

Ikigai: Towards a psychological understanding of a life worth living

Yasuhiro Kotera • Dean Fido

Editors

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Yasuhiro Kotera

Dr Yasuhiro Kotera is Academic Lead in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Derby. He is currently working on intervention studies and cross-cultural studies to evaluate the effects of self-compassion interventions on mental health. As a father of triplets, he is also exploring the experience of triplets' parents cross-culturally.



Dean Fido

Dr. Dean Fido is the Master's Lead for the Forensic Psychology programme taught at the University of Derby (UK). Dean's expertise bridges the areas of public perceptions of crime, mental health and wellbeing, and image-based sexual abuse (e.g., 'revenge pornography', and upskirting). These areas of interest form the basis of several international and applied projects with the aim of bringing about positive change for service users and staff. Because of this, Dean ensures that his research outputs can be understood and accessed by the general population and those they best serve.



Nicholas Kemp

Mr Nicholas Kemp is a father, husband, ikigai coach, Japanologist and solopreneur, having operated several educational and marketing businesses over the past two decades. Having lived in Japan for 10 years, Nick developed a deep fascination for and appreciation of Japanese culture. "I have had a love affair with Japan ever since I first visited the country at the age of five. Some 45 years later my relationship with Japan has never been more intimate. The older I get, the more I seem to discover how unique, beautiful and wise the culture and people of Japan are." He is the founder and head coach of Ikigai Tribe, a small community of ikigai coaches; teachers, psychologists, business coaches, empowerment coaches, university professors and trainers who serve their personal community using the ikigai concept."



Katy Chamberlain

Dr. Katy Chamberlain is a volcanologist and geochemist at the University of Derby, UK. Her research looks at where and how magma evolves in the crust prior to a volcanic eruption. This research has led her all over the world, including a 9-month postdoctoral fellowship at the Japan Agency for Marine Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC) where she developed an interest in Japanese culture and style of living.



Gulcan Garip

Dr. Gulcan Garip is Academic lead for the MSc Psychology programme at the University of Derby, a health psychologist, registered with the Health and Care Professions Council and chartered psychologist with the British Psychological Society. Her research interests include the use of psychological (e.g., finding meaning, ikigai) and behavioural strategies for improving quality of life, the influence of laughter on wellbeing, and interventions for carers of people living with long-term conditions.



Greta Kaluzeviciute

Dr. Greta Kaluzeviciute is a qualitative psychotherapy researcher, currently working as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the School of Clinical Medicine, University of Cambridge. She is also an Associate Academic in Counselling and Psychotherapy, University of Derby. Greta's work focuses on clinical and systematic case study narratives, the role and function of empathy in psychotherapy, mental wellbeing, self-compassion and psychological interventions, and determinants of poor/impaired mental health experiences. Greta is particularly passionate about drawing in findings from both research and practice in the clinical fields.



Claude-Hélène Mayer

Dr. Claude-Hélène Mayer is a full professor in Industrial and Organisational Psychology at the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa. She is further an adjunct professor (Privatdozentin) at the Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany. Her research areas include the Fourth Industrial Revolution, mental health and well-being in diverse settings, intercultural conflict management and mediation, women in leadership, shame and psychobiography. She primarily uses positive psychology, systems psychodynamic and eco-existential perspectives.

**Kirsten McEwan**

Dr. Kirsten McEwan is a Senior Research Fellow in health, psychology, and social care. Dr McEwan has worked in Clinical Trials, NHS, and University settings, collaborating on over 60 published projects. She has 18 years' experience of evaluating compassion, nature connection and Forest Bathing wellbeing interventions. She is also a Forest Bathing practitioner and loves spending time outdoors.



Pninit Russo-Netzer

Dr. Pninit Russo-Netzer is a senior lecturer and the head of the Education Department at Achva Academic College. Her main research and practice interests focus on meaning in life, positive psychology, existential psychology, spirituality, positive change and growth. Dr. Russo-Netzer is the founder and head of the 'Compass' Institute for the Study and Application of Meaning in life, and the head of the Academic Training Program for Logotherapy (meaning-oriented psychotherapy) at Tel-Aviv University. She develops training and intervention programs on these topics, serves as an academic advisor and consultant to academic and non-academic institutions, and the co-developer and co-instructor of the Mindfulness-Based Meaning Program (MBMP). She has published scholarly journal articles on these topics, and is the co-editor of the books *Meaning in Positive and Existential Psychology* (Springer NY), *Clinical Perspectives of Meaning* (Springer NY), and *Finding Meaning: An Existential Quest in Post-Modern Israel* (Oxford University Press).



Nichola Snape

Ms Nichola Snape is an MSc Forensic Psychology student studying at the University of Derby. Just starting out in the field, this is her first publication. Her time is divided between academic study and voluntary work, for organisations such as Lincolnshire Action Trust, Safer Living Foundation and the Citizens Advice Service, creating a strong foundation of both practical and theoretical knowledge on which to build a future career as a forensic psychologist. She is inspired by professionals in the field, such as Dr Dean Fido, Professor David Wilson and Professor Elizabeth Yardley.



Elisabeth Vanderheiden

Dr. Elisabeth Vanderheiden is a pedagogue, theologian, intercultural mediator. She is the CEO of the Global Institute for Transcultural Research and the President of the Catholic Adult Education of Germany. Her latest publications focused on shame as resource as well as mistakes, errors and failure and their hidden potentials in the context of culture and positive psychology 1.0 and 2.0. In a current project she investigates life crises and their individual coping strategies from different cultural viewpoints. Other current research interests focus on Ikigai - especially in the context of adult education and counselling.



Forward

Nicholas Kemp, the founder of Ikigai Tribe

Ikigai is a greatly misunderstood concept outside of Japan. Millions of people believe that it represents a framework of doing something the world needs that you love, are good at and can be paid for doing. This framework is often referred to as the “Ikigai Venn Diagram,” but in fact is the work of Spanish astrologer Andrés Zuzunaga.

The original incarnation of this Venn diagram was an image shared on Facebook by Andres on June 4th, 2012, with ‘purpose’ written in the centre in Spanish (‘proposito’). His Venn diagram was inspired by natal charts and is nothing more than his personal interpretation of purpose. It was later translated into English and shared online.

It became misunderstood as the ikigai concept after entrepreneur and blogger Marc Winn replaced the word ‘purpose’ with ‘ikigai’ in a blog post, later going viral and spreading this misconception. After learning about the word ikigai from Dan Buettner's Ted Talk on ‘How to Live to Be 100+’, Marc thought it would be a cool idea to merge the ‘Purpose’ Venn diagram with Ikigai and share his interpretation in a blog post. For him it was nothing more than a passing thought of inspiration that he decided to share with his blog readers. And at that time his only knowledge of ikigai was from Dan Buettner's Ted Talk.

Marc’s visual interpretation of ikigai, while erroneous, has positively impacted thousands of people. It has been seen by millions, reproduced by hundreds of bloggers and life coaches, and inspired many books and several documentaries. I see it as a great serendipitous blunder, and one could argue that its positive impact outweighs the harm of its misinterpretation. However, ikigai means so much more than the pursuit of financial success—in fact, that has nothing to do with it. And it is this misinterpretation that inspired me to study and share with the world what ikigai really means to the Japanese.

The problem with interpreting ikigai as the Purpose Venn Diagram is that it creates the illusion that ikigai is a lofty and formidable goal to achieve. In many ways, it is the opposite of this: embracing the joy of little things, being in the here and now, reflecting on past happy memories, and having a frame of mind that allows one to build a happy and active life. It is not about professional success or entrepreneurship.

The biggest misconception of *ikigai* is that it is a sort of ‘sweet spot’ of our professional life, where we achieve our one true purpose on a grand scale. But *ikigai* is not a destination or goal to achieve, because while it does encompass goals, with *ikigai* there is no destination.

Ikigai Is Not About:

Making money. The pursuit of professional success and/or financial freedom is extremely important to many. However, most Japanese would not associate making money with *ikigai*. Of course, success and the accumulation of wealth could be a by-product of your *ikigai*, but it would not be the focus.

What the world needs from you. *Ikigai* lies in the realm of community, family, friendships, and in the roles you fulfil. When you pursue your *ikigai*, you are not setting out to save the world. Instead, you are connecting with and helping the people who give meaning to your life: your family, friends, co-workers, and community. In doing so, you strengthen your societal bonds and bring positive change to those around you.

What you are good at. You don’t have to be an expert in a particular field to find your *ikigai*. *Ikigai* can be a very simple but impactful practice, such as a daily ritual or the practice of a new hobby that you seek to improve upon. It is more about growth than mastery.

What you love. *Ikigai* can be something you love or are passionate about, but to the Japanese it is more associated with purposeful living. You can find *ikigai* in areas of your life you would least expect—and it can find you.

The etymology of *ikigai* paints a clear picture of the word’s true meaning and how we should understand it. It consists of two parts, *iki* and *gai*:

- *Iki* comes from the verb *ikiru*, meaning “to live.” It relates to daily living.
- *Gai* refers to “worth” or “value”, and comes from the word *kai*, which means “shell” in Japanese.

During the Heian period of Japan (794–1185), shells were extremely valuable because they were commonly decorated and used for a game called *Kaiawase* — shell matching. The game of *Kaiawase* was played by Japanese nobles, hence the association of value (*gai*) in the word shell (*kai*). *Gai* is a suffix often used with other verbs, for example:

- *Yarigai* — the value of doing (*yaru* — to do)
- *Hatarakigai* — the value of working (*hataraku* — to work)
- *Asobigai* — the value of playing (*asobu* — to play)

- Shinigai — the value of dying (shunu — to die)

As these examples illustrate, *gai* relates to the value of doing some action. As such, a concise definition of *ikigai* could be 'the value one finds in day-to-day living.'

For the Japanese, *ikigai* is a common word used in casual conversation, which differs greatly from the hype associated with it in Western culture. While the concept is important and deeply personal, the word itself is not something they would pay any special attention to in a conversation.

To the Japanese, 'ikigai' is usually used to indicate the source of value in one's life or the things that make one's life worthwhile. It can be helpful to think of *ikigai* as a spectrum that includes all things we value, from the little joys in life to the pursuit of life-defining goals.

The most genuine thing about *ikigai* is our emotions, or *ikigai-kan*. *Ikigai-kan* can be translated as *ikigai* "feeling," *ikigai* "perception" or *ikigai* "awareness." If our *ikigai* indicates the source of value in our life, then *ikigai-kan* indicates the feelings and emotions we experience related to these sources of *ikigai*. It is these emotions that we want to experience.

Ikigai goes beyond the realms of one's work or career. In fact, for many Japanese, *ikigai* is something they pursue *after* they retire. If one's *ikigai* is their work, it is because of the intrinsic value one finds in it. If this is the case, then *hatarakigai* would be a more appropriate word to use for that context. Likewise, if one finds life satisfaction and meaning in their hobbies and interests, then *asobigai* would be a more appropriate word to use. Generally speaking, we could say that *ikigai* encompasses both one's *hatarakigai* and *asobigai*. But it goes deeper than this for some, whose *ikigai* is their journey to self-actualisation.

In the context of *ikigai*, self-actualisation is realised or expressed in the various roles you pursue in your life. The secret to finding your *ikigai* is to find a role where you can express your most important and personal values. To do this you must identify your role within your personal community. This is why *ikigai* is considered by some Japanese as the most honourable thing to do.

Ultimately, you don't need a Venn diagram or framework to find your *ikigai*, you just need to listen to your feelings. *Ikigai* is more emotional than rational. Ultimately, your feelings will tell you what makes your life worth living.

If your feelings are quiet at the moment, you can connect with a family member, share a laugh with an old friend, help a stranger or someone in need, pick up that hobby you have always been curious about, work on something you believe in, appreciate the freedoms you

have, challenge yourself with a new project, pursue a personal mission, or find your role in your personal community.

Finally, understand that ikigai comes and goes, changes over the course of your life, and best of all, you can have more than one.

The following chapters in this book will give you insight into a concept that can change your life. Drs. Kotera and Fido seek to offer an authentic representation of the ikigai concept, what it means to the Japanese, but also how it can integrate within any culture. As you read through the pages of this book, knowing you are getting closer to discovering your own ikigai, you'll feel a new passion for life—and that is something to be grateful for.

Ikigai: Towards a psychological understanding of a life worth living

Introduction

Yasuhiro Kotera & Dean Fido

Nearly 800,000 people die from suicide every year, which is twice the number of homicides, and accounts for about one death every 40 seconds in the world. Not only do suicide and attempted suicide have direct and immediate consequences for the individual, but often entails far-reaching and long-lasting effects on their families, friends, and loved ones.

National health care providers and charities are stretched in terms of resources, leaving those at greater risk to attempt suicide waiting longer for pharmaceutical and therapeutic treatment. As such, there is a clear and timely need to explore alternative means by which we can better understand, predict, and intervene in antecedent factors to self-harm and suicide.

In Japan, recent policies have incorporated the promotion of *ikigai* as a means of reducing the growing number of suicides. *Ikigai* is a psychological construct thought to reflect one's 'purpose in life' or 'reason for living', and until recently, has only been explored in Japanese samples.

Across multiple large-scale and longitudinal studies, *ikigai* is consistently found to be associated with reduced mortality, including incidence of cardiovascular diseases, lesions, and suicide, as well as better mental wellbeing. The latter finding has recently been shown to also hold true in Western individuals.

Whilst empirical research into the presence of *ikigai* in the West is in its infancy, the concept is becoming better known through newspaper articles as well as books such as "*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). However, no book exists which draws together global empirical research, personal accounts, and reflective commentary on *ikigai* and its associations with aspects of physical and mental wellbeing.

For this reason, this book reviews existing literature and offers novel insights into the potential role of *ikigai* in the domains of health, leadership, education, creative expression and crime. The co-editors hope that it will help further discussion, research and practice of *ikigai* as a means to mitigate mental distress and suicide and enhance wellbeing of people throughout the world.