go to church, a lot of spiritual leisure. That makes me very happy, helping others. If I can help somebody today, then I'm happy. I feel as though I'm very important... What makes me happy gives me purpose, gives me something to do, gives me a 'why am I don't this,' and I know why I'm doing it, to help somebody. (#11)

Referring to the congregation of the synagogue and volunteer work at church, "spirituality is important for me because I can reach to my higher power when I'm in the synagogue. I can worship together with the congregation of the synagogue. I get involve in volunteer work... It's like a comfortable feeling that you are wanted there. People won't criticize you for who you are" (#68).

In addition, culturally contextualized notion of spirituality was noted, "I like the spiritual life, give me out of stress... I like to play music, that's in my culture. We listen to reggaeton, salsa, merengue, bachata, some cultural" (#52). Another cultural aspect mentioned was related to language, spirituality, and leisure:

I live around a lot of Chinese people, so church is Chinese, so I can have language, my language and spirituality so I feel not so lonely and not so isolated. It's good... I volunteer to teach few people Chinese, yea, very meaningful to me... Church helps, you know, leisure helps me concentrate on leisure time, so I won't only by myself, thinking of the past, hurting time... Yea, nice things, happy people, confident people, you more happy. (#69)

Finally, as a "spiritual person," another individual talked about his love of "the outdoor activities—I do love to be outdoors. The natural world is a constant source of joy for me. It's a real good counterbalance to indoor activity. Well, I am a spiritual person. Gardening is a kind of existential prayer. It's my way of celebrating life in its most basic form" (#42).

Discovered life. Another key theme involves the role of leisure in making one's life meaningful through promoting self-discovery or self-identity. In particular, creative forms of leisure were often mentioned: "Creativity is a driving force and a big outlet for me. I like to write, I pick up a guitar and I'll play. That's always self-discovery in its own rite. It comes from inside you

somewhere, so you're discovering something new every time" (#41). This self-discovery through leisure was further commented by another participant: "sewing, crocheting, knitting, and cooking—my favorite past times. For one, I'm learning more about me on a daily basis. Two, I'm actually working on things in my life" (#35). In addition, seeing leisure as a "gratifying" activity, its connection to recovery, identity, and "well-rounded" life was described:

In my case, recovery means a human being finding his identity, finding his identity in mental illness. A true human being with his compassion and inspire people all over.... Leisure is very gratifying, yea... Well, it [leisure] helps me socially because I can not only advocate, and it just helps me socially and it helps me to be broad-minded through reading and my involvement in the church... By writing poetry, I find my identity. I know that I can achieve something. It inspires me. It stimulates me. It broadens my mind. By writing these poems, I feel like I contribute to this world and make it a happier world by my poems. I feel I'm a person with compassion and I am starting to feel well-rounded. (#72)

This feeling of a "well-rounded" life illustrated extension of personal discovery to more global discovery, contextualized within a "happier world." Furthermore, more comments were made concerning positive self-identity, rather than being identified as mentally ill, again, as a way to be connected with "the real world": "When I do arts and crafts and collages, they make me feel like I'm me, not a schizoaffective freak. It makes you dream about pretty things that you want to do. It makes me feel connected with others and it keeps me in tact of the real world" (#38). Self-expression is another related benefit, for example, through painting, as a way to promote personal discovery: "I like to paint. It's a whole lot of different colors, but every color that's in there has the reason why that color is there. Every one of those colors is one of my emotions; it's what I'm feeling" (#35). Speaking of helping homeless people, another participant mentioned about personal development (discovered life), "When I volunteer, I realize that I'm important; that gives me good hope that I can do it... You're never too old to learn. And I'm still learning from other people because I take the negative out and leave the positive in" (#32).

Hopeful and empowered life. A number of people spoke about the role of leisure in making one's life more hopeful and empowered, by showing a sense of strength, as another way of making one's life more meaningful. Referring to reading, walking, being with people, and "fixing up my apartment," "they make my life meaningful because they contribute to my full potential. They make me feel better about myself and give me the strength to keep on going" (#1). "A sense of meaning" can be gained from going on "different trips," "socializing with friends," taking a walk, going to church, reading books, and participating in a "mural arts program," because these "let me know that I could do those things! It gives me good self-esteem, hope, and encouragement that I can do that" (#10).

Contribution of leisure to generating hope and empowerment as a way to make one's life meaningful was further elaborated:

A lot of the leisure stuff they do stop me from being depressed—reading, writing, listening to music, playing with my daughters—all these play a major part in my recovery so I don't have to suffer from my depression... That's definitely important; it's definitely empowerment to me because you always hope for a better life, better than what your mind state is at. (#12)

It was added that: "I'm an avid reader and the church activities and stuff like that—it does make me feel better. Because you can be more active, it keeps you motivated more; it makes you

more willing to do more. It gives you more hope than if you're just laying around" (#56). The following quotes further capture the role of creative leisure in enhancing a sense of hope and empowerment as a process of meaning-making:

Leisure is important to me. Arts and crafts, I like doing collages. Because you put pretty pictures on there and it makes you dream, dream about pretty things that you want to do... and you need to have your space... Things that I dream about having, and things that I enjoy, so I always like to see things that I could enjoy, so that's why I put it on paper... Because it gives you goals, it gives you that good spirit around you. Good vibrations around you. A good presence... Painting is enjoyable and meaningful leisure... I get empowerment and hope. (#38)

Speaking of poetry, church activities, and walking and nature, these are considered a source of "strengths" by another participant:

Leisure helps you. Leisure stimulates you and helps you get through this recovery process. Leisure gives me strength... It makes me stronger... I'm acquiring self-esteem by going through what I'm doing. Life isn't always easy sometimes, you know, but again, it makes you stronger. I'm full of hope and empowerment. I know what hope is. I have hope. And I can give to generate hope to other people. (#72)

Overarching Theme: Inspiration toward an Engaged Life through Leisure

Supported by several key themes of meaning-making through leisure described above, an overarching meaning-making theme emerged from this study seems to be inspiration toward an engaged life through leisure. Leisure provides a "space" (#35 & 38) or "outlet" (#14 & 41) to pursue opportunities for an engaged life personally, socially, and spiritually. For example, as described earlier, one participant spoke of travelling, hiking, sports, and Girl Scouts/camping that are "important to involve in something that keeps you socially engaged with others" (#14). Also, identifying himself as "a spiritual person," another participant's joy of "gardening" was seen as an "existential prayer" through spiritual engagement (#42). Exemplified by the participants' illustrations, leisure provides various opportunities for active engagement in life. Specifically, through such engagement, leisure gives "strength" (#1, #10), "peace of mind" (#27, #38), "inspiration" (#32, #72), and "more depth and color" (#14) to one's life and makes it more "well-rounded" (#14, #72).

To further support leisure's contributions to an engaged life, more quotes are highlighted as follows. First, striving to achieve goals to "better myself" was noted as a way to show personal motivation and aspiration toward a more engaged life:

Leisure activities, it's important to me because I'm more into me. That's what makes it good. I do what I got to do for me knowing that I can get done what I want to get done by doing what I got to do so I can reach the goal, you know? Now I feel more like I'm a leader and I make my own decisions on things, and I kind of like to do things by myself. I feel good about it because I get them done ... If I do it my way, it's going to work for me and accomplish what you're looking for. I got to believe in myself, I got to identify myself... Find a comfort zone without having to go back to the negative... My goal is to better myself, you know? (#27)

The maintenance of active living through leisure engagement was mentioned as an important way to strive to achieve goals. Speaking of activities such as "reading, writing, sewing, crocheting, knitting, and making things like cooking," it was commented that "when you make

goals for yourself and you achieve those goals, you do everything you can to strive, so you keep making goals and you keep reaching for what you want. That's the other part of active living" (#35). Likewise, the importance of having a "productive" and "constructive" life was described as another way to demonstrate personal aspiration for an engaged life. Referring to spending time at the public library, "a lot of walking in my neighborhood," reading books such as "history books," and getting "some exercise," "I feel like my days are more productive, like I accomplished something, like I did something positive, constructive that day. Puts my mind at ease. Makes me feel better about myself as a person" (#70). For another, feeling productive and engaged was derived from voluntarily helping to fix cars at an automotive garage: "I go there and help because it gives me, like a vocational thing, learning something, keeping me from walking up and down the streets doing nothing. So it's like 'training' and a place where I help out" (#27).

Even being raised in a "dysfunctional family," recovery from mental illness is a possibility, which highlights personal inspiration for a more positive, engaged life: "My recovery comes a long way from homelessness, addiction, recovery from the loss of a long-term relationship. Life is good! Recovery is a never-ending kaleidoscope of life. As long as you're alive, you're in it" (#6). For that person, leisure was perceived as "curiously interesting" that provides a "stable," "comfortable," (#6) and a positive space to stay on a positive, engaged life. For example, speaking of playing with and taking care of "my pet, Miss Fat Boy:"

It [leisure] is my recovery. It's not the same types of activities that I was doing when I was drunk or getting high. Recovery to me is a stable environment. It [leisure] is a stable environment to me. A stable environment is some place I feel comfortable and empowered to get my needs met... It has to be interesting, needing activities and things to do that are curiously interesting. (#6)

This quote showed that once leisure is perceived as "interesting," this can provide a "stable environment" to satisfy the needs for feeling comfortable and empowered by promoting personal inspiration for a positive, engaged life.

Consequently, through actively engaging in life, advocating for self, and recognizing personal abilities and potentials, one can succeed in personal "journey to recovery":

It's very important for me to be active on a daily basis. I feel more energetic when I'm active and doing something and specially things that I like to do, like walking, going to the restaurants, attending cultural events, visiting art museums, playing dominos and being involved with the community... This [leisure] is part of my daily activities, you know, and it helps me in every aspect... It [recovery] is being an advocacy for myself, advocate for my rights... It has to be a balance in everything in order for a person to be successful in their recovery... Knowing about myself and my abilities and my potential—that really helps me to continue my journey to recovery. (#86)

Finally, comments were made on the role of leisure in promoting a feeling of strengths and accomplishments:

Read the Holy Bible. It gave me a sense of peace. I feel with my illnesses an everyday commitment to reading the bible, gives me a divine peace within myself, became spiritually stronger, and how I challenged my mental illness. I feel like a captain of a great ship, sending a course to a great land.... I looked back into this week and I gave me a sense of amazement. I mean this. I feel a sense of achievement. I mean this. Writing the events in my journal and truly accomplishing my goal! (#72)

This person's observation was based on his experiences with church activities, poetry, walking through the park to immerse within nature, and spending fun time with an alumni support group. All of these leisure activities provided opportunities for an engaged life personally, socially, and spiritually.

Another important finding from this study was that our participants spoke about the possibility of deriving multiple meanings from a single experience, as well as the potential interconnectedness of the meaning themes identified. For example, comments were made to describe the role of creative activities (i.e., arts, crafts, and collages) in promoting a discovered and connected life: "When I do arts and crafts and collages, they make me feel like I'm me, not a schizoaffective freak. It makes you dream about pretty things that you want to do. It makes me feel connected with others and it keeps me in tact of the real world" (#38). Another example was the role of poetry, church activities, and walking through nature in promoting a connected, discovered, and hopeful/empowered life as the following comment spoke to the contribution of these activities to enhancing hope, empowerment, and self-esteem (i.e., self-discovery), and transferring hope to other people (i.e., connection): "Leisure gives me strength. It makes me stronger. In doing all this, I'm getting self-esteem. I'm full of hope and empowerment. And I can give to generate hope to other people" (#72).

Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, this study with participants who live with mental illness highlighted a significant meaning-making role of leisure through a variety of activities. Their perspectives helped identify in what ways and how leisure pursuits can contribute to making one's life more meaningful among community-dwelling adults with mental illness. As described in the results section, several key themes of leisure meaning-making were identified including the role of leisure in promoting: (a) a joyful life, (b) a composed life, (c) a connected life (e.g., socially, spiritually), (d) a discovered life, and (e) a hopeful and empowered life. Supported and contextualized by these specific themes, an overarching leisure meaning-making theme, which emerged from this study, is inspiration for an engaged life. The findings suggest that leisure can provide a safe, stable, and meaningful space/environment where individuals are inspired to be actively engaged in life, achieve their goals (e.g., personal, social, and spiritual), and celebrate their talents and accomplishments. As highlighted in this paper, the pathways and milestones for achieving these goals showed the strengths and abilities of individuals with mental illness, while actively engaging in leisure offered various opportunities for doing so and for making their lives more meaningful.

The findings of this study are in line with the literature on meaning-making through leisure. Lloyd et al. (2007) noted that leisure participation can be a major source of joy/enjoyment and provide meaning and purpose in the lives of persons recovering from mental illness, while Hutchinson and Nimrod's (2012) study that examined the role of leisure in successful aging by older adults with chronic health conditions identified the pursuit of an enjoyable/joyful life as a key theme. Also, the role of leisure in promoting a composed, focused, and collected life is a key function of leisure as diversionary activities, described by Kleiber, Reel, and Hutchinson's (2008) paper on the relevance of leisure to adjustment to disability. In addition, the role of leisure in enhancing a discovered life through promoting self-identity or self-expression is recognized as an essential function of leisure as a meaning-making activity in studies of community-dwelling elders with dementia (Phinney et al., 2007), creative leisure as a means for healing (Hegarty & Plucker, 2012), and others (Iwasaki, 2008; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; Porter et al., 2011). Furthermore, a sense of strength is a central aspect of hope and empowerment as a way of meaning-

making, highlighted by Wensley and Slade's (2012) phenomenological study of walking (i.e., specifically, achievement from a challenge) and Iwasaki's (2008) discussion on the role of leisure in meaning-making from cross-cultural perspectives.

The significance of connectedness was highlighted in the current study, and it is also a prevalent theme in other leisure research (Iwasaki, 2008; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; Phinney et al., 2007; Porter et al., 2011; Wensley & Slade, 2012). Chun and Lee's study (2010), for example, discussed the role of leisure in the experience of posttraumatic growth for people with spinal cord injury, specifically for building companionship and meaningful relationships through leisure. More specifically relevant to the target population of the present study, Iwasaki, Coyle, and Shank's framework highlighted the role of leisure in meaning-making by promoting personal identity and spirituality, harmony and social connections, effective coping and healing, and human development for persons with mental illness. Furthermore, Davidson et al.'s international study with individuals recovering from mental illness emphasized the role of leisure in giving meaning and purpose to the person's life. Particularly noted was the role of leisure in promoting enjoyment/pleasure, connectedness/belonging, feeling composed/collected, and self-identity/self-expression/self-worth. Previous analyses of the meaning of recovery and the role of actively engaged leisure among our study participants concurred with Davidson et al.'s study findings (Shank, Iwasaki, Coyle, & Messina, *in press*).

One of the unique contributions of our study was that it provided illustrations of lived experiences showing not only the possibility of deriving multiple meanings from a single experience, but also the potential interconnectedness of the meaning themes identified. For example, the participants' descriptions included the role of creative activities (i.e., arts, crafts, and collages) in promoting a discovered and connected life, as well as the role of poetry, church activities, and walking through nature in promoting a connected, discovered, and hopeful/empowered life.

More broadly, inspiration for an engaged life through leisure, identified as an overarching theme from our study, resonates with the liberating and healing effects of leisure (Deschenes, 2011; Mount, Boston, & Cohen, 2007; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Specifically, Deschenes recognized leisure as a freeing source for the experiencing of the infinite dimension. This function was coined as the "liberating effects of leisure," in which leisure is seen as a means of an engaged life and meaning-making that can promote healing and personal development, especially for persons with significant life difficulties and personal limitations. In addition, Mount et al.'s (2007) study with persons with life-threatening illness showed an important role of being engaged in leisure activities such as art, nature-based, music, and sports in meaning-making as a primary source for "healing connections" and life quality. Furthermore, Stuckey and Nobel's comprehensive review paper emphasized contributions of the engagement in artistic and creative activities to meaning-making and healing. Specifically highlighted were the effects of music engagement, visual arts therapy, movement-based creative expression, and expressive writing on healing from negative events.

Importantly, our findings about the overarching theme on the role of leisure in promoting a more inspired and engaged life are a unique, original contribution of our study. To address the issue of significant stigma, marginalization, and social exclusion often experienced by persons with mental illness, our research process respectfully gave voices to our study participants. Based on their lived experiences, they convincingly articulated that leisure gives "strength," "peace of mind," "inspiration," and "more depth and color" to one's life and makes it more "well-rounded," as a meaningful way to be more actively engaged in life.

The limitations of this qualitative study, however, need to be considered for interpreting the findings. These include an exploratory nature of the study, a small sample size, and limited generalizability. Despite these limitations, however, our study has provided richly nuanced insights into the various ways in which leisure can contribute to meaning-making or making one's life more meaningful, by respectfully acknowledging the diversity of community citizens. Community-dwelling adults with mental illness represent a significant population group who are often socially excluded, marginalized, and stigmatized, and in need of greater attention and support.

A meaning-making role of leisure has important implications from both conceptual and practical perspectives. First, this area of research seems to help advance the field of leisure sciences, considering an increasing emphasis on "positiveness" in the social sciences. For example, Freire's (2013) recent book extends positive psychology by "embedding leisure into the positive science field," stressing the significance of meaning-making that extends from individuals and subjective experiences to social worlds. Indeed, our study findings described an extension of personal leisure experiences to social, spiritual, and global (e.g., linking to "the real world" and "a happier world") experiences through leisure as a way of, or a context for, meaning-making. As one of the contributors to Freire's edited book, Stebbins focuses on the role of serious leisure to illustrate the centrality of leisure for the study of "positiveness" in the social sciences because leisure activities can lead to a worthwhile, meaningful existence.

Second, contributions of leisure to meaning-making and making one's life meaningful have practical implications. Leisure-based intervention including therapeutic recreation would benefit greatly from more systematically integrating the purposeful use of leisure in promoting meaning-making and related benefits. Along with the growing literature on meaning-making toward effective coping and healing (e.g., Mount et al., 2007; Park, 2010; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010), new knowledge gained from rigorous research on meaning-making through leisure for people, including those who deal with a variety of life's challenges (e.g., poverty, disabilities, mental health issues, social exclusion), can provide evidence-based recommendations for developing effective interventions for better supporting those individuals. Our research has provided some useful information to help achieve this important goal, specifically for community-dwelling adults with mental illness. For example, the overarching theme and its specific themes identified in this study, along with its theme descriptions and illustrations, may be used to inform the development of a meaning-oriented leisure intervention for people with mental illness.

Finally, one cautionary note is that the findings reported in this paper might be unique or specific to people living with mental illness perhaps due to unique experiences of being socially excluded, stigmatized, and living with illness symptoms. As a constructive way to address these challenging experiences, the role of leisure in meaning-making seems especially important for those stigmatized/marginalized population groups from a practical perspective. Further research on meaning-making through leisure is needed to provide evidence for its effects on adjustment to challenging, stressful, or even traumatic life experiences, including meaning-based coping, healing, and adaptation to life's challenges.

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