

4

*Preliminary Exploration of Creative Expressions of Ikigai*

*Pninit Russo-Netzer*

**Abstract**

The concept of ikigai is still relatively new in the West; yet it has already succeeded in drawing attention as a unique and potentially key predictor of physical and psychological wellbeing. Given its multidimensional nature and the profound ideas it encapsulates regarding the life worth living, it may require not only a cross-disciplinary approach but also a multimethod one to fully understand. Through the theoretical perspectives of positive psychology and meaning in life, this chapter aims at complementing the emerging contribution of large-scale and longitudinal studies with a “bottom-up” qualitative understanding of how ikigai is experienced and expressed. This chapter will also point to the potential benefits of exploring individuals' experiences of ikigai, using creative methods, given that it is a personal, phenomenological pillar of human experience which is often challenging to capture verbally. Insights from this chapter may inform empirical and practical implications for further development of therapeutic, organisational, and educational interventions.

**Keywords:** Ikigai; Meaning in life; Qualitative methods; Auto-photography

*"What people actually need is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of them. What they need is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by them."  
(Frankl, 1963, p. 166)*

## **Introduction**

While the Japanese concept of ikigai is gaining increased attention through popular media and publications, such as the book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (García, Miralles, & Cleary, 2017) and *The Little Book of Ikigai: The Secret Japanese Way to Live a Happy and Long Life* (Mogi, 2017), empirical research into the concept is still limited and rather sparse in the West. Conceptually, it has been defined as a sense of 'a life worth living' (Sone et al., 2008), having 'purpose in life' (Mori et al., 2017), the 'reason for living' or 'the reason for which you wake up in the morning' (Mathews, 1996), and the 'feeling of being alive' or 'individual motivation for living' (Hasegawa et al., 2001). The broad range of definitions and inconsistencies in the conceptualisations adopted to describe and measure ikigai is an indication of its complexity and multidimensionality. Much like the overall construct of *meaning in life* (MIL), the multifaceted nature of which poses a conceptual and empirical challenge (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of what ikigai means is needed. Furthermore, the concept of ikigai has additional layers of meaning that cannot be fully captured in English (e.g., Lomas, 2016) in the absence of an equivalent word in Western cultures (e.g., Shibata, 1998). Along these lines, Christopher Peterson (2008) concludes: "Ikigai is a good reminder to positive psychologists in the United States that our science should not simply be an export business. There are lessons to be learned in all cultures about what makes life worth living, and no language has a monopoly on the vocabulary for describing the good life" (para. 2).

Given that the meaning of ikigai can vary depending on how each individual perceives it (Demura et al., 2005), a multi-perspective and cross-cultural approach to the study of human experience (Delle Fave et al., 2011) is especially useful to better understand the breadth and depth of this concept. In line with the importance of considering the value of a person-centred phenomenological approach (Wong, 2016) of giving a human face and voice to abstractions, theoretical definitions, and categories, this chapter aims to complement the emerging contribution of large-scale studies with a "bottom-up" understanding of how ikigai is experienced, perceived, and expressed. Because ikigai is a personal, phenomenological pillar of human experience that is often challenging to capture verbally,

this chapter will also include examples of photos and creative writing illustrating individuals' experiences of ikigai.

### **Ikigai and Human Flourishing: A Meeting Point between Perspectives**

Beginning with the distinction between *shiwase*, a term more related to happiness in Japanese, and *ikigai*, which refers more to an individual's sense of personal values and sense of worth (cf. Kono & Walker, 2020; Kumano, 2018), increased empirical attention has been given to the construct of ikigai in several disciplines over the last two decades, particularly within the frameworks of healthcare, positive psychology, and preventative medicine (Fido et al., 2020). Recently, attempts have been made to more closely connect this concept to positive psychological terms of *quality of life* and *wellbeing*. More specifically, ikigai has been likened to *eudaimonic wellbeing* (Kumano, 2018; Lomas, 2016), an area which has been relatively underexplored compared with its *hedonic* counterpart (Huta & Waterman, 2014). Western empirical and philosophical literature on wellbeing mostly refers to these two basic forms (Friedman, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ryff et al., 2004; Waterman, 1993), both of which are fundamental to human flourishing. Although both theoretically and empirically distinct (e.g., Huta & Ryan, 2010), they are considered to have complementary functions (Huta, 2016). Hedonia involves pursuing happiness, positive affect, and pleasure, while avoiding negative affect and pain (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan et al., 2008). Eudaimonia, on the other hand, supports the idea that wellbeing is achieved when one lives in accordance with their "true self," which at the individual level includes experiencing self-actualisation, meaning, virtuous purpose and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff et al., 2004; Waterman, 1993), and commitment to shared goals and values at the social level (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000).

The hedonic and eudaimonic types of wellbeing represent two different and independent approaches to life-pursuits and goals, but are not mutually exclusive, and each is essential in its own manner (Huta, 2016). Put simply, hedonia addresses more fundamental and immediate needs, while eudaimonia is considered a sort of "higher pleasure" (Seligman, 2002), as it enables individuals to develop their potential and address values, virtue, and vision (Huta, 2016; Steger et al., 2011). Pursuing hedonia is generally related to personal wellbeing, whereas the pursuit of eudaimonia is associated with both personal wellbeing and caring that goes beyond self-interest (e.g., Huta & Ryan, 2010; Peterson et al., 2005). In a similar manner to eudaimonia, having a sense of ikigai has been found to involve actions and pursuits related to

fulfilment of one's values, life's purpose and meaning, which entail efforts and future-orientation (Kumano, 2018). Such association between Western conceptualisations of MIL and ikigai is also evident in Martela and Steger's (2016) three dimensions of MIL, where significance, "the worthwhileness and value of one's life," is described as "directly connected to the Japanese notion of ikigai" (p. 535).

Although still in its infancy, large-scale empirical research, including longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, have already indicated the importance of ikigai to physical and psychological wellbeing, and also as a protective factor in mortality (e.g., Koizumi et al., 2008; Mori et al., 2017; Murata et al., 2006; Tanno et al., 2009; Sone et al., 2008; Weiss et al., 2005). Yet, despite these promising findings, inconsistencies in the conceptualisations and measurement of the construct reflect a key limitation (Fido et al., 2020).

Such concerns have also been raised when exploring Western concepts related to ikigai such as MIL, for example, that the lack of context and content regarding what presence and search for meaning constitute leaves these concepts rather abstract (e.g., Wong, 2014) and subject to intuitive judgments regarding what they mean on a personal level and how they align with individuals' lives (George & Park, 2016). For example, emerging evidence that supports the relevance of context to better understand people's experiences has shown that while the search for meaning was negatively related to the presence of meaning among U.S. participants, it was positively related to the presence of meaning among Japanese participants (Steger et al., 2008). Similarly, individuals in collectivist cultures tend to prioritise goals in their lives that take the larger community into account and are attuned to others, while people in individualist societies tend to emphasise more personal goals and preferences (e.g., King & Watkins, 2012). Initial evidence for such individual and cultural differences can be found in ikigai research as well. For example, Mathews (1996) used an anthropological approach to the exploration of ikigai as experienced by both Japanese and Americans through interviews and found distinct mechanisms. In as the more collectivist culture of Japan, commitment to groups and communities was more dominant in their experience of ikigai, whereas for more individualistic culture such of the U.S., self-actualisation emerged as more salient (Mathews, 1996).

Beyond specific cultural differences, socio-historical context may also play a role in how individuals understand and experience ikigai and its role in their lives. The contemporary Western socio-cultural context is complex, with pluralist and postmodern influences, and this has challenged existing processes of continuity, socialisation, and certainty, as well as the transmission of traditional patterns (Buxant et al., 2010). The gradual weakening of traditional

structures, the “disembedding of social institutions” (Giddens, 1991; pp, 16-21) and the decline in the moral authority of religion (Cushman, 1990) have left people more alienated and exposed than before. The contemporary Western differentiation into a multitude of subspecialties in medicine and psychology dismantles individuals and human life into components and ingredients, allowing scientifically control and accurate predictions. A by-product of this approach is that it appears to yield a “hunger to be understood as a whole person ... the desire to be understood and treated not as a liver, or a depression, or an addiction but as a complete and integrated person” (Miller & Thoresen, 1999, p. 10). Against this background, a closer investigation of individual perceptions and experiences may provide a more holistic, realistic, and richer understanding of the multidimensional and complex notion of ikigai.

### **Preliminary Creative Exploration of Ikigai**

Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the potential benefits of involving the arts to enrich the understanding and cultivation of wellbeing and human flourishing (e.g., Conner et al., 2017; Darewych & Bowers, 2018; Forgeard & Eichner, 2014; Lomas, 2016; Ryff, 2018), as well as in other fields such as medicine and public health (e.g., Crawford et al., 2015; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). For example, arts activities have been suggested to contribute to the expression of gratitude (Owens & Patterson, 2013) and reinforce positive emotions (Kurtz & Lyubomirsky, 2013).

The burgeoning research on MIL, its sources, and its role in human functioning, has relied mostly on the use of self-report quantitative questionnaires. However, MIL is “intuitively a personal, phenomenological pillar of human experience” (Steger et al., 2013, p. 530), and so understanding the sources of MIL calls for a complementary, non-verbal approach (Steger et al., 2013; 2014). In this way it is similar to the concept of spirituality, which is also challenging to capture or express in words, and requires a different approach that involves visual symbols and/or metaphors to explore sacred experiences (e.g., Pargament, 2013).

Such an approach may be especially relevant to the study of ikigai, which represents an amalgam of abstracts and often ineffable concepts such as meaning, significance, self-transcendence, and purpose. Thus, it is important to gain a richer understanding of what ikigai means for people according to their own individual perspectives. In line with preliminary attempts to utilise such methodologies to elicit information about individuals' experiences (e.g., Gube, 2021; Johnsen et al., 2008; Steger et al., 2013), this section outlines a creative approach to the exploration of ikigai experiences that can inform a more sensitive and nuanced

understanding of the concept, as well as new instruments for use in its measurement and interventions to promote it.

### ***Experiential Exercise: Methods and Insights***

Over the past six years, approximately 100 Israeli adults have participated in various logotherapy (Meaning-oriented psychotherapy) training groups. The participants came from a broad range of educational, occupational, and organisational backgrounds (e.g., psychotherapy, healthcare, military etc.) and were of various ages ranging from 27 to 75. They were instructed to take a picture or to document an image of their choice that best captured (symbolically or metaphorically) their ikigai as they understood and experienced it and to provide a corresponding title that described the meaning of it to them. The following are the detailed instructions that were given to the participants:

- *What does ikigai mean to you?*
- *If you had to find a metaphor for it, what would it be?*
- *Please take some time to reflect on this question, and try to draw, take a picture, or find an image, that captures or represents what ikigai means to you.*
- *Now, having found something, which title would you give this image that represents its meaning to you?*

The process of data analysis was spiral and circular, engaging both within-case analysis of each account as a stand-alone entity and cross-case comparisons to identify common experiences (Straus & Corbin, 1990) synergistically (Ayres et al., 2003). Given that there is no single guideline for analysing photographic data (Harper, 1986), and since the data was extracted as part of an experiential learning process rather than a planned research design, an “open coding” method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify patterns and to determine the “meaning units” (Giorgi, 1975) in the participants' experiences. This was used to create descriptive categories of basic themes to construct an initial flexible framework for further analysis. The cyclic process of abstraction enabled shared essential ideas and meanings of the participants' lived experience of ikigai to be synthesized into clustered themes representing its multidimensional manifestations. Then, an attempt was made to tie together the essential themes (Giorgi, 1975) and move from a descriptive view of the data to a congregated bigger picture with a new understanding of the participants' experiences.

Furthermore, additional open-ended questions were asked to better understand the

process of taking a picture of participants' ikigai and reflecting on its meaning for them. Specifically, participants were asked:

- *Why did you choose this particular image or picture to express your ikigai?*
- *What does it represent for you?*
- *How did you experience this process of taking a picture\finding an image?*

The next sub-section reviews some prominent categories of the participants' ikigai images, as well as excerpts from their own accounts that elaborate on the meaning they ascribed to it.

### ***Initial Findings of Participants' Experiences of Ikigai***

The initial main categories that emerged from the analysis of the images were: (1) Relationships and connections; (2) Self-development, learning and growth; (3) Connection to nature; (4) Self-transcendence: doing good, volunteering, giving to the community and the world; (5) Vitality, energy and authenticity; (6) Calling, mission in life, direction, future perspective; (7) Sense of wholeness, integration and self-alignment; and (8) Leisure activities and hobbies reflecting personal strengths and talents. The following examples from the participants' insights demonstrate some of these categories, along with their experience of the process. When asked how she chose the image of a sunrise to capture her ikigai, Anna (all names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the participants), 48 years old, recounted how the image of a sunrise served as a reminder or an anchor for her ikigai and what really mattered to her:

My ikigai image and I have chosen each other. It chose me and I chose it. From a young age, one of my nicknames was actually “Sunshine.” A big smile and yellow hair were my identifying mark. This is how people remembered me wherever I went. When I began reflecting on questions of meaning in purpose, questions that were taken for granted in my life until that point, I realised that my ikigai, my role in life, my mission, is to be a sun. The sun, for me, means an energy of light, warmth, kindness and giving... Making this image a concrete essence strengthens me and frees me from dependence in external circumstances. It's a visual reminder that my ikigai, the sunshine, is always there, unconditionally, like a backbone that holds my entire body, like a beam of light that guides someone who walks in the dark. It's enough for me to remember the photo in challenging times to feel that sense of validation again, “I know who I am and what I am doing here, in the world.” This photo reminds me of who I choose to be. It reminds

me of my sources of power and energy...

I remember a time when I didn't know how to help my dad who was laying on the shower's floor after he slipped and broke his leg. I felt a blend of helplessness and fear. "What now?" I asked myself, and then my ikigai photo came to my mind, "sunrise!" Reminded of my ikigai, I smiled, reminded of my anchor, my purpose. I dressed my dad, while distracting him by telling him a joke. It helped me to regain my composure. That photo which came to my consciousness reminded me who I am and what I choose to bring to a given situation.



**Figure 1.** Anna's ikigai: Sunrise.

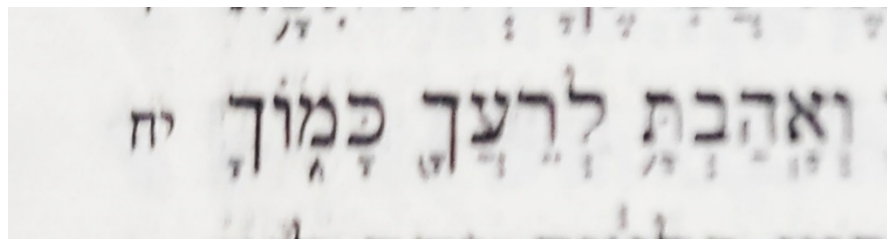
David, a 33-year-old male, chose to take a photograph of the verse "Love thy neighbor as thyself" from the Bible (the Torah) as his ikigai, and described it as follows:

I chose this to represent my ikigai, as it symbolises for me the source and essence of my being. Rabbi Akiva indicated that this is the central commandment of the Torah, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," thus I chose to take a photo of the biblical script which reminds me of something that is deeply rooted in tradition and heritage, a commandment that can be translated to the endless situations in everyday life. Therefore, it is always relevant to me, in each and every moment of life... This quote may be perceived as its verbal description, but it's beyond that. It is actually the highest value for me, a value which is short and pretty simple to remember but is essentially a life-work in order to fulfil it. You need to be capable of loving yourself first, truly and



unconditionally, with all of your flaws and imperfections, in order to be capable of really loving thy neighbor, others, as yourself...

I think that when it comes to ikigai, the advantage of a photo over a verbal description or definition is that I can use that photo as a daily reminder in different places in my environment. It can be kept on my keychain, on my mobile background, my computer screensaver, framed in my office or next to my bed, etc., and it helps me to reconnect to my inner “charger,” which cannot be done with merely a verbal description.



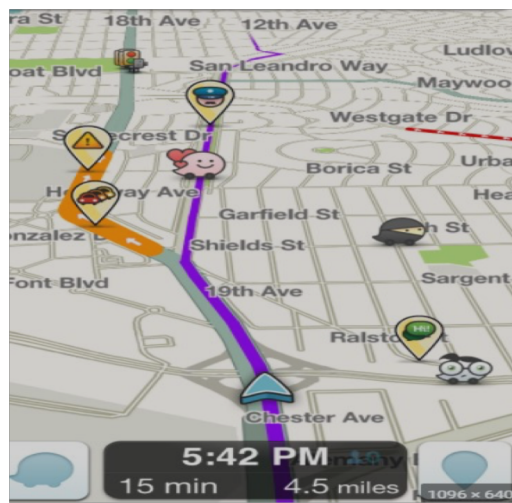
**Figure 2.** David's ikigai: The verse “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Tali, a 48-year-old woman, chose to photograph her GPS (Waze) navigation system as her ikigai, and described it as follows:

A GPS is a system that serves to accurately identify a specific location and to plan a route to navigate the way to one's destination. And if a person goes the wrong way, no worries, we can recalculate the route. When I tried to “connect the dots” of my life to define my own ikigai, the essence of direction and guidance emerged. From a young age I have always loved guiding people, so that metaphor felt most accurate for who I am and what I do, my ikigai. I feel that it's important that people will choose their way for themselves just like they choose their destination and routes in the GPS system. I can be there to illuminate their way with a flashlight, just like the GPS directs and guides people to get back on the track and recalculate if they deviate or make a mistake...

I think that for me, using a photo to explain what ikigai means is very important. It can shed light to illuminate ingredients that are sometimes missing in our vocabulary. For example, if someone chooses a metaphor of a boat, it's important which photo he

or she will choose to best capture what they mean – will it be a speedboat? A fishing boat? A rescue boat? A kayak? A canoe? A pedal boat? The specific photo can enable a more precise articulation of the essence, because each chosen image or photo is unique. The photo enables us to transmit elements that the word itself cannot reflect, such as a shape, a colour, etc. Also, giving it a title enables us to explain the personal meaning and interpretation of the more intuitive choice of the photo. The combination between a photo and a title is very strong, as it can clarify potential gaps between what we see and what we say. It allows for a person's unique self-expression of one's voice and identity.



**Figure 3.** Tali's ikigai: GPS.

Yael, a 50-year-old woman, shared her experience of finding an image of a butterfly to capture her ikigai:

My ikigai is a butterfly. The journey to finding it was short and long at the same time. A journey of a lifetime, the logotherapy studies, learning about ikigai, and one magical moment of realisation. There, I found it. Like a funnel that gradually got more focused and more crystallised until that moment. My ikigai – “Nice to meet you, I'm Yael, I've been searching for you my entire life” ... When I was asked to identify a moment when I was most connected to myself, and to imagine the time, place and how I felt in that moment, I went back to Manhattan, New York, eight years earlier. It's not the first time I've visited there, but it was the first time I was there alone. I had just finished a complicated year of treatment for cancer and I decided to travel with myself to celebrate my victory and to process what I had been through. I wandered the streets

with a small backpack and every once in a while, I stopped and just wrote down whatever came to my mind. In those pauses I just let my thoughts fly and wrote down anything that in my 37 years before the disease I hadn't dared to. I reminded myself who I am and what's important to me. So, when given the exercise, I got back to that moment, where everything felt so accurate. And then, a butterfly came to my mind. A clear visual picture of an orange butterfly. It had to be orange, I'm a redhead... and I knew that this butterfly is unique, and that it is independent and stands on its own, it's in movement and it's free. Free to be what it really is. So, I chose it just like it chose me. I just knew that it's my marker for life. An authentic life just as I want to live, where I am true to myself and am free to be me.

I guess that the saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words" has a reason. A photograph is authentic, clear, precise, and it doesn't go through thinking mechanisms and patterns that try to conceptualise and explain... it was so powerful to me that I've tattooed it on my hand, in a place which is half visible and half hidden, not obvious but still reachable in every moment I'll be able to see and feel it. A reminder. A tattoo on my skin which is clear and accurate. My ikigai.



**Figure 4.** Yael's ikigai: A butterfly, made into a tattoo.

Ori, a 55-year-old man, chose to photograph a squill plant as a symbol of his ikigai, describing it as follows:

My ikigai is squill. It symbolises the ultimate form of development and growth. Its bulb is soaked in the dry soil and unlike other flowers and plants that react to external conditions such as rain and weather, the squill grows in accordance with its innate biological clock, out of internal vitality force. It leads the way. It doesn't wait for

external conditions to allow its bloom but is influenced by its own pace and the ripening process. If I compare that to human development, it chooses to grow in areas and places that are challenging in terms of climate conditions and is willing to invest effort in creating its own unique space.

Another aspect of the squill I identify with is its roots. The squill's roots can reach to the depth of the ground in order to get to humidity, and even capable of making its own way through narrow cracks in rocks. It literally carves its way through the rocks and some argue that this is the origin for the plant's name [in Hebrew squill is called *hatzav* and to carve is *lahatzov*, a word which comes from the same root]. My ikigai combines growth out of internal force, a search for a space which allows uniqueness and also the tension which lies in extending myself to reach higher and to bloom along with the deep connection to my roots...

Ultimately, I think that ikigai is self-consciousness. We form it through our worlds of ideas, values, passions, character, and life experience. I can say that there is something very authentic, intuitive, and fundamental when we use a photo or a visual to illustrate something. The use of the brain's right hemisphere lacks rational considerations and is more able to create unique associations. It's a process of clarification, like writing a poem. The ability to summarise an idea, emotion or thought into an image, a metaphor, a rhythm, requires an accuracy of that thought or idea. This process allows a lot of associations which I think enable us to form our consciousness. When I took the picture of the squill it was clear to me that my ikigai is related to growth, development and learning, and thus it was clear to me that it should be a photo from nature, because it's a major symbol of that for me.



**Figure 5.** Ori's ikigai: Squill.

Naomi, a 38-year-old woman, chose a piece of artwork by Yoram Kupermintz to symbolise her ikigai:

The process of choosing an image was not easy for me. I didn't want to choose something banal or generic... I wanted something that I could relate to with all of my being, that I will know, feel, that “this is it.” Then, I suddenly remembered a work of art by Kupermintz, which combines the terrors of Auschwitz, the symbolic buildings, the smoke in the chimney, but also the possibility to create something new and beautiful out of it. This photo manages to trigger a great wonder and awe, but also withdraw. I was moved by the artist's capability to turn something so horrible into something so beautiful. In this case, the photo is worth much more than a thousand words. The more I looked at the photo, the more I realised that this is my ikigai. I wasn't just the granddaughter who is curious about what happened to her grandparents in the Holocaust, but much more than that.

The title I gave that photo – the verse from Psalms, “Depart from evil, and do good,” reflects my calling, my mission, to take that horrible thing that happened to them and to turn it to something good, to see the goodness in people and to always help those who are weak and oppressed. These are the values that they passed to me, in words, in actions, in my interpretation.



**Figure 6.** Naomi's ikigai: A picture by the artist Yoram Kupermintz, from the Series *Paradise* (2014).

Dana, a 55-year-old woman, took a picture of one of one of her Chinese medicine treatments with a client to reflect her ikigai:

The title I gave to this photo is “listening from the inner ear.” The idea of deep and refined listening accompanies me in my personal and professional life. The photo embodies the most clean and profound space of listening to another person, a space which originates in nothingness, a void, which enables me to fully and authentically hold and contain the person in front of me... to listen to his or her heart's pulse.

I chose this photo because it represents in a holistic way a value that means a lot to me, which is to really listen wholeheartedly to the person in front of me, to be fully present and attentive... the process of choosing an image to reflect my ikigai was very intuitive and quick. I felt that this photo captures gentleness along with assertiveness, knowing and unknowing, the silence of listening and at the noise of realisations... I feel that a picture, unlike words and verbal description, captures and embodies a magical, unique and unrepeatable moment that freezes the situation. Within that captured moment, the emotions, experiences, and the story involved in it are embedded. Each person can interpret the given picture differently, to feel certain feelings and to notice certain details, and thus becomes a participant to everything it represents, unlike a verbal description which may operate one's rational thinking, but misses the capability of participation in the feelings, emotions, and the message a picture can convey.



**Figure 7.** Dana's ikigai: Chinese medicine treatment with a client.

Rona, a 52-year-old woman, chose to take a picture of a groundsel to represent her ikigai:

I think that the use of a picture is strong because our language is limited. We can't always express and accurately define the full spectrum of emotions, feelings, thoughts and unconscious insights, so it's important to find additional ways that transcend language. One of such ways is imagination and metaphors, which allows me to find a symbol to express myself in a more precise way. Thinking of a metaphor to capture in a photo was both a challenge and a way to be more accurate with myself.

The choice of my ikigai was a part of a long personal journey of internal reflection and exploration of what I feel about my life and my mission in this world. Around the age of 50, following internal and external circumstances, I decided to pause the rat race I was living in and to reflect on the things that make my life meaningful. Over more than 30 years, I've developed in my various life domains, both personal and professional, but also experienced losses and crises, such as losing my only and beloved brother, who had a meaningful part in shaping my identity and life course. His death influenced my way of being and the way I dealt with issues of life and death. Suddenly I realised that while I was very successful in my work that I invested hours a day throughout my 30 years of career, the intensity I was in didn't allow me to pause and reflect on my life, on whether I'm on autopilot or truly fulfilling my mission and values in life...

When I contemplated my ikigai, I realised that its essence is relationships which are central to my life, my strengths and the influence I have on others, through my choices and actions. All of these are reflected in the image of spring, and more specifically in the groundsel plant which spreads its flowers to the world through the

wind. The spring reflects a season of prosperity and blossom, of new beginnings, development, optimism and creation, it reflects a sense of wholeness to me. It's also the name of one of my children, and I feel that through them I leave the most meaningful imprint. The groundsel, in its capability to spread its goodness to the world, captures all of these aspects that reflect my anchors and values – spring, new beginnings, wholeness and relationships. Following the change, I went through lately I feel that I'm more able to experience spring, to rediscover my calling in life, the reason I wake up in the morning and to be able to spread the goodness in me to others.



**Figure 8.** Rona's ikigai: A groundsel.

## Discussion

A well-known proverb says that a picture is worth a thousand words. This chapter has attempted to show the power of pictures to represent rich and multilayered concepts such as ikigai. The use of creative methods such as visual tools was found to provide “referential anchors” for individuals to convey their experiences (Hilppö et al., 2017) by providing more direct access to preverbal knowledge (Gerber et al., 2012). As Bachofen (1967) puts it, “the symbol touches all chords of the human heart at once, language is always forced to keep one thought at a time” (p. 49). The usage of images, especially photography, is gaining increased popularity in the academic world (Heng, 2016).

The growing development of visual methods in the social sciences (e.g., Banks, 2008; Hamilton, 2006; Mitchell, 2011; Pauwels, 2010; Rose, 2011; Spencer, 2011) has been suggested to reflect a rising significance of visual images in contemporary social and cultural tradition (Rose, 2014). Photographs may represent “a slice of a person’s perception at one



place and one moment in time” (Noland, 2006, p. 3), thereby allowing us to generate authentic data through the participants' own points of view. Photo-eliciting techniques allow for the emergence of new meanings and new ways of understanding (Eisner, 1991) by giving voice to participants and capturing a more holistic and context-sensitive description of a given phenomenon (Gube, 2021). Auto-photography methods provide participants with a sense of agency to use their environments and choose items and images that are significant to their identity (Phoenix, 2010), unrestricted to any specific external constraints of categories imposed by researchers (Ziller, 1990).

Given that language can shape and form the way individuals experience their reality (e.g., Gergen, 1985; Potter, 1996) and reflect layers of experience that are inaccessible to people who are unfamiliar with a specific language (Lomas, 2018), the use of non-verbal methods to explore human experience may facilitate a better glimpse into individuals' ways of being in the world independent from any specific context or culturally accepted verbal definitions. The participants' experiences described in this chapter suggest that the use of photos to express their *ikigai* allowed more direct access to richer and more complex understanding of what it means to them. The use of non-verbal methods also allowed them more flexibility to express a broad and unique integration of various dialectics and dynamic movement between worlds, rather than a single or narrow verbal definition. Another significant aspect which emerged from the participants' experiences was the concrete reminders or cues that photos provide as an anchor of continuous implementation of their deeply held intentions and values.

The preliminary main categories which emerged from this exploration demonstrate some convergence with previous research, relying mostly on verbal expressions regarding sources of meaning in life, such as the centrality of relationships, nature, achievements\work, service, and self-actualisation (e.g., Ebersole, 1998; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Schnell, 2009; Steger et al., 2013). Similarly, several empirical studies have found personal relationships to be a central source of meaning (e.g., Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). Yet, they also suggest that the uniqueness of *ikigai* lies in what appears to represent a more comprehensive and holistic experience and outlook of life. This may reflect a more experiential felt sense of embodied meaning and purpose, which complements the overall sense of having meaning in life, and the more cognitive understanding of one's sources of meaning.

Previously, I have suggested that to better elucidate meaning in life constructs, we

might need to pay attention to cognition (comprehension; “having meaning in life”), experience (“experiencing meaning in life”), and activity (“prioritising meaning in life”) (Russo-Netzer, 2018). Along these lines, ikigai may be seen as a connecting link between the three, representing a holistic sense of life's mission and purpose, as well an engagement in activities that are inherently value-congruent.

### **Concluding Remarks with an Eye Towards the Future**

Recent years have witnessed a growing sophistication in assessing meaning in life (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016) and new conceptualisations that place it within general models of wellbeing (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Keyes et al., 2002). As part of rising attention given to the empirical exploration of ikigai in particular, research indicates a connection to physical and mental wellbeing (e.g., Koizumi et al., 2008; Mori et al., 2017; Murata et al., 2006; Tanno et al., 2009). Yet, given that this knowledge is largely limited to “top-down” quantitative designs, and given the inconsistencies in the conceptualisations and measurement of ikigai (Fido et al., 2020), it is important to adopt a complementary approach to studying this multifaceted concept in greater depth, as it is understood and experienced by individuals.

Employing non-verbal methods such as auto-photography can produce more authentic data given that it allows participants to choose and record a representation of what is important to them at their own space and time (Steger et al., 2013). Photographs elucidate how individuals make sense of their values and preferences, and thus shed light on their “taken-for-granted” realities and experiences (Phoenix, 2010). In this sense, they “mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002, pp. 22–23).

A future next step may be to further develop this pilot approach with further studies that use qualitative and mixed methods, since qualitative methods can help to discover layers of human experience and richness that are less apparent in quantitative data, thus facilitating a broadened understanding of people’s perceptions, experiences and cultural factors (Delle Fave et al., 2011). The exploration of ikigai may take fluctuating pathways in a variety of patterns. Taking note of such varieties, nuances and individual differences are important as different people may view and describe their understanding of it in diverse ways. A more practical next step could involve the facilitation of small groups to allow more breadth and depth in exploring how ikigai is experienced, for example by sharing personal stories about

times when they felt most authentically themselves and embodied their ikigai. Based in these stories, the listeners in the small group could identify and explore “meaning clues” (e.g., strengths, values, and passions) that underlie the story.

As a final note, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 has triggered a wide variety of psychological crises worldwide. The disruption of routine, social distancing, long-distance learning, uncertainty, isolation, and loneliness has contributed to rising levels of mental health challenges (e.g., Czeisler et al., 2020). Increased levels of separation, fragmentation and isolation rupture individuals’ sense of purpose and value in life and often culminate in a void in individuals’ meaning systems (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013). This may further emphasise the importance of a more in-depth understanding of individuals’ subjective and complex understanding of their ikigai in particular, and life in general.

In conclusion, following the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “Behind all the things visible, there is something bigger; Everything is a path, a gate, or a window that opens up to something else,” this chapter sought to lay out a potential platform to gain insights into individuals’ understanding and experience of their ikigai through the paths or windows of metaphors and images.

## References

- Ayres, L., Kavanaugh, K., & Knafl, K. A. (2003). Within-case and across-case approaches to qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 13*(6), 871-883.
- Bachofen J. J. (1967). *Myth, religion, and mother right*. Princeton University Press.
- Banks, M. (2008). *Using visual data in qualitative research*. Sage.
- Buxant, C., Saroglou, V., & Tesser, M. (2010). Freelance spiritual seekers: Self-growth or compensatory motives? *Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 13*(2), 209–222.
- Conner, T. S., DeYoung, C. G., & Silvia, P. J. (2017). Everyday creative activity as a path to flourishing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*, 1–9.
- Crawford, P., Brown, B., Baker, C., Tischler, V., & Abrams, B. (2015). Creative practice as mutual recovery. In *Health humanities* (pp. 137-152). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crescioni, A. W., & Baumeister, R. F. (2013). The four needs for meaning, the value gap, and how (and whether) society can fill the void. In J. A. Hicks & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The experience of meaning in life* (pp. 3-15). Springer.
- Cushman, P. (1990). Why the self is empty: Toward a historically situated psychology. *American Psychologist, 45*(5), 599.
- Czeisler, M. É., Lane, R. I., Petrosky, E., Wiley, J. F., Christensen, A., Njai, R., Weaver, M. D., Robbins, R., Facer-Childs, E. R., Barger, L. K., Czeisler, C. A., Howard, M. E., & Rajaratnam, S. M. (2020). Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 69*(32), 1049-1057.
- Darewych, O. H., & Riedel Bowers, N. (2018). Positive arts interventions: creative clinical

- tools promoting psychological well-being. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 23(2), 62-69.
- Debats, D. L. (1999). Sources of meaning: An investigation of significant commitments in life. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 39(4), 30-57.
- Delle Fave, A., Brdar, I., Freire, T., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Wissing, M. P. (2011). The eudaimonic and hedonic components of happiness: Qualitative and quantitative findings. *Social Indicators Research*, 100(2), 185-207.
- Demura, S., Kobayashi, H., & Kitabayashi, T. (2005). QOL models constructed for the community-dwelling elderly with ikigai (purpose in life) as a composition factor, and the effect of habitual exercise. *Journal of Physiological Anthropology and Applied Human Science*, 24(5), 525-533.
- Ebersole, P. (1998). Types and depth of written life meanings. In T. P. Paul Wong & S. Prem Fry (Eds.), *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications* (pp. 179–191). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). What the arts taught me about education. *Art Education*, 44(5), 10-19.
- Fido, D., Kotera, Y., & Asano, K. (2020). English translation and validation of the Ikigai-9 in a UK sample. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 18(5), 1352-1359.
- Forgeard, M. J. C., & Eichner, K. V. (2014). Creativity as a target and tool for positive interventions. In A. C. Parks & S. M. Schueller (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychological interventions* (pp. 137–154). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Friedman, E. M. (2012). *Well-being, aging, and immunity*. In S. C. Segerstrom (Ed.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of psychoneuroimmunology* (pp. 37–62). Oxford University Press.
- García, H., Miralles, F., & Cleary, H. (2017). *Ikigai: The Japanese secret to a long and happy life*. Penguin Books.
- George, L. S., & Park, C. L. (2016). Meaning in life as comprehension, purpose, and mattering: Toward integration and new research questions. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(3), 205–220.
- Gerber, N., Bryl, K., Potvin, N., & Blank, C. A. (2018). Arts-based research approaches to studying mechanisms of change in the creative arts therapies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2076.
- Gerber, N., Templeton, E., Chilton, G., Liebman, M.C., Manders, E., & Shim, M. (2012). Art-based research as a pedagogical approach to studying intersubjectivity in the creative arts therapies. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health*, 3, 39–48.
- Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, 40(3), 266-275.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.
- Giorgi, A. (1975). An application of phenomenological method in psychology. *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*, 2, 82-103.
- Gube, J. (2021). Photo-eliciting technique as an integrated meaning-making practice: An introspective look at diversity, identities, and voice-giving. *Visual Studies*, 1-12.
- Hamilton, P. (Ed.). (2006). *Visual research methods*. Sage.
- Harper, D. (1986). Meaning and work: A study in photo elicitation. *Current Sociology*, 34(3), 24-46.
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 13-26.
- Hasegawa, A., Fujiwara, Y., & Hoshi, T. (2001). The review of ikigai on the relationship of

- ikigai and well-being in the elderly. *Comprehensive Urban Studies*, 75, 147-170.
- Heng, T. (2016). *Visual methods in the field: Photography for the social sciences*. Taylor & Francis.
- Hilppö, J., Lipponen, L., Kumpulainen, K., & Rajala, A. (2017). Visual tools as mediational means: A methodological investigation. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 15(4), 359–373.
- Huta, V. (2016). Eudaimonic and hedonic orientations: Theoretical considerations and research findings. In J. Vittersø (Ed.), *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being* (pp. 215–231). Springer.
- Huta, V., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). Pursuing pleasure or virtue? The differential and overlapping well-being benefits of hedonic and eudaimonic motives. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 735–762.
- Huta, V., & Waterman, A. S. (2014). Eudaimonia and its distinction from hedonia: Developing a classification and terminology for understanding conceptual and operational definitions. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 15(6), 1425–1456
- Johnsen, S., May, J., & Cloke, P. (2008). Imag(in)ing ‘homeless places’: Using auto-photography to (re)examine the geographies of homelessness. *Area*, 40(2), 194-207.
- Keyes, C. L., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C. D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82(6), 1007.
- King, R. B., & Watkins, D. A. (2012). “Socializing” achievement goal theory: The need for social goals. *Psychological Studies*, 57(1), 112-116.
- Koizumi, M., Ito, H., Kaneko, Y., & Motohashi, Y. (2008). Effect of having a sense of purpose in life on the risk of death from cardiovascular diseases. *Journal of Epidemiology*, 18, 191–196.
- Kono, S., & Walker, G. (2020). Theorizing the interpersonal aspect of ikigai (‘life worth living’) among Japanese university students: A mixed-methods approach. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 10, 101-123.
- Kumano, M. (2018). On the concept of well-being in Japan: Feeling shiawase as hedonic well-being and feeling ikigai as eudaimonic well-being. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 13(2), 419-433.
- Kurtz, J. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2013). Happiness promotion: Using mindful photography to increase positive emotion and appreciation. In J. J. Froh & A. C. Parks (Eds.), *Activities for teaching positive psychology: A guide for instructors* (pp. 133–136). American Psychological Association.
- Lomas, T. (2016). Positive art: Artistic expression and appreciation as an exemplary vehicle for flourishing. *Review of General Psychology*, 20, 171–182.
- Lomas, T. (2018). Experiential cartography and the significance of “untranslatable” words. *Theory & Psychology*, 28(4), 476-495.
- Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11, 1–15.
- Massimini, F., & Delle Fave, D. A. (2000). Individual development in a bio-cultural perspective. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 24–33.
- Mathews, G. (1996). The stuff of dreams, fading: Ikigai and the Japanese self. *Ethos*, 24(4), 718-747.
- Miller, W. R., & Thoresen, C. E. (1999). Spirituality and health. In W. R. Miller (Ed.), *Integrating spirituality into treatment* (pp. 3–18). American Psychological Association.
- Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. Sage.

- Mogi, K. (2017). *The little book of ikigai: The essential Japanese way to finding your purpose in life*. Quercus Editions Limited.
- Mori, K., Kaiho, Y., Tomata, Y., Narita, M., Tanji, F., Sugiyama, K., Sugawara, Y., & Tsuji, I. (2017). Sense of life worth living (ikigai) and incident functional disability in elderly Japanese: The Tsurugaya Project. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *95*, 62-67.
- Murata, C., Kondo, T., Tamakoshi, K., Yatsuya, H., & Toyoshima, H. (2006). Determinants of self-rated health: Could health status explain the association between self-rated health and mortality? *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *43*(3), 369-380.
- Noland, C. M. (2006). Auto-photography as research practice: Identity and self-esteem research. *Journal of Research Practice*, *2*(1), M1.
- O'Connor, K., & Chamberlain, K. (1996). Dimensions of life meaning: A qualitative investigation at mid-life. *British Journal of Psychology*, *87*(3), 461-477.
- Owens, R. L., & Patterson, M. M. (2013). Positive psychological interventions for children: A comparison of gratitude and best possible selves approaches. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, *174*(4), 403-428.
- Pargament, K. I. (Ed.). (2013). Searching for the sacred: Toward a nonreductionistic theory of spirituality. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality* (Vol. 1): *Context, theory, and research* (pp. 257-273). American Psychological Association.
- Pauwels, L. (2010). Visual sociology reframed: an analytical synthesis and discussion of visual methods in social and cultural research. *Sociological Methods and Research*, *38*(4), 545-581.
- Peterson, C. (2008, September). Ikigai and mortality: Individuals who believe their lives are worth living live longer. *Psychology Today*. <http://archive.is/m4m1J#selection-1171.0-1171.307>
- Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *6*, 25-41.
- Phoenix, C. (2010). Auto-photography in aging studies: Exploring issues of identity construction in mature bodybuilders. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *24*(3), 167-180.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. Sage.
- Rose, G. (2011). *Visual methodologies: Interpreting visual materials* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage.
- Rose, G. (2014). On the relation between 'visual research methods' and contemporary visual culture. *The Sociological Review*, *62*(1), 24-46.
- Russo-Netzer, P. (2018). Prioritizing meaning as a pathway to meaning in life and general well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *20*(6), 1863-1891.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *52*(1), 141-166.
- Ryan, R. M., Huta, V., & Deci, E. L. (2008). Living well: A self-determination theory perspective on eudaimonia. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(1), 139-170.
- Ryff, C. D. (2018). Well-being with soul: Science in pursuit of human potential. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *13*(2), 242-248.
- Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. H. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(1), 13-39.
- Ryff, C. D., Singer, B. H., & Dienberg Love, G. (2004). Positive health: Connecting well-being with biology. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, *359*(1449), 1383-1394.

- Schnell, T. (2009). The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to demographics and well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(6), 483-499.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. Free Press.
- Shibata, H. (1998) Required to the elderly. Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology-Successful aging. *World Planning, 47-52*.
- Sone, T., Nakaya, N., Ohmori, K., Shimazu, T., Higashiguchi, M., Kakizaki, M., Kikuchi, N., Kuriyama, S., & Tsuji, I. (2008). Sense of life worth living (ikigai) and mortality in Japan: Ohsaki study. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 70*, 709-715.
- Spencer, S. (2011). *Visual research methods in the social sciences: Awakening visions*. Routledge.
- Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S. (2008). Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being. *Journal of Research in Personality, 42*(1), 22-42.
- Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kesebir, S. (2011). Is a life without meaning satisfying? The moderating role of the search for meaning in satisfaction with life judgments. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(3), 173-180.
- Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2014). Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, 3*(1), 27-30.
- Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Rush, B. R., Brueske, L. A., Shin, J. Y., & Merriman, L. A. (2013). The mind's eye: A photographic method for understanding meaning in people's lives. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 530-542.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and research*. Sage.
- Stuckey, H. L., & Nobel, J. (2010). The connection between art, healing, and public health: A review of current literature. *American Journal of Public Health, 100*(2), 254-263.
- Tanno, K., Sakata, K., Ohsawa, M., Onoda, T., Itai, K., Yaegashi, Y., Tamakoshi, A., & JACC Study Group. (2009). Associations of ikigai as a positive psychological factor with all-cause mortality and cause-specific mortality among middle-aged and elderly Japanese people: Findings from the Japan collaborative cohort study. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 67*(1), 67-75.
- Waterman, A. S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64*, 678-691.
- Weiss, R. S., Bass, S. A., Heimovitz, H. K., & Oka, M. (2005). Japan's silver human resource centers and participant well-being. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 20*, 47-66.
- Wong, P. T. (2014). Viktor Frankl's meaning-seeking model and positive psychology. In A. Batthyany & P. Russo-Netzer (Eds.), *Meaning in positive and existential psychology* (pp. 149-184). Springer.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2016). Integrative meaning therapy: From logotherapy to existential positive interventions. In P. Russo-Netzer, S. Schulenberg, & A. Batthyany (Eds.), *Clinical perspectives on meaning: Positive and existential psychotherapy*. Springer.
- Ziller, R. C. (1990). *Photographing the self: Methods for observing personal orientations*. Sage.