Understanding Occupational Potential Across the Life Course

Life Stories of Older Women

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Certificate of Authorship

I, ALISON MARY WICKS

Hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

Should this thesis be favourably assessed and the award for which it is submitted approved, I agree to provide at my own cost a bound copy of the thesis as specified in the Rules for the presentation of theses, to be lodged in the University Library. I also agree that the thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the University Librarian for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis. *

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Signature                                                                                                           Date

* Subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University
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mother, a member of their generation, and of myself. Most importantly, they have given me hope for my daughter’s future.

A Charles Sturt University Postgraduate Studentship supported this doctoral thesis.
Ethics Approval
Abstract

The qualitative study described in this doctoral thesis explored the concept of occupational potential and its development across the life course. Theoretically framed by occupational science and informed by narrative and hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, this study adopted occupational and feminist perspectives when analysing the life stories of a small group of older women. The six women in the group were aged between sixty-six and seventy-six years and were living in the Shoalhaven, a rural community on the south coast of New South Wales.

The in-depth analysis, from an occupational perspective, of the life stories of the six older women in this study has enhanced understanding of the concept of occupational potential. Essentially, occupational potential has been illuminated by this study as a highly complex phenomenon and one that evolves throughout the life course. Rather than following a predetermined course, the developmental course of a person’s occupational potential is largely unpredictable, due to a host of environmental and personal influences that affect its trajectory. The dynamic interaction between specific features of the environment and the individual is what renders each person’s occupational potential unique.

When the life stories were also analysed from a feminist perspective, the effect of gender on the development of occupational potential emerged as a significant influence. Being a woman shapes the development of occupational potential at each stage of the life course as biological and social determinants of gender interact. Gendered power relationships, explicit and tacit social expectations, gender-based occupations, and women’s familial obligations combine in such a way as to be constraining influences on the development of women’s occupational potential. Despite the constraints on their ‘becoming’, women use occupational strategies, which are gradually refined over time, to create their opportunities for meaningful occupational participation so that they may continue to reinvent themselves occupationally and realise their potential. Those women in this study who perceived that they had become who they wanted to be,
through doing what they wanted to do, reported satisfaction with their life to date and had continuing plans for occupational enrichment.

The findings of this study have significant implications, related to a variety of issues, across a range of sectors: policy issues in the social, education and health sectors; theoretical and research issues in occupational science, occupational therapy and feminism; and practice issues in occupational therapy. Recommendations arising from a synthesis of the findings relate to employment policy in respect of women, occupational science research and occupational therapy practice. The dominant theme underpinning each recommendation is the dynamic interaction between the person, environment and occupation.
Chapter 1
Introducing the Study

This thesis describes a qualitative study that explored the concept of occupational potential and its development across the life course. The study focused on the development over time of the occupational potential of a group of older women. The six women who comprised the group were aged between sixty-six and seventy-six years and lived in the Shoalhaven, a rural community on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia.

The purpose of the study was to increase understanding of occupational potential, a fundamental yet relatively nascent concept in the theoretical construction of the human as an occupational being. In particular, the study sought to uncover how the development and realisation of each woman’s occupational potential were facilitated or constrained at the different stages of her life course. The findings from this study have the potential to contribute to the theory and knowledge base of occupational science, the study of humans as occupational beings. Consequentially, the findings may enhance the theory and practice of occupational therapy, a profession that enables human occupation. Ideally, the findings will influence policy, across a range of sectors, regarding people’s occupational needs. It is hoped, in particular, that the study findings will raise awareness of how gender influences the development and realisation of occupational potential throughout the life course, and subsequently influence social policy in respect to women.

At the broadest level, this study of occupational potential is located in the human sciences as it sought to elucidate and understand elements of the human world (Polkinghorne 1983). At the intermediate level, this study is located within occupational science, a relatively new, basic science that aims to generate knowledge and understanding of the human as an occupational being (Yerxa et al. 1990; eds Zemke & Clark 1996; Yerxa 2000). At the micro-level, because the
study focused on the occupational potential of women living in a rural community, the research described is situated within rural women’s studies.

Methodologically, narrative and hermeneutic phenomenological approaches shaped the form and structure of this qualitative study. Life history was the specific narrative approach used. The six Shoalhaven women who shared their life stories for the study were purposively selected from the twenty-two women, all aged over sixty-five years, who participated in one of three focus groups conducted in Nowra, the administration centre of the Shoalhaven. The purpose of the focus groups was to elucidate significant occupational and feminist themes embedded in the women’s stories and the social, historical, political and economic events that had influenced their occupational life course. Such themes and influences were subsequently explored in-depth in individual interviews. The data gathered from the focus groups and the interviews were narratively analysed and interpreted from both an occupational and a feminist perspective. The data analysis and synthesis of the findings form the basis of this thesis.

**Background to the study**

The original impetus for the study came when the researcher was working as a health professional in the Preventive Care Trial (PCT) in the Shoalhaven. The PCT, conducted by the Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA), was a three year study to evaluate the effectiveness of preventive programs for improving health outcomes and quality of life for veterans and war widows who were aged seventy years and over (DVA 1999). During the Trial, the researcher undertook either six monthly or yearly home visits to ninety war veterans and widows. The women’s level of community participation and their diverse range of occupational interests were of particular interest to the researcher. As an occupational scientist and an occupational therapist, the researcher was intrigued by how the older women were satisfying their occupational needs and exercising their occupational capacities. The researcher also wanted to consider what influenced the realisation of their occupational potential, their ability to participate in personally meaningful and satisfying occupations over time. Thus, the seeds were sown for the development of the proposal for this doctoral study, and a review of related and relevant literature was undertaken.
The literature review spanned three distinct, yet interconnecting, bodies of literature. It began with a search of generic literature, primarily sourced from the human sciences, on human needs, capacities and potential. In the psychology literature, various theories about human needs and what influences human behaviour were found (Pavlov 1927/1960; Cannon 1939; Piaget 1950; Maslow 1954; Bruner 1960; Erikson 1965; Rotter 1966; De Charms 1968; Skinner 1968; Bandura 1986), as were additional theories of intrinsic motivation, such as the theories of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990), and the need for effectance (White 1971). The literature on human capacities discussed issues such as: cognitive and intellectual capacities (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980; Gardner 1983; Lorenz 1987); individual differences in regard to capacities (Ornstein & Sobel 1988); and the human need to exercise capacities (Maslow 1968). With respect to potential, humanists such as Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1951), James (1890/1952), Allport (1955), Rogers (1961), Roger & Stevens (1967) and Maslow (1968) showed an interest in human potential in their writings. There has been a relatively recent project on human potential undertaken by some educationalists (Scheffler 1985; LeVine & White 1986; Gardner 1993).

Following the review of the generic literature, the search narrowed to focus on the literature that was particularly relevant to the concept of occupational potential. Although not actually termed occupational potential, the search revealed that British social activists, in the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, incorporated a similar concept into their community development programs (More 1516/2001; Owen 1813; Darley 1990:). In the occupational therapy literature, references to potential were found (Townsend 1997; Yerxa 1998). Although a search of the occupational science literature uncovered the theory of the human need for occupation (Wilcock 1993, 1995a), in which occupational potential appears to be a fundamental component, only one specific reference to the term ‘occupational potential’ per se was found (Wilcock 1998a). However, some concepts associated with the concept of occupational potential, such as occupational deprivation (Whiteford 1995), occupational adaptation (Frank 1996a), and occupational justice (Wilcock & Townsend 2000) were found in the occupational science literature.
Feminist literature was the third source of literature reviewed. While classic texts were reviewed (Friedan 1963; Curthoys 1988; de Beauvoir 1988), the emphasis of the review was on Australian feminist writing (*For love or money* 1983; eds Crowley & Himmelweft 1992; eds McDowell & Pringle 1992; Lake 1999). As the context of the study was a rural, coastal community in New South Wales, Australian rural women’s studies were also reviewed (ed. Alston 1990; Alston 1995; ed. Alston 1998).

The review process, as summarised above, highlighted the need for research on occupational potential. The literature search also revealed that older women, particularly those living in rural or non metropolitan communities, are still relatively invisible and voiceless in the extant literature, even though the feminist movement has invoked a feminist consciousness. For these reasons, it was considered imperative that a qualitative study exploring the development of occupational potential over time, especially as perceived by older women in a rural area, was undertaken.

**Purpose of the study**

The general purpose of this study was to explore the concept of occupational potential and its development across the life course. In particular, the study focused on understanding the influences that facilitated or constrained the development of occupational potential over time from the perspective of six older women living in a rural community.

Three questions have guided the structure of the study described in this thesis. The principal question was:

- What is occupational potential and how does it develop over time?

The second question, which focused specifically on the six older women’s perceptions of the development of their occupational potential over time, was:

- How was the development of the women’s occupational potential facilitated and constrained at different stages of the life course?

An additional and related question that guided this study was:
• How can understandings gained from the women’s life stories inform future policy, theory, research and practice in a range of sectors?

Relevance of the study
This study is relevant to policy development in the social, education and health sectors. As a result of this study, the concept of occupational justice has emerged as significant for policy makers and planners. It has become apparent that social policies need to ensure, within certain constraints, that people have opportunities to satisfy their personal occupational needs, through exercising their individual capacities, so that they may realise their unique occupational potential. The study has highlighted the particular significance of such policy in the field of education, as education has emerged as one of the important developmental influences on the realisation of occupational potential. In addition, the finding that wellbeing and satisfaction with one’s life are directly related to the realisation of occupational potential supports an occupational perspective of health. From this study, it has become apparent that health promotion programs should adopt the general principles advocated by the World Health Organization’s (1986) Ottawa Charter because such principles embody the notion of humans as occupational beings.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant to policy issues in respect to women, locally, nationally and internationally. Gender equality, women’s empowerment and capacity building for women are three themes that are embedded within current Australian policies, such as: the NSW Action Plans for Women and Rural Women (NSW Department for Women 2001a, 2001b), the strategic plan of the Australian Commonwealth Office of the Status for Women (2002), and UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (2002). Similar themes have been illuminated by this study as highly relevant if women are to realise their occupational potential.

Theoretically, this study has contributed to the development of theory and the knowledge base in occupational science, occupational therapy and feminism, as well as highlighting additional areas for research in each of these fields. From a practical perspective, the study has relevance for occupational therapy, a profession whose domain of concern and therapeutic medium is occupation.
As with all qualitative research projects, this study has been significant for the researcher. As a female Australian occupational scientist and an occupational therapist, the study afforded the researcher many opportunities: to understand more about the complex nature of the occupational human; to appreciate the relevance of such understandings to occupational therapy practice; and to gain new perspectives about women in general, significant female others, and the self.

**Context of the study**

The Shoalhaven provided the geographic context of this study. The Shoalhaven is a community on the south coast of New South Wales and is comprised of forty-nine different towns and villages, most of which are located along the coastal fringe. Typical of other coastal areas in New South Wales, Shoalhaven is no longer primarily an agricultural community, but a centre for tourism (Shoalhaven Tourism Board n.d.). In addition, it has a significantly high growth rate and proportion of older people. Based on the Rural Remote Metropolitan Areas Classification (RRMA), Shoalhaven is considered a rural community (National Rural Health Alliance 1999). However, when the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) is applied, Shoalhaven is considered a non-metropolitan area which has adequate access to services (Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care 2001). Throughout this thesis, Shoalhaven is referred to as a rural community, as it is only relatively recently that accessibility to services has improved.

The temporal context of this study is also significant. The lives of the study participants span the last seven decades of Australian history, during which there were some important sociocultural, historical and economic influences on Australian society. Examples of such influences include the Depression, World War II, the post-war baby boom, the abolition of the ban on married women as permanent employees in the Public Service, and the introduction of the Pill.

It is important to acknowledge that the Shoalhaven has been the residential and professional base of the researcher for the past twenty-one years. Accordingly, the researcher was already largely familiar with the sociocultural, political, historical and economic frameworks within which the study was located, and women living in the Shoalhaven provided a convenient sample.
Assumptions and meanings

In qualitative research, particularly that which is framed by an interpretivist paradigm such as the study discussed in this thesis, analysis of narrative data serves as a basis for theory development. This is significantly different from the positivist notion of testing theory through data generation. However, it is nonsensical to pretend that this study was conducted ‘a theoria’ and without foundations. Obviously, certain assumptions based on the ontological and epistemological foundations that underpinned it, and associated with the theoretical framework that provided the study’s structure, were made prior to the conduct of the study. These assumptions are now briefly described, and a glossary of some of the most frequently used terms in this study is presented.

This study adopted a subjectivist ontology and a relativist epistemology. Basically, this means that personal perceptions are considered valid, and that knowledge is mediated through experience (Sandelowski 1993; DePoy & Gitlin 1998a). A humanist perspective, congruent with a subjectivist ontology and relativist epistemology, as well as with both occupational science and occupational therapy, was the overall philosophical perspective of this study. A humanist perspective views human nature as ‘good’, emphasises conscious and unconscious processes, and highlights inherent human capacity for responsible self direction (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980).

The following assumptions, which are essentially optimistic and humanist, have guided the conduct of this study:

- Human beings are complex, multileveled systems who act on and interact with their environments (Yerxa 1991, p. 199).
- Humans are unique, with unique capacities. They need to utilise their capacities to realise their potential, to grow and self actualise (Maslow 1954).
- Humans generally strive to develop their potential in constructive, creative ways (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980).

By way of orientation and introduction, the terms used most frequently throughout this thesis are now explained very simply:
• **occupations** – the things people do in their daily lives, within and in response to their environments
• **occupational** – related to occupations, to doing
• **occupational adaptation** – an occupational response to changing needs and conditions
• **occupational deprivation** – exclusion from doing
• **occupational justice** – the right to do
• **occupational life course** – occupational experiences accumulated over a person’s life span
• **occupational potential** – the capacity to do
• **occupational participation** – doing, from a macro rather than an individual perspective
• **occupational science** – the study of humans as occupational beings
• **occupational strategy** – a way of doing
• **occupational tensions** – experiences that hinder doing
• **occupational therapy** – a profession that enables occupational participation.

**Structure of the thesis and overview**

There are eight chapters in this thesis. The purpose of this first chapter is to provide an introduction by briefly describing the background to the study, its purpose and relevance. The subsequent chapters are concerned with the story of the study itself. This thesis has four major sections: an in-depth review of relevant literature; a description of the study methods; a presentation of the data; and a synthesis of the findings. A detailed description of each chapter is now provided as a guide to the content of the chapters and their relationships to each other.

Chapter two reviews the literature that is relevant to the study described in this thesis. There are three sections to the literature review. The first section, which provides a broad perspective, discusses the pan disciplinary literature on human needs, capacities and potential. The second section discusses the literature that focuses on human occupational potential, a fundamental dimension of the occupational being. The third section, which is the most specific, is a discussion of the feminist literature that relates to women’s occupational potential.
Chapter three describes the methodology of the study and the questions that have guided it. At the beginning of this chapter, there is a description of the philosophical and theoretical foundations that underpinned the study. In addition, there is a description of the narrative approach to understanding human experience, and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to interpretation of qualitative data. These descriptions explain the orientation and structure of the study. Chapter three also addresses issues such as the research processes adopted and the analysis of the data, as well as the trustworthiness of the study and its limitations. At the conclusion of chapter three, an explanation is given of how the data is presented in the subsequent chapters and the study participants and the researcher are introduced.

Chapters four, five and six form the heart of this thesis. They contain the data generated in the study and interpretative commentaries about the data. In keeping with the qualitative nature and the epistemological and ontological foundations of this study, the integrity of each woman’s life story has been maintained. However, where similarities and differences in their stories are apparent, these are noted and discussed.

In chapter seven, there is in-depth, critical discussion of the cogent occupational and feminist issues embedded in the women’s stories. This discussion integrates and synthesises the data as a whole. The relevance of these issues in relation to social policy, particularly with respect to women, is highlighted by this discussion. The theoretical, research and practical implications of this study are also discussed in this chapter.

The final chapter, chapter eight, presents some specific recommendations that have arisen from the study findings and a reflective summary of the study.

The appendices include copies of the forms that were used in the study, as well as samples drawn from the researcher’s reflexive journal.
Chapter 2
Review of Related Literature

Chapter two reviews the literature related to the exploration of occupational potential, the subject of the study described in this thesis. Extensive searches of library catalogues and electronic databases, which included texts, publications, journal articles and reports, identified the literature relevant to the review. The search process revealed three intersecting bodies of literature that relate to and inform the research undertaken for this study.

The first body of literature reviewed is the generic, pan disciplinary literature on human potential. Such literature provides a firm foundation for the study of occupational potential as it offers a broad perspective to the subject, in that it has been studied over time by a wide range of disciplines. The literature that addresses occupational potential specifically is relatively more recent, and is reviewed next. The third body of literature reviewed is that which discusses occupational potential from a feminist perspective. Such a perspective is important, given that the study participants were women. Before examining literature from these three bodies, however, the study is located within the existing body of knowledge.

Locating the study

Locating the study described here within the existing body of knowledge is a useful means of not only identifying the literature relevant to it, but also highlighting the theoretical and conceptual background against which the study is set. At the broadest level, according to Polkinghorne’s (1983) criteria, this study on occupational potential fits within the human sciences. Not only did it explore human experiences, activities and constructs, and the impact of social, political and economic systems on personal consciousness and experience, it also sought elucidation and understanding of the human world.

At the intermediate level, this study is located within occupational science, a discipline that aims to generate knowledge and understanding of the human as an
occupational being, and of the form, function and meaning of occupation (Yerxa et al. 1990; eds Zemke & Clark 1996). Occupational science is a product of the postmodern era, a period that has witnessed a growth in the complexity of daily life, necessitating new ways of understanding the pragmatic and existential issues of such everyday complexity (Best & Kellner 1991, 2001). Due to the complex and multidimensional nature of occupation, occupational science synthesises knowledge from relevant and traditional disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and ethnography (Yerxa et al. 1990; Yerxa 2000).

At the micro-level, because the study focuses on women’s occupational potential, the research being described is situated within women’s studies that are framed by feminist theory. Since the emergence of the feminist movement invoked a feminist consciousness, there has been ‘an awareness that gender makes a difference in how a person is perceived and in what choices are possible’ (Hess 1990, p. xi). Therefore, it can be assumed that being a woman has implications for the realisation of occupational potential. Rural women’s studies, a recently established subset of women’s studies, are pertinent to the research as the participants were women who have chosen to live in a rural community. The inequities in relation to potential that result from being a woman and being rural are addressed in rural women’s studies (ed. Alston 1990; ed. Alston 1998).

While visual representations are always partial, incomplete and limited (eds Lynch & Woolgar 1990), a diagram depicting the intersecting literature sets appears below (Figure 2.1). The purpose of the diagram is to graphically represent a summary of the description of the study’s location. Following on from this description and the graphic summary, a review of the first body of literature relevant to the topic is now presented.

**On human potential**

Human potential, a central feature of human nature, has been an object of study down through the ages; by ancient Greek philosophers, through to modern day educationalists, planners and policy makers (Scheffler 1985). The generic literature on human potential is relevant to this study, as the notion of human potential is embedded within the concept of occupational potential.
Interest in human potential increased in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of the humanist perspective. William James (1890/1952) set the stage for such a perspective, which was adopted by various psychologists (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman 1951; Allport 1955; Rogers 1961; Rogers & Stevens 1967; Maslow 1968; Murphy & Kovach 1972). In fact, humanistic psychology, which became a so-called ‘third force’ in psychology, was developed as a reaction against the environmental determinism of learning theory and the Freudian determinism of instincts (Craig 1986). The humanist perspective in humanistic psychology is more a statement of values than a theory of human behaviour. Humanists maintain that the self is a unifying force, focus on human values and personal growth, and adopt a positive view of human nature and potential (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980). The following quote eloquently expresses the humanist view that people strive not only to maintain themselves and to survive, but also to express themselves, to improve and to grow:

Human life is a struggle — against frustration, ignorance, suffering, evil, the maddening inertia of things in general; but it is a struggle for
something … And fulfilment seems to describe better than any other single word the positive side of human development and human evolution — the realization of inherent capacities by the individual and of new possibilities by the race; the satisfaction of needs, spiritual as well as material; the emergence of new qualities of experience to be enjoyed; the building of personalities (Huxley 1953 cited in Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980, p. 99).

Inherent in humanist ideation is the perception that people generally strive to develop their potential in constructive and creative ways: by enriching their experiences; by forming warm and meaningful relationships with others; and by striving to become the selves that they feel they should be. The humanist perspective also acknowledges that people strive for fulfilment in different ways, depending on their abilities, values and life situations (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980).

Maslow’s (1954) theory of self is perhaps one of the best known theories about human potential. This particular theory, which emphasises each person’s need for self actualisation and the full development of potentialities, is based on the belief that self actualisation is achieved following satisfaction of the needs that are lower in the hierarchy of needs. Shaffer (1978), on the other hand, considers that the need for self actualisation can never be entirely satisfied, as self actualisation involves an ongoing search for truth and understanding, the attempt to secure equality and justice, and the creation and love of beauty.

In a contemporary context, it is not only psychologists who are interested in human potential. The Project on Human Potential, run by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is sponsored by the Bernard van Leer Foundation of The Hague, a foundation dedicated to the cause of disadvantaged children and youth. The aim of the Project is to assess the state of scientific knowledge concerning human potential and its realisation (Scheffler 1985). The principal investigators, whose publications are contributing to the Project, represent a variety of fields and interests. For example, Howard Gardner (1993, 1999) is a psychologist, Irene Scheffler (1985) is a philosopher, Robert LeVine is a social anthropologist, and Merry White, a sociologist (LeVine & White 1986).

Scheffler’s (1985) text is particularly relevant to this study, even though it focuses on human potential in the field of education. The crux of her philosophical
discussion is that human potential is not a metaphysical essence governing the predetermined direction of a person’s development, nor is it a durable feature intrinsic to the person. Scheffler (1985) maintains human potential is a phenomenon that reflects the person and the social environment and, accordingly, is open to considerable change. Of particular interest is her identification of three compatible elements of human potential: propensity, capability and capacity. Within her conceptual and philosophical framework, propensity refers to the likelihood of becoming, with no value restriction presupposed; capability refers to the possibility of becoming, should a person choose to become or to exercise such a power; and capacity refers to the ability of becoming, should conditions allow.

Most recently, Parker Palmer (1990, 2000), a contemporary activist, writer and teacher, has contributed to the discussion on human potential, which he refers to as a person’s authentic selfhood. Palmer believes that people have an intense need to grow into their authentic selves, and that when people take the journey of authentic service in the world, they find immense joy.

Apparently, The Harvard Project is not the only contemporary project on human potential. A recent search of the key phrase ‘human potential’ on www.google.com revealed 2,120,000 related websites. A selective review of several sites revealed some that were relevant to this literature review. For example, there exists the Center for Human Potential (n.d.), a service, developed in 1989 and ‘dedicated to helping people achieve their potential’. The Human Potential Center (2003), as stated on its website, offers workshops to help people ‘become more creative, loving, playful and vibrantly alive’. Advocates for Human Potential Inc. (n.d.) describe this particular corporation as a research and consulting firm that has a public as well as an individual focus, and which apparently develops comprehensive service systems addressing public policy and public health needs. The Human Potential Movement (n.d.) is, by description, an organisation founded in 2000 which focuses on developing human potential by providing educational tools, motivation and income opportunities to those who have a desire to succeed and achieve their goals. Human Dynamics International (1999) seems to have a more global focus, aiming to develop, empower and sustain human potential internationally. On this particular website, ‘human
dynamics’ is described as a term given to a new way of understanding humans, a way that identifies the interaction between people’s physical and emotional capacities.

These websites are relatively recent additions to the human potential literature and, as such, have emerged in a postmodern context which values personal aims and cultural world-views (Best & Kellner 2001). They have been included in this review because they are indicative of postmodern thought and trends. Postmodernism reflects scepticism of the grand narrative of empiricism in positivist science and emphasises the situated nature of knowing, rather than universal truths (Lyotard 1984).

In order to obtain a comprehensive review of the literature on human potential, the literature on human needs and human capacities was also reviewed, because of the relationship between human needs, capacities and potential (Wilcock 1993).

**On human needs**

Within the literature, needs are considered to energise and direct human behaviour. They are forces within the brain that organise a person’s thinking and action in order to bring about a change to an existing, unsatisfying situation (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980; Craig 1986). A need is also described as a state of urgently requiring something which, if present, would satisfy tension (Wolman 1973 cited in Wilcock 1993, p. 19). Essentially, there are two types of needs that have been identified in the literature. There are intrinsic, biological needs, such as the need for food (Keys et al. 1950), sleep, and appropriate levels of stimulation and activity (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980). Acquired or extrinsic needs arising from adaptation to the sociocultural environment are the second type of needs identified. Biological needs are not easy to distinguish from acquired needs, and often work in partnership. However, at times, because of the hierarchical structure of the central nervous system and due to the development of the human cortex, acquired needs can override biological needs (Campbell 1988 cited in Wilcock 1993, p. 21).

There are various theories of human development, each of which has specific assumptions about human needs and what drives human behaviour. Learning
theory proposes that human behaviour results from people simply reacting and responding to their environment (Pavlov 1927/1960; Skinner 1968). On the other hand, the psychoanalytic tradition focuses on need fulfilment and psychosexual needs (Freud 1922; Erikson 1965). Cognitive theory maintains that humans are alert, rational and competent beings who do not merely receive information, but process it (Piaget 1950; Bruner 1960). Rotter’s (1966) concept of internal and external ‘locus of control’, the concept of ‘self efficacy’, as described by Bandura (1986), and De Charms’ (1968) theory of personal causation are relevant to the cognitive theories. As previously mentioned, humanistic psychology views humans as spontaneous and self-determining.

In addition, there are theories of intrinsic motivation which emphasise that behaviour can occur as a result of free choice, without any apparent external reward. Such theories include the theory of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), and the theory of the need for ‘effectance’, an innate need to influence the environment (White 1971). Other theorists maintain that homeostasis, a term coined by Cannon (1939), is an intrinsic human physiological need to maintain constancy of the internal milieu for maintenance and development of the organism (Bernard 1927).

**On human capacities**

A capacity is defined as ability, a capability (Hayward & Sparkes 1975). Humans, when compared with other mammals, have numerous, highly developed cognitive and intellectual capacities, due to their superior brains (Jerison 1976; Lorenz 1987). The human brain, with its extended neuronal circuits and increased association areas of the cortex, enables complex communication, language, thinking, forward planning, adaptation and problem solving (Coleman, Butcher & Coleman 1980). In addition to cognitive capacities, humans have physical, creative and emotional capacities. When stimulated or aroused by needs, these complex, interactive capacities are exercised to maintain equilibrium, satisfy tension or facilitate further development (Wilcock 1993).

Review of the literature revealed a range of ideas and theories about capacities, which include the following:
• Humans have different capacities, which are not given equally (Ornstein & Sobel 1988).
• Capacities vary from one person to another (Gardner 1983).
• Humans need to use their capacities. The use of capacities is necessary for growth and unused capacities either atrophy or disappear, diminishing the person (Maslow 1968).
• Capacities, each with its own specific focus, usually work in concert with other capacities to respond to inner needs and external variables (Gardner 1983).
• A single capacity may represent a family of competencies (Gardner 1993).
• The realisation of a capacity is not isolated or discrete. It is intricately linked to the realisation of other capacities. However, not all capacities are harmonious (Scheffler 1985).
• No capacity is fixed (Scheffler 1985).
• A capacity is valued, by the individual and by the society (Scheffler 1985).

When drawing from the literature, the fundamental relationship between needs, capacities and potential can be stated as follows: when a need is aroused, it stimulates the use of a capacity; when a capacity is exercised to its fullest extent, it is realised; the realisation of capacities enables the development and realisation of potential. However, given the multidimensional nature of humans, this explanation of the relationship is too simplistic and naive. Humans live within, and are shaped by, a complex environment. Personal disability or impairment, sociocultural constructions, political and historical influences and economic conditions all impact on the extent to which a person’s potential is realised (Gardner 1999).

**On occupational potential**

Occupational potential, a nascent concept in occupational science, relates to the potential of humans as occupational beings. In order to provide a theoretical framework for reviewing the literature on occupational potential, the literature that is relevant to the phenomenon of occupation and the occupational nature of humans is reviewed first.
Defining occupation

‘Occupation’ comes from *occupatio*, a Latin noun, which means engagement, taking possession of. *Occupatio* is derived from the verb *occupo, occupare* to seize, take possession of (Kidd 1962). In this thesis, the term occupation does not just refer to the commonly held notion of paid employment (Hayward & Sparkes 1975). Rather, this thesis refers to occupation as it is described in the occupational science literature, that is, as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that embodies time, purpose, meaning, form and context.

Since the renaissance of interest in occupation in the postmodern era (Whiteford, Townsend & Hocking 2000) and the establishment of occupational science in 1989 to specifically study occupation and humans as occupational beings (Yerxa *et al.* 1990; eds Zemke & Clark 1996), numerous definitions of occupation can be found in the occupational science literature (Sabonis-Chafee 1989; Yerxa *et al.* 1990; Christiansen 1991; Wilcock 1991; Kielhofner 1995; AOTA 1997; ed. Townsend 1997). Recently, a range of definitions of the term ‘occupation’ was compiled for the Occupational Terminology Interactive Dialogue in the *Journal of Occupational Science* (ed. Dunn 2001). A selection of these definitions, which include those by Yerxa *et al.* (1990), Christiansen (1991) and Kielhofner (1995) are presented and critiqued here, highlighting important conceptual points of alignment and differentiation:

Occupation is a general term that refers to engagement in activities, tasks and roles for the purpose of productive pursuit (such as work and education), maintaining oneself in the environment, and for the purpose of relaxation, entertainment, creativity, and celebration (Christiansen 1991, p. 26).

Occupation refers to specific ‘chunks’ of activity within the ongoing stream of human behavior which are named in the lexicon of the culture. These daily pursuits are self initiated, goal directed, (purposeful) and socially sanctioned (Yerxa *et al.* 1990, p. 5).

We can define human occupation as doing culturally meaningful work, play, or daily living in the stream of time and in the contexts of one’s physical and social world (Kielhofner 1995, p. 3).

Each definition refers to all the things that people do in their daily lives as occupations. Both Yerxa *et al.* (1990) and Christiansen (1991) refer to the purposeful and meaningful nature of occupations. The definition by Kielhofner
(1995) incorporates an important temporal dimension of occupations. Yerxa et al. (1990) make reference to the cultural and social aspect of occupation, whereas Kielhofner (1995) considers the physical and social environments, in which occupations occur. In this thesis, ‘occupation’ is defined simply as the things people do in their daily lives, within and in response to their environments (ed. Townsend 1997).

**The occupational nature of humans**

Occupational science assumes that humans need occupation, and that they are shaped by their daily patterns of occupational participation (Yerxa et al. 1990; Wilcock 1993; eds Zemke & Clark 1996). The occupational theory of human nature is based on a study of human occupational behaviour throughout history (Wilcock 1993, 1995a, 1998a). Having examined human occupation from an evolutionary perspective, Wilcock has developed a theoretical framework that centralises purposeful occupation in maintaining and enabling the health of individuals and the survival of the species. The theory, based on such an examination of human occupation is stated as follows:

Humans are occupational beings with a need to use time in a purposeful way. The need is innate and related to health and survival because it enables individuals to utilise their biological capacities and potential and thereby flourish (Wilcock 1993, p. 23).

Wilcock (1993, p. 20) maintains that humans are occupational beings because purposeful occupation serves to maintain the health of individuals and the survival of the human species. She proposes that the functions of occupation are to: provide for immediate bodily needs of sustenance, self care and shelter; develop skills, social structures and technology aimed at safety and superiority over predators and the environment; and exercise and develop personal capacities enabling the organism to be maintained and to flourish.

Other theorists have also discussed the occupational nature of human beings. Fidler and Fidler (1978), for example, argue that through doing, the nascent human becomes humanised, and maintain that by engaging in purposeful action people learn about their selves and their world. Fidler and Fidler (1978, p. 306) state that:

The ability to adapt, to cope with problems of everyday living, and fulfill age-specific life roles requires a rich reservoir of experiences
acquired from direct engagement with both human and nonhuman objects in one’s environment. Doing is the process of investigating, trying out, gaining experience, responding, creating and controlling. It is through such action, with feedback from both nonhuman and human objects that an individual comes to know the potential and limitations of self and the environment and achieves a sense of competence and intrinsic worth.

Bateson (1996, p. 11), in a somewhat similar vein, believes that the ‘capacity to do something useful for yourself or others is key to personhood’. This concept of developing personhood through doing is extended by Christiansen (1999, p. 547), who asserts that ‘occupations are key not just to being a person, but to being a particular person, and thus creating and maintaining an identity’. In some aspects, Christiansen’s (1999, 2000) work on occupation and identity, and personal projects, and Christiansen et al.’s (1999) literature on occupation and wellbeing resonates with White’s (1971) thesis that the human develops a sense of competency and mastery from exploring and mastering the environment. Do Rozario (1994), however, challenges the view that through doing, people know who they are. Do Rozario argues that instead of focusing on ‘doing for the sake of doing’, it is important to consider the meaning, ritual and transcendence that infuses ordinary daily activities.

**Realising occupational potential**

This next section of the review discusses the literature that is specifically relevant to the concept of occupational potential and its realisation as it relates to the theory of the human as an occupational being. The literature search uncovered only one definition of the actual term ‘occupational potential’. Wilcock (1998a, p. 257) has defined occupational potential as ‘future capability, to engage in occupation towards needs, goals and dreams for health, material requirement, happiness and well-being’. Interestingly, however, while the search revealed that the actual term ‘occupational potential’ is significant by its absence in the occupational science and occupational therapy literature, the search ascertained that the concept of occupational potential is not new. Ancient Greek philosophers, English social activists in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, and occupational therapists since the beginning of the twentieth century have all been concerned with enabling people to exercise their occupational capacities and realise their potential through meaningful occupation (Wicks 2001).
Fidler and Fidler (1978, p. 305) maintain that since Aristotle reportedly stated, ‘We realise our being in action ... what is potential becomes actual in the work which gives it expression’, the behavioural sciences have contributed little to the relationship between doing and individual development. However, much has been written about the influence of German philosopher Karl Marx, the communalism of Robert Owen and the British advocates for social reform, John Ruskin and William Morris, on the establishment of community programs aimed at developing occupational potential (Wilcock 1995b, 1999a, 1999b; 2001b). In fact, Wilcock (2001b) has suggested that the work of Octavia Hill, a Christian socialist, embodies a belief in occupational potential. According to Darley (1990), the objective of Hill’s housing program was to make lives happier and healthier by facilitating people’s opportunities to partake in the occupations they needed, enjoyed, and in which they had particular capabilities.

The literature search showed that the concept of occupational potential has been associated with occupational therapy since the profession was established. Occupational therapy was founded on humanist values and the belief that its role was to provide ‘opportunities to work, to do, to plan and create’ (Meyer 1922, p. 641). In Kielhofner’s (1997) view, though, by the 1970s, occupational therapy had suffered an identity crisis, losing sight of the meaning of occupation and the occupational nature of human beings. However, with the renaissance of interest in occupation at the close of the twentieth century (Whiteford, Townsend & Hocking 2000), occupational therapy is apparently adopting, once again, an occupational perspective (ed. Townsend 1997; Townsend 1999). Recently, it has been stated that occupational therapists are ‘in the business of enabling people to transform their lives through enabling them to do’ (Wilcock 1999c, p. 1). In fact, Yerxa (1998, p. 413). states that occupational therapists are ‘search engines for potential’. Yet, despite the emphasis on enabling people to ‘restore, develop, maintain, or discover their occupational potential in their environment’ (ed. Townsend 1997, p. 49), the term ‘occupational potential’ has not yet been fully assimilated into the lexicon of occupational therapy. An implication of this non-assimilation is that many occupational therapists may lose sight of the overall objective of their occupational therapy programs by focusing primarily on short term functional improvements.
Surprisingly, the term ‘occupational potential’ has not been developed within the occupational science discourse either. Actually, it appears occupational potential is still a relatively invisible and unexplored dimension of the occupational being (Wicks 2001). Since the *Journal of Occupational Science*, a multidisciplinary, international journal was first published in 1993, occupational potential has not appeared as a keyword, nor have there been feature articles focusing on occupational potential in any of its subsequent issues. However, some important concepts that are intrinsically linked to the concept of occupational potential have been discussed in the occupational science literature, thereby informing the study of occupational potential. These associated concepts are: occupational justice (Wilcock & Townsend 2000); occupational deprivation (Whiteford 2000) and occupational adaptation (Frank 1996a; Walker 2001). It suffices in this review to explain these interconnecting concepts in simple terms. The concept of occupational justice is concerned with people’s rights to have opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations. Occupational deprivation refers to the state wherein people are restricted from engaging in meaningful occupations, and occupational adaptation pertains to a process of selecting and organising occupations to enhance quality of life. Considering the apparent fundamental nexus between these three concepts and occupational potential, and in view of the dearth of literature on occupational potential, the relevance of the study described herein is clearly evident.

**On being a woman**

This third section of the literature review discusses the literature that relates to a feminist perspective of women’s potential and women’s occupational potential. The review begins with an overview of international, national and state policies on women’s potential. Such an approach was taken to situate the study described in this thesis within a global context. Following the policy review, the Australian feminist literature is reviewed to identify the dominant themes that have emerged over the last century. The final part of this section focuses on literature that informs the study in relation to older women’s potential, rural women’s potential and, in particular, older, Australian rural women’s occupational potential.
Women’s potential

Locating this study, in terms of current policies about women, within the big picture highlights the study’s relevance and significance. At the global level, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (2002) promotes women’s empowerment and gender equality and works to ensure the participation of women in all levels of development planning and practice. UNIFEM acts as a catalyst within the United Nations system, supporting efforts that link the needs and concerns of women to all critical issues on the national, regional and global agenda. Playing a strong advocacy role, UNIFEM concentrates on fostering a multilateral policy dialogue on women’s empowerment. Other international initiatives promoting the realisation of women’s potential include the United Nations’ Gender Mainstreaming Program (2000) and Women Watch, the United Nations’ Internet Gateway on the Advancement and Empowerment of Women (1997).

Within Australia, at the national level, the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women (2002) has a vision to ensure equality for women in every aspect of their lives. Its goal is to enable women to lead fulfilling lives. At the state level, the NSW Department for Women’s (2001a) Action Plan for Women aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women to ensure that women have the potential to participate equally and contribute to the community, socially, economically and culturally. There is also a NSW Department for Women’s (2001b) Action Plan for Rural Women. This Plan includes comprehensive strategies to provide rural women with opportunities for development and growth in areas such as education and business. It also contains policies that ensure equality and justice for rural women in community participation. A particularly interesting find emerging from the literature search was that as early as 1871, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) started in Geelong, a rural community in the Australian state of Victoria. Its purpose was to provide opportunities for women to develop their full potential, to express concern for the community in responsible action, and to strive to achieve peace, justice and freedom for all people (Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women 2002).
This summary of current international, national and state policies for women demonstrates the growing recognition of women’s rights to opportunities for realising their potential and, in so doing, highlights the timeliness of this study. Having provided the political background, the discussion will proceed with a review of general feminist literature, in particular, Australian feminist literature, as the participants in this study were Australian older, rural women.

The literature search revealed that there is ample relevant literature, generated by the women’s movement throughout the world, which discusses the influence of gender on the likelihood of women realising their full potential (Friedan 1963; Millet 1970; Eisenstein 1984; de Beauvoir 1988; Smith 1988; ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989; Smith 1990; DeVault 1999; Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin & Lyndenberg 1999). The literature from the Australian women’s movement, however, is particularly relevant to this study, as it reflects the unique changing needs and demands of Australian women. The Australian women’s movement was founded at the time of white settlement in Australia. Despite there being changes in emphasis over the years, the overriding focus of the movement representing women in Australia has remained constant in its advocacy for women’s rights and justice (For love or money 1983). This predominant theme, as well as other significant and related themes are now discussed from a historical perspective.

At the turn of the twentieth century, according to Marilyn Lake (1999), Australian women were extremely marginalised in respect to social rights. In her text, Getting equal: The history of Australian feminism, Lake (1999, p. 3) further reveals that:

They [women] lacked basic political, civil and economic rights. They were not permitted to vote. They were denied access to most professions and were unable to earn a living wage in those occupations to which they were admitted, such as teaching, nursing, factory work. Most were forced to find a husband to provide them with a livelihood. But marriage rendered them even more powerless, as it robbed them of the right to own property, the right to refuse access to their bodies and the right to custody of their children.

The Australian feminist movement has been instrumental in addressing these inequities. It has won for women the right to vote and to have equal rights to
participate in social, economic and political life in Australia. Australian women today enjoy freedoms unimagined by their mothers and grandmothers (Lake 1999).

Post-depression and during and after World War II, the thrust of the Australian women’s movement was political, demanding equal pay for equal work (For love or money 1983). But the goal of equality proved problematic, because participating in the world on men’s terms reinforced the masculine standard as the norm by assuming that all workers and citizens were autonomous, mobile and free from domestic responsibilities (Lake 1999). In response to the difficulties posed by such an emphasis on equality, the women’s movement in Australia changed tack. By the 1960s, the aim of the movement was to make women visible as objects of study, and differed from the earlier movement which emphasised sexual politics and critiqued domestic life and personal relationships. In contrast, the new movement was more concerned with psychological oppression, the structures of femininity and women’s responsibility for housework, childcare and emotional wellbeing (eds Crowley & Himmelweit 1992).

Without doubt, the feminist movement in Australia at this time was influenced by feminist trends overseas, which had been stimulated by the publication of The feminine mystique by Betty Friedan (1963). Friedan’s book is about the emotional and intellectual oppression of women. In fact, it redefines the very nature of woman’s problem. Friedan believes that only when a woman is seen as a human being of limitless human potential, equal to man, can she be in a position to realise her full potential. Friedan (1963, p. 316) writes that ‘by not using their full capacities, they [women] are evading human growth’. The strength of Friedan’s beliefs is also revealed in her statement, ‘if women do not put forth that effort to become all that they have in them to become, they will forfeit their own humanity’ (Friedan 1963, p. 336).

Not long after the publication of Friedan’s classic, Australia had its own high profile feminist in the form of Germaine Greer. Greer’s (1971) central thesis in the book The female eunuch is that as wives, lovers, mothers, and employees, women are not only still body and soul in bondage to men, they are deformed by them and made into eunuchs. Greer maintains that if women are able to realise
their true potential as independent persons, and contribute their special talents towards running the world, politics, business, technology, as well as family life, then civilisation will mature, rather than eventually be annihilated.

By the 1970s, it was recognised that women’s lives centred on issues that were different from men’s and that these issues needed to be studied (eds Crowley & Himmelweit 1992). Feminists of the time believed that women’s positions would be fundamentally improved if there were radical transformations in society. A new feminist theory was sought to gain an understanding of the way gender was structured in society. However, with the advent of postmodernist thought in the 1980s, it was claimed that such a theory would be invalid and universal, rather than local and historically specific. Hence, a different political project was undertaken. No longer did the feminists pursue either equality for individuals or a de-gendered society. Rather, they sought autonomy for women in which the criteria set by men were of no relevance. Postmodernism, in fact, which posed some new questions, such as what it means to be a woman and how this affects the way we theorise the world (eds Crowley & Himmelweit 1992), prompted Australian feminists to celebrate difference rather than equality (Phoca & Wright 1999).

In Australia at the close of the twentieth century, the concept of difference between the sexes was, perhaps, the most interesting, yet frustrating and enduring division of society (Wearing 1996). Wearing (1996, p. ix) claims that gender differences were obvious at all levels of society, from individual perceptions to macrosocial structures:

> Men and women construct different realities in their everyday lives concerning their clothing, their families, their jobs, their ambitions, even their definitions of happiness.

The issue of the impact of gender difference on women’s lives is further explored in the book Defining women: Social institutions and gender divisions. This book, edited by McDowell and Pringle (1992) considers how women are defined and constrained by sets of social relations and institutional practices that construct gender divisions in contemporary societies.
In addition to the focus on gender difference in the 1990s, other important feminist themes were being explored. Cox and Leonard (1991), for example, were examining the theme of the unpaid work done by women. A few years later, in her Boyer Lecture, Eva Cox (1995, p. 15) spoke about the value of social capital, which she defined as ‘the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’. Though not specifically speaking about women, given her passion for feminist issues, Cox (1995, p. 15) was undoubtedly referring to women’s unpaid contributions as ‘the social glue or social fabric’. In another publication, Cox (1996, p.22) wrote about leading women in relation to power, which she refers to as a ‘beneficial change agent’. The concept of power and women is also discussed in Caine and Pringle’s edited (1995) book *Transitions: New Australian feminism*. In this book, the editors refer to Elizabeth Grosz’s description of power: ‘power can be thought of as running around and through us, like honey, in various states of fluidity and congealment’ (eds Caine & Pringle 1995, p. xi).

Another important issue that emerged in the Australian feminist literature towards the end of the century was that of a ‘distinctively female subjectivity, that is, women becoming subjects as women rather than, as hitherto, as men’ (Curthoys 1997, p. 148). In actual fact, Susan Mitchell (1984) had already presented narrative accounts of women’s lives in her book *Tall poppies*. Mitchell (1991) revisited this theme in a follow-on publication, *Tall poppies too*. It is also interesting to note that, as the presenter of the 2001 Anne Conlon Memorial Lecture, Mitchell spoke about the importance of recognising the contributions made to society by women. The title of her lecture, in recognition of the International Year of the Volunteer, was ‘Women who were there for other women’.

This brief overview of the significant issues embedded in twentieth century Australian feminist literature provides an excellent backdrop for a critical appraisal of the matters that were relevant and, in some instances, of concern, to the women who were participants in this study. The women interviewed for this study, who were aged between sixty-six and seventy-seven, have all lived through at least the last seven decades of the twentieth century.
Being an older woman

Having explored the Australian literature for general feminist perspectives on women’s potential, the literature search was then narrowed to focus, first, on older women and, second, on occupational potential from an older woman’s perspective. However, before reviewing the literature on older women, it is important to consider how the literature defines ‘being old’ and to be cognisant of how society considers the ageing process.

Several explanations as to what defines a person as being old or older were found in the literature search. Job (1984, p. 10) simply defines being old as ‘having lived a long time’. In the text edited by Poole and Feldman (1999, p. 17), those aged over sixty years are referred to as ‘value added citizens’. And, according to Gibson, Benham and Gray (1999, p. 105), in their report *Older women in Australia*:

In today’s contemporary world, women aged 65 and over do not fall into the category of ‘old age’ as it was understood a couple of generations ago. The vast majority of 65 year old women are neither disabled nor dependent on others and many would not categorise themselves as ‘old’ (Worthington, 1998). This is not merely a shift in individual perceptions: at age 65 women now have an average life expectancy of 20 years.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999), however, refers to people aged sixty-five years and over as the ‘older population’. This is the definition that is being used in this thesis.

In addition to differing ideas as to what constitutes an old person, there is a range of views about being old. At one end of the continuum, there is the negative view which, according to do Rozario (1998), has been fostered in industrial societies where value is measured in terms of ability to materially produce. In such a view, older people are portrayed as objects of loss rather than producers of gain (do Rozario 1998). Additional derogatory connotations, such as frailty, sickness, mental vacuity and loneliness, can be associated with this perceived unproductiveness (Job 1984). According to Job (1984, p. 3):

Ageism, like racism and sexism, creates its own self fulfilling prophecies and promotes lifestyles that damage individual potential. It is a cumulative process: the older people get, the more inferior they are assumed to become, and the more difficult it is for them to swim against the social tide that can so easily swamp them.
Editors Poole and Feldman (1999) cite Gibson who maintains that the stereotype of all older women living out their years in ill health, physical dependence and financial insecurity does disservice to the many older women actually living full, busy and useful lives. Rosenthal (1990, p. 1) agrees with the damaging effects of a negative view of ageing, particularly when it is combined with gender bias:

Powerful myths and stereotypes of aging limit the lives of middle aged and old people. For women as they age, the intersection of ageism with sexism can be devastating, in circumscribing their activities and controlling their self image.

The interviews with older women in the report *Gendered ageism* highlight the combined impact of age and gender on opportunities, particularly in relation to employment, on older Australian women (Department for Women & NSW Committee on Ageing 1997). ‘Gendered ageism’ is a term adopted by a similar British study conducted by Arber and Ginn (1995).

A positive, successful, healthy view of ageing lies at the other end of the continuum. Successful ageing, as defined by Rowe and Kahn (1998 cited in Carlson, Clark & Young 1998, p. 108), means growing old with good health, strength and vitality. In actuality, the concept of successful ageing dates back centuries, to Cicero’s *De senectute*. In this classic work, Cato, in his reply to Laelius’s question as to how he bears old age so cheerfully, replies, ‘the remedy lies within: the natural course of life brings no hardship to those who have learned to find satisfaction and society in themselves’ (ed. Huxley 1948, p. x4). The following quote from Clause 17 of *De senectute*, and its accompanying translation by W. Falconer, exemplifies some of the themes in Cicero’s treatise on being old:

> Non viribus aut velocitate aut celeritate corporum res magnae gerunter, sed consilio, auctoritate, sententia: quibus non modo non orbari, sed etiam augeri senectus solet.

It is not by muscle, speed or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is basically not only not poor, but is even richer.

Although, since Cicero, others have endorsed the concept of successful ageing, as noted by editors Baltes and Baltes (1993), it is only relatively recently that successful ageing has been promoted as a guiding concept in gerontology. Today, there is ongoing research about untapped physical and mental reserves of the elderly and their potential for change (eds Baltes & Baltes 1993; eds Baltes &
The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, for example, is accumulating large amounts of information about what it means to Australian women to become old (Byles 1999). Julie Byles (1998), a member of the study team, reports on a positive view of older women. Such knowledge is undoubtedly influencing the Australian government policy on ageing.

The National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (Ministerial Reference Group 1999) is founded on the concept of healthy ageing which was first defined by the World Health Organization. In 1982, the United Nations World Assembly on Ageing drafted a Plan of Action on Ageing. This Plan viewed ageing as a lifelong process and focused on improving the well-being of people as they age. The New South Wales Government has also developed a Healthy Ageing Framework, 1998–2003 (NSW Health 1998). The goal of this Framework is for ‘a society in which all older people lead satisfying and productive lives with maximum independence and well-being’ (NSW Health 1998, p. 4). Of particular relevance to this study is a report issued in January 2000 by the NSW Committee on Ageing (2000), titled *Caring for the country: A spotlight on the needs of older people who live in rural and remote NSW*. The initiatives described in this report are grounded in the philosophy of healthy ageing. All these reports echo the importance of enabling older people to participate fully in society.

All such current policies on ageing in Australia are really very relevant to this study. When considered in-depth, important occupational themes, such as occupational justice, occupational deprivation and occupational adaptation, are actually embedded within them, even though these particular terms have not been used. The emphasis in these policies is on providing opportunities for older people in urban and rural areas to participate fully in their communities. These policies recognise that not only do older people have a right to remain active participants, that is, to engage in meaningful occupations, but also there are personal and social benefits to be gained when the policies are implemented.

After exploring the literature on ageing and being an older person, the search was narrowed, yet again, to focus specifically on the occupational needs of older women. Initially, some related literature on gender-neutral occupational issues for older people was identified (Cram & Paton 1993; Hocking 1996; Clark *et al.*
The search then revealed that some additional, more relevant, occupationally focused research on older men and women had been undertaken. For example, Jackson (1996, p. 340) undertook a pilot study to discover the adaptive strategies used by a group of elderly people living in the community. For this particular study, ‘adaptive strategies were viewed as the complex system of methods and plans used by individuals to overcome obstacles and live satisfying, meaningful lives’. The landmark Well Elderly Study, also undertaken in the United States, highlighted the importance of occupation as providing a fundamental, personally relevant context for the enactment of sustainable choices that foster successful ageing (Carlson, Clark & Young 1998). Despite some sociocultural implications, the findings of both these studies have significance in relation to occupational engagement for older women in Australia.

In the search process, it became apparent why there is so little literature specifically on the topic addressed in this thesis. The fact that there is little available literature on older women is not unique to Australia. According to Rosenthal (1990), with few exceptions, feminists have failed to challenge ageist construction of the nature of women beyond midlife. Rosenthal (1990, p. 1) actually states that ‘it is time to round out the feminist agenda with issues of deep concern to women at midlife and beyond’. Hale (1990, p. 7) states that ‘we need to hear what the elderly have to say to us about what it means to be old before we can answer their needs and ours relevantly and effectively’. A study by Minichiello, Davis and Courtney (2000) helps to explain the lack of literature from an Australian perspective. Minichiello and his team undertook a content analysis of the Australian gerontology literature, 1990–1996. Their findings revealed that well older people were included in the sample in only 15% of the studies included in the analysis, women’s issues were seldom discussed, and only 7.4% of the research had an allied health focus compared to 56.9% of articles which were from medicine. Such findings account for the dearth of available literature on Australian well older women.

One book that is particularly relevant, however, is *A certain age: Women growing older*. Edited by Poole and Feldman (1999), the book consists of a collection of
papers that explore the public and private worlds of older Australian women. It examines the interaction between older women and their family, friends and community, as well as their work and leisure activities. In this book, older women themselves describe some issues that are important to them, such as the invisibility they can often experience, the damaging effects of negative stereotyping of older women, and the personal and social barriers experienced by many of them over the years. At the same time, the book contains examples of older Australian women who have realised their potential and are engaging in meaningful and satisfying occupations. It also emphasises the strength, resourcefulness and resilience of some older Australian women. In some respects, this book resonates with the themes and tone of a book written by older English women (Hen Co-Op 1995). Both books describe the value of older women’s wisdom and experience and highlight the positive contribution they make to the community, provided they have the opportunity to fully participate within it. The similarities are a reminder that, at least in developed societies, there are commonalities in the issues faced by older women.

**Being an Australian rural woman**

The literature review now becomes quite specific. It focuses on the literature relevant to being a rural woman in Australia as the participants in the study were residing in the Shoalhaven at the time of their interviews. The Shoalhaven is a rural community on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. This section of the review begins by clarifying what is meant by ‘rural’ before discussing the literature on Australian rural women.

In most instances, within Australia and other western developed countries, ‘rural’ is used to refer to people living and or working on farms and involved in the agricultural industry. In other instances, the term is often used rather loosely and interchangeably with words such as ‘regional’ or even ‘remote’ (NSW Committee on Ageing 2000, p. 3). In Australia, ‘rural’ sometimes means everywhere outside the larger metropolitan areas. A commonly used system to classify rural areas was the Remote Rural Metropolitan Areas Classification (RRMA). In the RRMA system, ‘rural’, including regional centres, referred to towns with populations between 10,000 and 100,000 (National Rural Health Alliance 1999). However,
there is widespread acceptance that the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) is a superior approach to measuring remoteness when compared with the RRMA classification (Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care 2001). In the ARIA system, rurality is not based on population size but on the distance people have to travel by road to centres where services are available (National Rural Health Alliance 1999; Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care 2001).

For at least the past decade, Margaret Alston has been researching and publishing literature about rural women from an Australian perspective. Her comment below, emphasising their invisibility, helps to explain the lack of literature on rural women:

Rural women have rarely been the subjects of independent study. They have, in fact, been peculiarly absent from the imagery of rural life. With the growth of the women’s movement, however, it has become a legitimate endeavour to study women’s lives and concerns. Much has been written on urban women, while we are only in recent years seeing the emergence of academic interest in rural women (Alston 1990, p. ix).

Alston (1990, p. ix) also states that as rural areas are still regarded as men’s territory, ‘women are viewed as domestically oriented, in spite of what they may actually be doing’. A feminist critique of rural Australian women is continued in a later publication by Alston (1995) in which she discusses the constraints of women living in rural areas as a result of patriarchy, ideology, gender and sexual division of labour. Jennings and Stehlik (2000) report that Australian farm women are often marginalised due to their lack of financial stake in their properties, a legacy from the dominant patriarchal hegemony in agricultural communities. They also refer to the powerlessness these women can experience. They maintain that such powerlessness results from the women’s lack of access to decision-making and is further exacerbated by their moral and physical dependence on their partners. However, Jennings and Stehlik’s (2000) research has shown that the impact of globalisation and extended periods of drought have provided the impetus for farm women to become innovators in regard to supplementing farm incomes. As a result, the women have demonstrated agency in pursuing off-farm paid work and, in so doing, have reduced their dependence on male partners and subsequently reduced their moral and psychical dependence.
A particularly relevant resource for this thesis is an edited collection of papers from the *Toward 2000* Conference. The collection is useful in this review because it presents a range of current views, positive as well as negative. The majority of the papers reflect the tensions experienced by Australian rural women, as described in the following introductory statement passage:

Invisibility, lack of representation, silencing and a cultural context that devalues women and their contributions together with poor servicing are constant realities in rural Australia. As a consequence, rural Australian women face ongoing tensions in their daily lives as they juggle multiple work roles while being expected to endure an invisible and disparaging public profile (Alston 1998, p. v).

In contrast, the paper by Bishop and Coakes (1998) discusses the enormous contribution rural women make in supporting their service-impoverished communities. Lucy Broad’s (1998) paper on the ABC National Rural Woman of the Year Award reinforces this positive theme. Her paper reveals the depth of expertise that many rural women have and highlights the power of exposure as an excellent tool in advancing women in decision-making areas.

To conclude this review of literature on Australian rural women, it is important to include a very recent publication which demonstrates women’s potential. This inspiring collection of sixty-one case studies of Australian women living in regional and rural communities is the outcome of an Action Research Project which aimed to identify how communities handle change. The project highlighted the skills of women to facilitate change and growth. The stories retold in *Women taking action* demonstrate the sense of purpose, determination and enterprising nature of a diverse group of Australian rural women (Regional Women’s Advisory Council 2001).

**Being an older Australian rural woman**

This final section of the literature review discusses the literature on older rural Australian women. Some details from the Australian Bureau of Statistics are presented first as they reveal the significance of the study described in this thesis, indicating the need and relevance for research on this particular subgroup of the population.
The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) reports that the proportion of the Australian population aged sixty-five years and over, defined as ‘the older population’, has grown steadily during the twentieth century and it is projected to grow further during the twenty-first century. The major contributors to ageing of the population have been declining fertility and increased life expectancy. It is also reported that, on average, women are living longer than men, so there is a higher proportion of women in the older population. The imbalance increases with age. In New South Wales, where the study in this thesis was conducted, a growing proportion of older people live in rural and remote areas. In fact, because younger people are moving away from small, rural centres, older people are increasing as a proportion of the population in rural areas. It is likely that this trend will continue (NSW Committee on Ageing 2000). The number of older people living in rural and non-metropolitan coastal areas is growing faster than inland areas. This is consistent with Salt’s (2001) argument that Australia is experiencing a ‘big shift’, as people move towards coastal and beach communities. As these reports indicate, research studies on the needs of older women living in rural coastal areas are timely.

Until recently, rural women have primarily been regarded as farm women. However, due to current market trends, rural communities are losing their farming and agricultural identities as tourism and manufacturing become the major sources of income. The Shoalhaven is one such example (Shoalhaven City Council n.d.).

The search revealed a scarcity of relevant literature on older Australian rural women. Some biographical and autobiographical literature was the primary resource for appreciating the lifestyles and experiences of older women in rural Australia (Thorpe 1987, 1989; Thomas 1997; De Vries 2001, 2002). Although the papers edited by McCulloch (ed. 1998) provide an American perspective on being an older rural woman, it would seem from reading the biographical material that the comments about the divergent realities in respect to older rural women are relevant to this study. Also, McCulloch (1998) herself states in the epilogue that, on one hand, older rural women are portrayed as stoic, tenacious and enduring, qualities that reflect the romance associated with rural. However, when compared
to their urban counterparts, older rural women are depicted as disadvantaged economically, in terms of health, and in relation to employment.

**Summary**

The literature that informed this study, which explores the concept of occupational potential and its development over time and specifically focuses on older rural Australian women’s perceptions of the development of their occupational potential, was extensively searched and reviewed. The literature included books, journal articles and government reports which were sourced from library catalogues, databases and electronic media. In the search, three interconnecting bodies of literature were found to be relevant to the study described herein: the literature on human potential, human occupational potential, and older rural women’s occupational potential.

The literature reviewed in this chapter provided both background and context to the research undertaken and described in this thesis. The review also pointed to the need for the study, both generally and specifically. Appreciating such a need has influenced and guided all stages of the research. In the following chapter, the methodology of the study is presented, along with the philosophical influences that have underpinned it.
Chapter three presents the methodology of the study described in this thesis. Following a description of the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided it, the major approaches influencing the study’s orientation and conduct are discussed. The theoretical perspectives which informed the interpretation of the data are also clarified, and more practical issues such as participant recruitment and interviewing are addressed. With respect to analysis, the processes that evolved as a means of understanding and interpreting the data are described. The authenticity and the limitations of the study are also discussed. To conclude the chapter, the presentation of the data is explained, and the study participants and researcher are introduced.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the concept of occupational potential and its development over the life course. The review of the literature that was presented in chapter two highlighted the need to understand more about occupational potential, a somewhat nascent, yet crucial, concept in the theoretical construction of the human as an occupational being, and a concept fundamental to occupational therapy. The findings of this study will broadly inform occupational science, a relatively new and evolving academic discipline that endeavours to understand the human as an occupational being. Additionally, the understandings about occupational potential gained from this study will contribute to both the theory and practice of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy, a profession whose primary role is that of enabling human occupation (ed. Townsend 1997), is informed by occupational science (Yerxa 1993). Occupation, which refers to all the things people do to occupy themselves, is both the domain of concern and the therapeutic medium of occupational therapy (ed. Townsend 1997).
The secondary purpose of the study was to explore how the development and realisation of women’s occupational potential were facilitated and constrained over time. To achieve this objective, the study specifically focused on occupational potential as perceived by six women, aged between sixty-six and seventy-seven years, living in the Shoalhaven, a rural coastal community in New South Wales. Older women were chosen as the participants for this study for three reasons. First, they were able to provide an over time perspective of their occupational experiences. Second, as the literature review revealed, older women have rarely been research participants. Third, the subgroup of older women in Australian society is growing in size and significance as the Australian demographic profile changes (ABS 2002b). Ideally, the findings of this study will influence national policy direction with respect to women and their occupational needs.

The principal question that guided this study was:

- What is occupational potential, and how does it develop over time?

A specific question which focused on the older women’s perceptions of their occupational life course was:

- How was the development of the women’s occupational potential facilitated and constrained over time?

An additional, related question underpinning the study was:

- How can understandings gained from the women’s life stories inform future policy, theory, research and practice in a range of sectors?

**Research approaches**

As these research questions were largely about people’s experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate means of addressing them. ‘Qualitative’ is a broad descriptive term that includes various approaches to answering research questions that require an understanding of a given phenomenon within its own context. Qualitative approaches focus on the way people interpret their experiences and the world in which they live (Holloway 1997). Before proceeding to discuss the two different yet related approaches used
in this qualitative study, the philosophical foundations that underpin qualitative research will be briefly explained.

All research is based on assumptions about what is real, and how we know. The qualitative research paradigm is underpinned by a subjectivist ontology and a relativist epistemology, which means individuals create their own subjective realities and there is an interrelated and interdependent relationship between knower and known (DePoy & Gitlin 1998a). In this study, the reality was each woman’s personal perceptions of her occupational experiences over time. It was the interaction between the researcher and the women participants during in-depth individual interviews which enabled their realities to be known, interpreted and understood.

The interpretation of the women’s realities was influenced largely by the subjectivity of the researcher which, in qualitative research, is equally as significant as the participants’ subjectivity. Indeed, the subjectivity of the qualitative researcher should be celebrated because it is the starting point of the research, enabling, rather than limiting, the research process (Hasselkus 1997). In this study, the researcher’s pre-understandings of herself and of the world were shaped by her personal experiences of living and working in the Shoalhaven for over twenty years, and linked to the assumptions and beliefs of her profession, occupational therapy.

In undertaking this qualitative study, two philosophically compatible research approaches guided the orientation and conduct of the study. Essentially, a narrative approach shaped the form and structure of the study, and a hermeneutic phenomenological approach informed the analytic and interpretative processes.

**Narrative approach**

A narrative approach to research uses narratives, the stories people tell about the things they do. Developed from the study of the form and content of narratives (Ricoeur 1985; Bruner 1986; Barthes 1975 cited in Freeman 1997, p. 174), the narrative approach utilises the sequential nature of narratives and the cohesive role of narrative plots to reflect on experiences that people recall (Grbich 1999). Narratives, the basic medium through which humans speak and think, are
ubiquitous, universal. As such, narratives are uniquely suited for comprehending human lives in culture and in time (Freeman 1997), and particularly suitable for understanding people’s occupational experiences (Polkinghorne 1988; Clark, Carlson & Polkinghorne 1997). The relatively recent increase in the use of narrative approaches in various fields, as noted by Frank (1996b), is justified because narratives render human experience meaningful, and display human existence as situated action (Polkinghorne 1995). Narratives enable a ‘proper study of man’ (sic) (Bruner 1990, p. 1).

This study adopted a life history approach, a specific narrative approach that uses life stories. The purpose of the life history approach is to reconstruct and interpret whole lives in order to obtain an over time and comprehensive view of people (Frank 1996b). It should be noted that, at times in the literature, the terms ‘life story’ and ‘life history’ are used interchangeably, which tends to create some confusion. Although similar in approach and what they cover, there are subtle differences between life stories and life histories (Bertaux 1981; Frank 1996b). It suffices here to say that a life story is the account of a person’s life, delivered orally by that person, whereas a life history is the person’s story, supplemented with biographical information drawn from other sources (Bertaux 1981). For this study, a life story has been defined as:

… the story a person chooses to tell about a life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it and what the teller wants others to know of it (Atkinson 1998, p. 8).

Kenyon and Randall (1997, p. 36) refer to a life story as an ‘inside-outside story’, a story about one’s life that someone personally imparts to others. Usually, a life story covers the period from birth to the present and includes the important events and feelings a person experiences in a lifetime. A life story gives order and meaning to the life being told, for both the teller and the listener (Atkinson 1998).

A narrative approach was selected for this study for two reasons. First, the qualitative nature of the narrative approach is compatible with the humanism embedded in occupational science which provided the study’s theoretical framework. The narrative approach preserves the integrity of the individual and acknowledges the individual’s experiences as credible (Yerxa et al. 1990). Second, narratives are accounts of people’s occupational experiences, the things
they have done. According to Yerxa et al. (1990), to fully understand aspects of occupation and the occupational human, it is necessary to comprehend people’s experiences of participation in occupation. The specific life history approach was considered a suitable narrative approach because it uses life stories. As the purpose of the study was to explore the older women’s perceptions of their occupational potential throughout the life course, life stories were considered appropriate means of gathering rich data about the women’s occupational experiences over time.

**Hermeneutic phenomenological approach**

The second distinct approach, a hermeneutic orientation to phenomenology, informed this study. Based on the philosophical works of Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1975), hermeneutic phenomenology is both descriptive and interpretive in that it endeavours to not only illuminate, but also understand human phenomena. Profoundly reflective, hermeneutic phenomenology involves uncovering the essence of a phenomenon by gathering stories from those living it and then interpreting those stories (van Manen 1997). The data of hermeneutic phenomenologically based studies are personal experiences. Van Manen (1997) maintains that the aim of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is to borrow other people’s experiences in order to learn from them and develop a richer, deeper understanding of a human phenomenon. In this study, the women’s stories of their occupational experiences over time were interpreted as a means of understanding more about the concept of occupational potential.

Three constructs from a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research shaped this study, guiding how the data were viewed and understood. The first is Heidegger’s (1962) notion of ‘being-in-the-world’, or Dasein. Heidegger was concerned with what he considered the essential philosophical and human questions: what is it, to be? and what kind of ‘being’ do humans have? (Dreyfus 1991). By way of a simple explanation of an extremely complex concept, it is necessary to refer to the words of Dreyfus (1991, p. 14), well-known as a Heideggerian scholar:

> The best way to understand what Heidegger means by Dasein is to think of our term ‘human being’, which can refer to a way of being
that is characteristic of all people, or to a specific person — a human
being.

Heidegger (1962) maintained that humans are ‘thrown’ into a world they have not
made, but which consists of potentially useful things, such as cultural and natural
objects. Because these objects come from the past, for use in the present,
Heidegger (1962) posited a fundamental relation between the mode of being, of
objects and humans, and the structure of time.

The hermeneutic circle, which is attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey, is the second
construct. The hermeneutic circle refers to the reflexive and ongoing process by
which we come to understand something. The circle is a metaphor for the dialectic
movements between the parts and the whole. In this study, the analysis was an
iterative process, one which involved ongoing movement from the whole story, to
the themes, to the elements that comprise the themes, and then back again to the

The third significant construct is that of fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1975). In
hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, an horizon is ‘the range of vision that
includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gadamer
1975, p. 269). ‘Horizon’ is a suitable term in hermeneutics because it expresses
the wide, superior vision that a person seeking to understand must have.
Understanding requires more than just placing oneself into another’s situation to
obtain their view. Rather, it involves fusing one’s own horizon with that of the
other in order to bring out the tension that exists between the past and the present
and not just cover it (Gadamer 1975). This was a particularly relevant concept in
this study, given that the women, who were a generation older than the researcher,
lived in a different historical situation. In order to appreciate the women’s
experiences in their true dimensions, that is, from their historical horizons and not
only in terms of the researcher’s contemporary criteria and prejudices, it was
necessary for the researcher to fuse her horizon of understanding with that of the
women.

In summary, the narrative approach to research structured and guided the type of
data that were gathered for this study, while the hermeneutic phenomenological
approach informed data analysis processes. In addition to particular approaches
for gathering and analysing the data, the study adopted two theoretical perspectives which provided the particular viewpoints from which to interpret or make sense of the data.

**Theoretical perspectives**

Occupational science provided the overarching theoretical framework for this study. In a qualitative study, such as described in this thesis, theory is used inductively, for discovering meaning in, and enhancing understanding of, complex experiences. Theory development is also made possible through such elucidation and description (DePoy & Gitlin 1994), and it is hoped that the findings from this study will contribute to the knowledge base of occupational science by developing understandings of occupational potential, as yet a relatively unexplored concept.

Two theoretical perspectives provided viewpoints from which to make sense of the study’s data. Given that occupational science set the boundaries of this study, the primary theoretical perspective was an occupational one. The other theoretical perspective that was significant in the study was a feminist perspective, because the participants were women. Embedded within a critical social perspective that examines people in society and related power relations, a feminist perspective specifically explores power relations between genders.

**Occupational perspective**

An occupational perspective views humans as occupational beings. This perspective, which is fundamental to the theory and practice of occupational therapy (Meyer 1922), is encapsulated in the theory of the human as an occupational being (Wilcock 1993). Wilcock, a leading contemporary occupational theorist, has studied human occupational behaviour throughout history and developed a theoretical structure that centralises purposeful occupation in human lives. In the words of Wilcock (1993, p. 23):

> Humans are occupational beings with a need to use time in a purposeful way. The need is innate and related to health and survival because it enables individuals to utilise their biological capacities and potential and thereby flourish.

Within this perspective, it is considered that occupation has several functions: to provide for immediate bodily needs; to develop skills, social structures and
technology; and to exercise and develop personal capacities (Wilcock 1993, p. 20).

Some contemporary occupational therapy models also contributed to this study’s occupational perspective. For example, the Model of Human Occupation, which assumes all human occupation arises from an innate spontaneous tendency of the human system to explore and master the environment (Kielhofner 2002), and the Ecology of Human Performance Model (Dunn et al. 1994), whose fundamental theoretical assumption is that ecology, or the interaction between a person and the context, affects human behaviour and task performance, added to the study’s theoretical foundations. Similarly, ‘Occupational adaptation: An integrative frame of reference’ (Schkade & Schultz 1992; Schultz & Schkade 1992) was a useful means of understanding the concept of adaptation. According to this frame of reference, competence in occupational performance is a life-long process of adaptation to internal and external performance demands.

Two other occupational therapy models also contributed to the study’s occupational perspective, the Person-Environment Occupational Performance Model (Christiansen & Baum 1997) and the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (ed. Townsend 1997). The Person-Environment Occupational Performance Model has three basic components: what people do in their lives; what motivates them; and how their personal characteristics combine with environmental influences. The Canadian Model of Occupational Performance also recognises a dynamic relationship between person, environment and occupation over a person’s lifespan. The primary difference between the Canadian model and the other occupational therapy models is that it places spirituality at its core. In so doing, this model recognises humans as spiritual beings who have unique values, beliefs and goals (ed. Townsend 1997).

As all these models essentially emphasise the dynamic interaction between people, their occupations and the environments in which they live, they highlighted the need to critically consider the social, cultural, historical and economic influences that influenced the women’s lives. Accordingly, it was appropriate to adopt a feminist perspective as well.
Feminist perspective

A feminist perspective is essentially a woman-centred perspective that emerges from feminist theories. A second wave of feminist theories developed in the 1960s as a result of dissatisfaction with traditional explanations of society that either ignored gender issues and the study of women altogether, or simply reflected sexist assumptions about the role of women. Millet (1970), Game and Pringle (1983) and Summers (1975) were some of the prominent feminist theorists who then began asking questions about the lack of studies on women and focusing on why women had inferior social positions. Essentially, feminist theories have challenged biological assumptions about women’s nature and identified gender role socialisation and sexual discrimination as keys to understanding gender inequalities (Germov 1998).

Feminist perspectives vary depending upon which feminist theory they are based. Wearing’s (1996) comprehensive overview explains the differences between the structuralist feminist theories, which include liberal, radical, socialist and Marxist feminist theories. Although each of these theories addresses the issues of patriarchy, gender and stratification, and the domestic labour debate in slightly different ways, they all remain structuralist in that they rely on ‘the dichotomous masculine/feminine framework that does not question the phallocentric way that the dominant masculine terms define the feminine’ (Wearing 1996, p. 30). However, in the last twenty years, post-structuralist and postmodern critical social science has influenced feminist thinking to the extent that a paradigm shift has occurred.

Critical social science attempts to understand the oppressive features of a society in order to alter it. Critical social science assumes humans are active beings who, with their intelligence, curiosity, reflectiveness and wilfulness, can co-author their lives. However, it also acknowledges that humans are embodied, traditional, historical and embedded, and that these other dimensions of human nature limit activity, ‘mitigating the effectiveness of the capacities which comprise it’ (Fay 1987, p. 209). The feminist movement has developed critical theories that attempt to explain the social existence of women and has endeavoured to improve that existence. Accordingly, post-structuralist and postmodern feminist theories and
perspectives now focus on the local, specific and particular, and challenge the universal and macro social views of the structuralists (Wearing 1996).

This study primarily adopted a viewpoint that pre-supposes ‘the centrality, normality and value of women’s experience and culture’ (Eisenstein 1984, p. xvii). Such a perspective on women emerged with the development of the late second wave of contemporary feminist thought. As opposed to the first wave, which strove to eliminate the socially constructed differences between the sexes, early second wave feminists concentrated on the distinction between sex and gender and argued for a form of androgyny to replace the polarisation of the male and female spheres (Eisenstein 1984). However, the feminists who formed part of the late second wave, recognised the apparent difficulties of women trying to adapt to the existing patriarchal system. Consequently, post-structural feminists began to concentrate on specific elements of the female experience and celebrate the differences, acknowledging the unique capacities and strengths of women (eds Crowley & Himmelweit 1992). Such an approach, however, has raised concerns that it focuses on a supposed moral superiority of women (Alston 1995) A post-structuralist feminist perspective explores the view that women have the freedom to become autonomous, to take some control in the direction in which their lives are headed, and to become the women they want to be (Wearing 1996).

Adopting a feminist perspective meant critically reflecting on the organisation of the everyday lives of the study participants to enable an appreciation of the power and social structures that influenced aspects of their lives (Townsend 1998a). Such an approach to the interpretation of the study data meant acknowledging and explaining the social, economic and political constraints on the women’s occupational participation, and their subsequent influence on the development of the women’s occupational potential. Adopting a post-structuralist feminist perspective meant looking for the unique ways in which the women have overcome some of the socially structured constraints on the development of their occupational potential. As espoused by Freire (1973), the critical consciousness of the researcher, and indeed the participants, was liberated by adopting such a perspective.
Setting of the study

As the primary purpose of qualitative research is to discover and reveal the perspectives of people and the meanings they assign to behaviours and experiences, qualitative research is context specific, and the knowledge derived from it is embedded within that context, and does not extend beyond it (DePoy & Gitlin 1994). For such reasons, it is important to appreciate the geographical and temporal contexts within which this study was set.

The Shoalhaven was the setting for this study. The Shoalhaven is a local government area located on the south coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. It is two hours’ drive south of Sydney, the state’s capital city, and two and a half hours from Canberra, the national capital. Covering an area of 4,660 square kilometres, it consists of forty-nine different towns and villages, mainly located along the coastal fringe. Typical of other NSW coastal communities, the Shoalhaven used to be primarily an agricultural community; however, today, manufacturing and tourism are the main sources of revenue (Shoalhaven City Council 1999).

The Shoalhaven has an Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) of 1.5108, indicating it is highly accessible to a wide range of goods and services and opportunities for social interaction (Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care 2001). According to the 2001 Census, the current population of the Shoalhaven is 83,548. Since the previous census, in 1996, Shoalhaven has had a significantly higher growth rate compared to the rest of the state of New South Wales, and a higher proportion of older people (i.e. those who are aged sixty-five and over) live in the Shoalhaven, when compared to state and national averages (ABS 2003). Table 3.1 summarises and compares the Shoalhaven, state and national population growth rates over the past five years and the percentage of older persons.

The Shoalhaven’s high growth rate and its large proportion of older people support Salt’s (2001) thesis of the ‘big shift’ to non-metropolitan coastal communities around Australia. In Salt’s view, the current expansion of rural coastal communities is indicative of a third Australian culture. Following on from the nineteenth century culture of the bush, and the twentieth century culture of
suburbia, Salt believes the twenty-first century is the culture of the beach. An implication of this sea change is that the growing populations in rural coastal communities, such as the Shoalhaven, contain older people from a variety of backgrounds who make the ‘shift’ when they retire. Such an implication was reflected in the study participants. Of the six women interviewed, five moved to the Shoalhaven when they retired.

Table 3.1: Summary and comparison of Shoalhaven, state and national population growth rates and percentage of older persons, as per the ABS (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census</th>
<th>Total population growth since 1996 census</th>
<th>Percentage of population aged over 65 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shoalhaven</td>
<td>7.45%</td>
<td>17.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specific venues within the Shoalhaven were selected for the collection of the study data. Three focus groups were conducted in the Country Women’s Association’s (CWA) building. Recently purpose-built, the CWA building is located in Nowra, the administration centre of the Shoalhaven. It was the venue of choice for the focus groups as it is a woman-friendly environment, airconditioned and accessible to older people. The women who participated in the individual interviews were given the opportunity to choose where they wanted to be interviewed. All but one chose their homes. A private and comfortable alternative was found for that woman, living in a small mobile home, who did not wish to be interviewed in the presence of her husband. Conducting the interviews in the homes was advantageous for both researcher and interviewees, for two reasons. As the women were in familiar surroundings, they were able to relax readily, minimising any anxiety they may have had in the early interviews. Also, interviewing the women in their homes, afforded the researcher another context in which to consider the women as occupational beings, as defined by their possessions and their personal objects (Hocking 2000).
Study sequence and rationale

There were three phases to this study, each with a specific purpose. Phase one, consisting of a focus group and three life story interviews with one woman, was conducted from November 2000 to January 2001 as a pilot study. The purpose of the pilot was to evaluate the proposed methods and to collect some preliminary data for trial analysis. Phase two, from February to March 2001, involved two focus groups that were conducted to ascertain the contextual dimensions of the women’s lives as well as to illuminate some themes to be explored in greater depth in the subsequent individual life story interviews. The third phase, comprising the life story interviews, was used to collect the data for narrative analysis. Conducted between April and October 2001, the interviews were held fortnightly, usually with one woman’s life story being completed before the next was commenced. Table 3.2 summarises the scheduling of the study phases and their purposes.

Table 3.2: Summary of schedule for focus groups and interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pilot</td>
<td>To evaluate data collection methods and trial analysis</td>
<td>Pilot Focus Group</td>
<td>November 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pilot individual interviews</td>
<td>December 2000 – January 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focus groups</td>
<td>To ascertain contextual dimensions and illuminate themes for deeper exploration</td>
<td>Focus Group 1</td>
<td>February 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Group 2</td>
<td>March 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Life story interviews</td>
<td>To collect life story data for narrative analysis</td>
<td>Individual interviews A</td>
<td>April–May 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews B</td>
<td>May–June 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews C</td>
<td>July–August 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews D</td>
<td>August–September 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews E</td>
<td>September–October 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individual interviews F</td>
<td>September–October 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research processes

Undertaking the research for this study involved a series of processes. There were also certain conditions acknowledging the responsibilities of the researcher and the rights of the participants. These necessary processes and important conditions will now be explained.

Ethical clearance

The Charles Sturt University Ethics Committee approved this study in September 2000. Such approval is necessary before undertaking any research involving human subjects. A copy of the ethics approval is located at the front of this thesis.

Recruitment and sampling

Following approval from the Ethics Committee, recruitment of the study participants was undertaken. Several strategies were used to recruit participants for this study. The researcher attended meetings of the Country Women’s Association (CWA), the Voices, Interests, Education for Women (VIEW) Club and the Older Women’s Network (OWN) in Nowra and informed those members present about the study. All members from the three groups were invited to register their interest in participation in the study. Attendees at each meeting were women, the majority of whom were over sixty-five years of age. Publication of articles about the study in the local newspaper and University of the Third Age (U3A) newsletter, as well as ‘word of mouth’, were additional recruiting tactics. The criteria for participation were being a woman, at least sixty-five years old, and currently living in the Shoalhaven. The third criterion, being a Shoalhaven resident, provided an opportunistic sample (Llewellyn, Sullivan & Minichiello 1999) as the researcher was living in the Shoalhaven at the time of the research. Such a criterion ensured a sample that was relatively convenient for the researcher to access and with which to saturate herself. In addition, as a result of Salt’s (2001, p. 2) ‘big shift’ to the coast, which has been ‘facilitated by new values and concepts such as leisure, entertainment, lifestyle and retirement and aided by new social and financial arrangements such as superannuation’, a diverse sample of older women was readily available.

As a result of the recruitment process, a total of thirty-four women indicated that they were interested in participating in a focus group, and/or being individually
interviewed. From this recruitment pool, women were randomly sampled to attend the pilot focus group, and one woman was purposively selected to participate in the pilot individual interviews. The women for the pilot focus group were notified by telephone and then sent an information sheet. The recruitment pool was also used when inviting women to participate in the subsequent focus groups. The only limiting factor in each instance was the women’s availability on the specified day. Six women attended the pilot focus group and there were nine and seven women in focus groups one and two, respectively. Table 3.3 summarises the number of participants in each focus group.

Table 3.3: Number of participants in focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot focus group</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group 2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the twenty-two participants of the focus groups, women for the life story interviews were selected for a purposive sample to ensure that ‘information rich’ life stories, with maximum variation, were available for in-depth study (Llewellyn, Sullivan & Minichiello 1999, p. 189). The women were selected because, in the focus groups, they had demonstrated an ability to reminisce and reflect and had revealed diverse educational and social backgrounds. Though a relatively small sample size was anticipated prior to commencing the interviews, it was not known how many women’s life stories would be sufficient. However, as the selected women were adequately diverse in their backgrounds and experiences with respect to marital status, family, qualifications, employment history, years of residency in Shoalhaven and previous residency, ‘saturation’ (DePoy & Gitlin 1994, p. 304) was reached at the completion of the sixth life story. Admittedly, due to the uniqueness of every life story, additional women would certainly have provided more information but, in this instance, as recommended by Sandelowski (1995), the researcher used her own judgement in gathering six ‘thick’ life stories. The profiles of the individual interviewees are
presented in Table 3.4, and copies of the information sheets sent to the study participants are found in Appendix A.

Table 3.4: Interviewee profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A Sylvia</th>
<th>B Maureen</th>
<th>C Fran</th>
<th>D Doris</th>
<th>E Mary</th>
<th>F Alice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (yrs)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M x 3 D x 2</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (no.)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational qualification</td>
<td>I.C</td>
<td>I.C</td>
<td>I.C</td>
<td>Dip.T. Dip.Ed.</td>
<td>3 x nursing certificates</td>
<td>I.C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid vocations</td>
<td>secretary, research assistant</td>
<td>insurance clerk, retailer, machinist</td>
<td>factory worker, machinist</td>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>nurse</td>
<td>clerk, farm manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of years living in Shoalhaven</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous residence</td>
<td>urban NSW</td>
<td>urban NSW</td>
<td>urban NSW</td>
<td>regional NSW</td>
<td>urban NSW</td>
<td>rural NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment source</td>
<td>snowball</td>
<td>OWN</td>
<td>U3A</td>
<td>newspaper</td>
<td>CWA</td>
<td>CWA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:  
M married  
D divorced  
S single  
W widow  
I.C. Intermediate Certificate  
Dip.T. Diploma of Teaching  
Dip.Ed. Diploma of Education  
OWN Older Women’s Network  
U3A University of the Third Age  
CWA Country Women’s Association

Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants

The women agreed to participate in the study on the basis of the consent conditions (see Appendix B). At no time have any details capable of identifying the women been made public or appeared in any publications, and every endeavour has been made to ensure their anonymity. No person other than the researcher has listened to the original taped interviews or read the original transcripts. All transcript extracts that have been discussed with the study supervisor and selected peers, published or presented, have contained pseudonyms and non-identifiable data. Tapes are stored in a sealed box in a locked cupboard. Consistent with the ethics approval, they will be incinerated after five years, at the same time that any documents containing identifying data will be shredded.
Participant support
After completion of the first two phases, a female Shoalhaven psychologist was recruited to provide counselling to any interviewee who required or requested it. Such a provision was not required at the time ethics approval was sought. However, it was introduced, as a precautionary measure, should any of the interviewees become distressed or anxious as a result of their reminiscences. This service was available at no cost to the participant because the psychologist was to be reimbursed for services rendered from research support funds. Prior to commencing the first interview, each woman was informed about the availability of the psychologist’s services. Though the services were also available to the researcher if necessary, the regular de-briefing sessions held with the study supervisor provided the researcher with adequate support.

Interviewing and dialogic processes
As part of the trial process, the pilot focus group and pilot interviews were conducted in accordance with recognised guidelines and dialogic principles (Patton 1990; Kenyon & Randall 1997; Atkinson 1998; Minichiello et al. 1999; St John 1999; Morgan 2001). These guidelines and principles proved satisfactory, with only minor modifications made in the subsequent group and individual sessions. It should be acknowledged that, as to be expected, the researcher’s skills as an interviewer and story listener improved over time.

There were three parts to each focus group session. The first part, usually about thirty to forty-five minutes in length, was an introductory discussion in which the purpose, format and guidelines for the focus group were explained and consent forms signed. A copy of the researcher’s script for explaining the guidelines for the focus groups is attached as Appendix C. In the second part, the data were collected by means of two tape recorders. The average length of this second part was ninety minutes. The third and final part of the focus group session was the ‘debriefing’ (Holloway 1997, p. 46), during which refreshments were served. The discussions that took place in this part of the session proved valuable for clarifying some of the data, and useful ‘field notes’ (Holloway 1997, p. 71; van Maanen 1988, pp. 117–118) were always recorded for later reference and use during the analysis phase. The level of excitement and noise generated during this
part confirmed the reported positive effect of focus group participation and sharing one’s life story with an interested, supportive audience (Birren & Deutchman 1991). Generally, the focus group session concluded after about three hours. Table 3.5 summarises the focus group format.

Table 3.5: Focus group format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>30–45 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 2</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>90–100 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part 3</td>
<td>Debriefing and data clarification</td>
<td>30–45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>150–190 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The individual interview sessions were conducted face to face, in a relaxed manner, with each woman choosing her ‘own spot’ (Atkinson 1998, p. 30) where she felt most comfortable. Usually, there were two components to each interview session: data collection and discussion. Only the data collection component, which ranged from 69 to 110 minutes in length, was tape recorded and therefore available for narrative analysis. However, field notes from the discussion component, which ranged from 60 to 100 minutes, were always made, forming an important part of the researcher’s ‘reflexive journal’ (Holloway 1997, p. 135). Extracts from the researcher’s Reflexive Journal are included in Appendix D. In the discussions, when the women often reflected on the story they had just told, there was opportunity for deeper insight into the women’s personal experiences. As a result, the discussion component helped inform the analysis and interpretation phases of the study.

In total, there were twenty-one individual interview sessions, sixteen of which were for data collection and dialogic discussion, and five for data clarification, in which the participants had opportunity to check their stories, modifying or expanding them as they wished. The number of individual interview sessions per woman ranged from three to four, determined by the point of saturation, which was the stage in the interview when both the woman and the researcher were reasonably satisfied that the topic under study had been exhausted (Holloway
Table 3.6 summarises the number of individual interview sessions with each woman.

Table 3.6: Summary of the number of individual interview sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Data collection and discussion</th>
<th>Data clarification</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Sylvia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Maureen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Fran</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Doris</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Mary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Alice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that the researcher was both focus group leader and interviewer also had some bearing on the total number of interviews undertaken. As all the interviewees had been participants in the focus groups, their familiarity with the researcher facilitated a comfortable start to the interviewing sessions, enabling the women to commence in-depth story telling at their first interview.

Transcribing

Each focus group session and all the data collection components of the individual interviews were transcribed for analysis (van Maanen 1988). Complete transcription involved typing up exactly what was said on the tape, which was considered the primary document (Atkinson 1998). In this study, transcription guidelines as advocated by the Center of the Study of Lives (Atkinson 1998) were adopted. The benefits of the researcher undertaking the transcription were evident after the pilot study. Transcription, which took six to eight hours per interview, provided an excellent opportunity to become fully saturated with the data. In addition, as the researcher had conducted each interview, she was able to include particular nuances and non-verbal gestures, such as ‘wiping tear from eye’, in the transcripts. Inclusions such as these seem to add valuable texture and tone to the transcripts. Although the original intention was to contract the services of a transcriber, the experience of phase one, the pilot study, was sufficient to convince the researcher to continue personally transcribing.
**Participant checking**

Unlike quantitative studies, which seek facts, truth and representativeness, this study used participant checking to add to its contextual richness and to ensure the participants were satisfied the transcripts adequately reflected their personal experiences. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach adopted in this study recognises that the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self evident, yet are the truths of experience (ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989).

Within a week of each interview, a typed copy of the transcription was posted to the participant, with the request that she review it prior to the next interview. The purpose of the participants checking the transcripts, referred to as the secondary document (Atkinson 1998), was to give them the opportunity to approve the data for analysis, as well as recognise their collaborative role in the study (Minichiello et al. 1999). It also gave the participants an opportunity to add any additional information they had thought about since the interview (Guba & Lincoln 1989). This option was taken up by two of the women. In one instance, however, one of the women, upon reflection and after reading through her transcript, requested that some information be deleted. Due to the researcher’s total respect for this woman’s authorship of her story, this request was fulfilled without the need for questions or explanations. Generally, only minor modifications were made, such as correcting dates or names.

**Analysis of the data**

We cannot analyse data without ideas, but the ideas must be shaped by the data we are analysing (Dey 1993 cited in Banning 1997, p. 130).

As there are no rules or formulas for the analysis of data in qualitative research, qualitative researchers are guided, to a large extent, by the form and nature of the data itself (Denzin 1994). For that reason, there is a wide variety of approaches to data analysis in narrative methodologies, several of which adopt a traditional form of thematic analysis, fragmenting texts, coding small chunks and collating them (Rice & Ezzy 1999). Despite different approaches, the essential aim of analysing narratives is to interpret or make sense of the data (van Manen 1997).

In this study, the manner in which the life story data were analysed and interpreted evolved over a lengthy period into a ‘custom-made’ process. The
process was developed in response to interaction with the life stories and was informed by hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative theory. Narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995) was especially influential in this study because, by emphasising the wholeness of narratives, narrative analysis retains the integrity and uniqueness of each story, rather than dissecting it into elements. From the outset, it was the researcher’s goal to celebrate and honour each life story by focusing on its individual quality. In addition, the narrative analysis approach was appropriate for this study as the purpose of using life stories was to gain an appreciation of whole lives from occupational and feminist perspectives.

The following section describes the various stages in the process of analysis of the six life stories. Despite their seemingly eclectic nature, these different stages, drawn from a range of analytical approaches, were deemed the ‘best fit’ for the data and the most suitable for the study’s purpose. As inferred by Dey (1993) above, the analysis was shaped by the data itself. Each stage was time consuming, demanding and iterative, as is characteristic of qualitative analysis.

**Analytical processes**

In all, there were four stages in the analysis of the life stories. These stages are presented in the sequence in which they basically occurred, though at times, due to the spiral nature of qualitative analysis, they took place concurrently.

**Being saturated**

The initial analytical stage in this study was saturation, in which the researcher became intentionally steeped in the world of the research participants (Bowers 1988 cited in Higgs 1997, p. 7) in order to become familiar with their world (Holloway 1997). The saturation stage actually began during recruitment of participants, when the researcher was addressing community groups of older women, as the meetings provided an appreciation of some of the values and diverse occupational interests of the members. This stage continued opportunistically throughout the life of the study. For example, as part of fieldwork, to understand the culture under study (van Maanen, 1988), the researcher visited some museums, which provided insight into the private lives and daily world of twentieth century Australian rural women. There were visits to the Pioneer Women’s Hut in Tumbarumba, a national museum dedicated to
collecting domestic objects relating to rural families, especially the women (Hucker n.d.), and to Meroogal, the Women’s History Place in Nowra, Shoalhaven which was home to four generations of women from the same family (Historic Homes Trust of NSW 1988). Stories about and by other women of an age similar to that of the study participants (Thorpe 1987; Clark 1991; Thomas 1997; Older Women’s Network 1999) afforded an emic perspective, an ‘insider’s way of understanding and interpreting women’s experiences (DePoy & Gitlin 1994, p. 130). Listening and re-listening to the tapes, particularly during the transcription, as well as reading and re-reading the transcripts, were important contributors to the saturation.

**Sequencing the events**

Sequencing the events described in each life story into chronological order was another part of the analysis process. Basically, the aim of this stage, which involved reorganising the stories temporally, was to bring about order and meaningfulness that were not always apparent in the life stories (Polkinghorne 1995). Although most of the women began their stories at the beginning, when they were young, they often included episodes that were out of sequence. In many instances, retelling a particular part of their stories prompted the recall of additional, yet temporally unrelated episodes. Sequencing the events also helped to develop the social, historical, political and economic dimensions of each woman’s occupational life course, and provided a temporal framework within which to understand her occupational experiences (Goodfellow 1997).

**Illuminating the themes**

The third stage involved illuminating the themes and sub texts that were woven throughout the stories. In the words of van Manen (1997, p. 90), themes, ‘like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun’, are abstract notions that get to the core of the phenomenon being explored and assist in understanding the meaning associated with lived experiences. Illuminating the occupational themes in each woman’s life story facilitated interpretation of her occupational experiences. Rather than mechanically counting or coding selected terms, illuminating the themes in this study was more a matter of ‘seeing’ the themes within the text as a whole, within discrete episodes of the
stories or even within particular sentences, as described in hermeneutic phenomenology. This stage followed the principles of the hermeneutic circle in that there was a recurring movement between the whole story and the individual episodes to ensure that the major events or actions described did not contradict or conflict with the idea behind the plot (Polkinghorne 1995). Essentially, this stage ensured coherence, enabled critical reflection and facilitated the interpretation.

**Interpreting the stories**

Interpreting the data was an ongoing part of this study, and was dependent upon the previous stages of analysis. Indeed, interpretation continued throughout the data collection phase, the analysis and the writing up of the thesis. It was truly a reflective experience. In addition to interpreting each story individually, the data set was interpreted as a whole, in the endeavour to explore the concept of occupational potential. As van Manen (1997) contends, we interpret qualitative data so that we may understand human phenomena.

The interpretation was a productive and transformative process that brought out and refined the meanings that could be sifted from the women’s stories (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). In essence, the interpretation was used to answer the research questions by interpreting how the women themselves interpreted the phenomenon of occupational potential (Wiseman 1998). It is important to note that the interpretations were influenced by the researcher’s *lebenswelt*, or life-world (Heidegger 1962), and by the theoretical constructs and approaches which informed the study from the outset. As van Manen (2000, Inquiry: Writing section, para. 5) reminds us:

> … no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is beyond challenge. It behoves us to remain as attentive as possible to the ways that all of us experience the world and to the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences.

**Programs used in analysis**

Ethnograph, a qualitative software program (Tesch 1990), was used primarily in the study for data management. All the focus group and interview transcripts were formatted in Ethnograph, thus producing texts that were consistent in style. For example, each line and page was numbered, all pages had a set margin and each
transcript was identified by a code name and date. Appendix E contains a page from one of the transcripts formatted in Ethnograph. These program facilities were very useful, assisting in the organisation of very large amounts of printed text.

Although Ethnograph also has the ability to generate memos and construct catalogues, these functions were used very little in the data analysis, for several reasons. First, one of the aims of the study was to maintain the integrity of each story and not to cross-reference themes or plots. Second, as the study was informed by hermeneutic phenomenology, which adopts a textual approach (van Manen 2000), the positivistic notion of reducing data to discrete parts with hierarchic relationships to each other was inconsistent with the study’s philosophical foundations. And, third, the researcher felt the program provided a barrier to the immediacy of the text, thus hindering connectiveness to the women’s words.

**Authenticity, trustworthiness and quality assurance**

The authenticity and trustworthiness of the processes involved in this study were maintained by systematic approaches to the research design, data collection and interpretation (Mays & Pope 2000) and a self conscious adherence to those criteria considered essential for quality qualitative research (Higgs & Adams 1997). An extensive ‘audit trail’ (Holloway 1997, p. 26) was developed, the principal component being the researcher’s ‘reflexive journal’ (Holloway 1997, p. 135). All the material that was retained in this journal was dated and catalogued. The journal also included a record of personal *a priori* constructions (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Dickie 1997), emerging thoughts and ideas.

Triangulation (Rice & Ezzy 1999) of data sources, methods and theory was used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of occupational potential, the phenomenon being studied (DePoy & Gitlin 1994). Multiple informants, being the twenty-two focus group participants from which the six individual interviewees were selected, provided the data, while focus groups and life story interviews were the means of gathering the data. The study supervisor, the participants themselves and peers of the researcher collaborated with the researcher to ensure multiple viewpoints were considered. Regular debriefing sessions held with the
supervisor and quarterly workshops with fellow doctoral students were used as opportunities to critique the processes, to test findings and assist in making propositional any tacit and implicit information within the data (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Such sessions were also extremely valuable as a means of catharsis, within confidential, professional relationships, helping to reduce any psychological stress resulting from the interviews. Finally, both occupational and feminist perspectives were adopted in the analysis and interpretation.

**Limitations of the study**

The limitations of this study are those features of its design and method which restricted certain aspects of the research, such as diversity of sample and focus group content, and over which the researcher had no control (Holloway 1997). With hindsight, it is apparent that modifications to the recruiting strategies could have reduced some of the limitations.

Among the recruitment pool of thirty-four women, there were no indigenous women, women from a non-English speaking background, women from other marginalised groups such as lesbians, or women who were physically or mentally challenged. This is possibly a result of one of the recruiting strategies that involved targeting some of the local community women’s groups. In retrospect, it is appreciated that those targeted groups were very homogenous in their membership, that is, the majority of members were physically and mentally able, community-minded and of Anglo-Saxon origin. Perhaps there could have been an increase in the diversity of the recruits, hence increasing the diversity of the women purposively selected for the interviews, if other types of women’s groups were targeted as well, for example, women’s sporting groups and professional organisations. While it could be argued that if women from marginalised groups were included, the diversity of ethnic, sociocultural and economic backgrounds would have increased, the decision not to target marginalised women’s groups can be defended. As membership of different marginalised groups could impact significantly on occupational experiences, thus influencing the realisation of occupational potential, it would be necessary to conduct an entire study focusing on a particular marginalised group.
The personal dynamics in the focus groups certainly influenced the content, direction and depth of discussion (St John 1999). Despite having rules for the focus groups, there were one or two women who tended to dominate each focus group, perhaps intimidating some of the other women who did not share as much of their own stories as desired, thus limiting their contribution.

Finally, as with most unstructured interviews, there was always the risk that the participants might choose to tell the stories that they thought the researcher wanted to hear. That is, it was possible the women would shape their stories to the presumed interests of the researcher (Atkinson 1998), thus limiting their value to the study. It is believed that this may have happened, to a slight degree, in the initial interviews only. It became apparent as the interviews progressed that the women all acquired a genuine interest in the study and endeavoured as much as possible to contribute deep and meaningful personal reflections.

**Introduction to the data**

This section describes how the data are presented and organised in the following three chapters. Relevant ethical, practical and theoretical reasons for such structure are discussed.

**Data presentation**

The following three chapters present interpretations of the women’s life stories. In order to maintain the conditions of the ethics approval, a pseudonym is used for each woman and no specific details of an identifiable nature are disclosed, ensuring the anonymity of the six women who shared their life stories. For example, appropriate substitutes have been used for all of the place names and significant others.

**Hearing the voices**

To ensure consistency with narrative theory, which acknowledges that the stories belong to the people who told them (ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989), and to maintain consistency with some of the principles advocated by feminism, namely, that women should be subjects, rather than objects of study and that their voices should be heard (Smith 1988), the following chapters contain extracts taken directly from the transcripts. Many of the selected extracts are quite long and have
been included to ensure the meanings of the women’s words remain embedded within the context in which they were spoken. Each extract begins with the pseudonym of the woman who spoke it and is presented as an indented block of text. In other instances, when a smaller number of the women’s words are included, their actual words are presented in italics so that they are readily recognisable. Some of the women’s words are printed in bold to signify the emphasis with which they were spoken during the interviews. Physical descriptors are sometimes included to highlight the emotion expressed. It is important to note that the extracts were taken directly from the transcripts and represent exactly what the women said. On only a few occasions has the syntax been changed, and additional words added in brackets, such as these [ ]. Such measures were considered necessary to ensure comprehension. The original meaning of the women’s words has remained intact.

**Organisation of the data**

To ensure congruency with an over time perspective, a developmental approach to the presentation of the data has been adopted. Chapter four discusses the early influences on occupational potential. The occupational tensions in adulthood are discussed in chapter five, and chapter six presents the findings that relate to the women’s occupational potential in late adulthood, as well as their reflections and expectations for the future.

**Introducing the women**

This section of the chapter introduces the six women who shared their life stories for this study. The purpose of introducing the women is to provide background for the subsequent chapters, which present and interpret the women’s experiences. This section identifies significant others and important chronological markers in the women’s lives and describes the different contexts in which they lived. The purpose of including brief descriptions of the women and mentioning some of their relevant idiosyncrasies is to facilitate rapport when reading the interpretative commentaries that follow. Again, it is important to emphasise that throughout this thesis, all names are pseudonyms and place names have been altered to ensure anonymity.
For this section, the women’s stories, as they were told in the interviews, have been reorganised chronologically to provide over time perspectives of their lives. Though most of the women began their stories from the beginning, that is, when they were young, they often digressed in their telling, moving forward or backward in time as they reminisced and reflected.

While acknowledging that the reorganised versions presented herein are skeletal and bland in comparison to the rich and engaging stories told by the women themselves, it is anticipated that the extracts included in the following three data chapters will deepen understandings of these six special women and evoke emotional responses that are characteristic of life story research.

**Sylvia**

Sylvia was born in 1928, the only child of a middle class family. She spent most of her childhood living in a waterfront home on an isolated river headland in Sydney. When the Japanese submarines entered Sydney Harbour, she was sent away to boarding school in the Blue Mountains, because her parents were terrified that she might die from the bombardment. Her father was an accountant who later became a financial journalist. Her mother used to play tennis and have bridge parties until she was recruited as a dietitian’s aid during the war, and that was a blossoming for her.

As a young girl, Sylvia led a solitary but contented life, enjoying a culturally rich environment. Provided she did not make a move or say a word, she was allowed to stay up for the intellectual discussions that were frequently held in her home with her father’s friends. Music, literature and opera were inherent parts of her upbringing. Sylvia left school at the age of fourteen years and eight months. Though she wanted to pursue a career in journalism, her parents insisted that she attend a business college. Her parents had been badly scarred by the Depression and believed she needed commercial training so she could get a secure job in the bank. After completing the twelve month course, she had a series of jobs: as a temporary public servant in the Department of Information, a clerical assistant for a playwright and then for an advertising agency.
Sylvia married Keith, a decommissioned English naval officer when she was aged twenty and they spent the first year of their marriage travelling and working in Europe. On their return to Australia, they moved to Canberra for Keith’s work. Sylvia secured some interesting positions as a clerical and research assistant for several academics at the newly established Australian National University. During this time she attended evening lectures in political science and international relations as a non-examinable student. At the age of twenty-seven, she had the first of their three children. She continued working part time during and between her pregnancies.

The family moved to Adelaide for five years because Keith had been given a promotion. During this period, Sylvia was not employed, but she was busy caring for her young family and also looking after her parents and her grandmother who also moved to South Australia. On their return to Sydney, following another promotion for Keith, Sylvia again worked in a variety of interesting part time positions: as a census taker, assistant for an entrepreneur and a columnist, and a secretarial assistant for the Parents and Citizens and the Family Planning Associations. Her final position, prior to her retirement at the age of fifty-five, was as secretary to the local Member of Parliament.

When she was not working, Sylvia attended adult education classes, played bridge and tennis and enjoyed recreational sailing. She was also a regular subscriber to the theatre and opera. They moved to the Shoalhaven in 1991, once Keith retired. They now live on a five acre property nestled under the escarpment and surrounded by lush, rolling hills. They are close to the beach and only fifteen minutes’ drive to the administration centre. Both Sylvia and Keith are active in local cultural groups. They enjoy gardening and frequently entertain. They both have insatiable appetites for reading.

The four interview sessions with Sylvia were conducted in the lounge room of her beautiful home, the walls of which are lined with books and hung with original paintings in various styles. Keith was at home at the time of each interview and usually prepared the post-interview refreshments. Although she has had some major illnesses in the past, and is not particularly strong in a physical sense, Sylvia nevertheless leads an exhausting social life. She has grey straight hair,
sometimes coiffured, a medium build and always dresses stylishly. Sylvia was a ‘snowball’ participant in the pilot focus group.

**Maureen**

Maureen chose not to be interviewed in her own home as she felt she would not have the privacy she wanted. She and her husband live in a small mobile home in a Shoalhaven Council caravan park in Nowra, and her husband stays home all the time. The home of a friend of the researcher was a suitable and convenient alternative venue for the interviews. Maureen and Ron have been living in the caravan park since selling their home in an outlying village ten years ago. Prior to their move to the Shoalhaven twenty-four years ago for an early retirement, they had always lived in Sydney. Maureen, who was born in 1929, was aged seventy-two at the time of the interviews. She is a volunteer with the St Vincent de Paul Society and a relatively new member of the Older Women’s Network (OWN). It was at one of the OWN meetings that she was invited to participate in a focus group for this study.

Maureen grew up in Sydney, the eldest daughter of four children of a working class family. She loved school and wanted to continue so she could become a teacher. However, for financial reasons, her parents wanted her to leave after completion of her Intermediate Certificate and to attend a commercial college. Upon completion of her training, Maureen worked in various clerical positions, most of which she found rather boring. She married her first husband, who was fifteen years older than her, just after she had turned twenty-one. Her parents were very much against the marriage, but they wouldn’t give any reason why, so she went against their wishes and married him anyway. It was a disaster from go to whoa. She was twenty-five when the marriage collapsed, after she informed her husband she was pregnant. She miscarried three weeks after he left her. Maureen met her current husband when she was twenty-seven years old and they married three years later. They have two adopted daughters.

Due to her husband’s long-term mental and physical health problems, Maureen has been the primary wage earner as well as carer of the children and homemaker. She has been employed in numerous positions, as a sewing machinist, a sales representative for an insurance company, a party plan agent, and a housekeeper.
When she ceased working, at the age of fifty-eight, she cared for her widowed mother for eight years until she was resettled into a nursing home. Maureen’s mother died, at the age of ninety-two, during the period of the interviews. With money from her mother’s estate, Maureen has recently planned a solo trip to Perth, which will fulfil a dream she has had since she was sixteen. She has never travelled overseas, though she has been interstate before.

Maureen’s current interests include reading and word puzzles. As the arthritis in her hands has worsened, she has reduced the amount of sewing she does, an occupation in which she has participated since she was taught by her mother at the age of nine. Maureen is a small, spritely woman who is most probably always busy doing something. She had a hip replacement about ten years ago but is still physically active. Her general health is good. Maureen dresses comfortably in knitted pantsuits.

Fran

Fran, at the age of sixty-six years, was the youngest woman interviewed for the study. She grew up in the very heart of working class Sydney. Her father, whom she describes as a drunken bastard and wife beater, left when she was aged seven and her mother raised her as an only child.

From all accounts, Fran had an impoverished childhood. Her mother had to work all the time, just to make ends meet, and Fran often stayed away from school. She says she only had a couple of friends and does not recall ever doing anything special or spectacular. After completing the Intermediate Certificate, in which she obviously didn’t do very well, her headmistress arranged for her to undertake a four year apprenticeship with a dressmaker. When Fran finished her training, she and a friend went hitch hiking around New South Wales and Queensland for nine months.

Fran was nineteen when she returned home from her trip. It was then that she met Harry, the man she married six months later. Harry was an electrician and Fran worked as a machinist until she became pregnant. Initially, they lived with Fran’s mother and then moved out to south western Sydney. From the birth of their first child, until their adopted fourth child was aged three and she was thirty-eight,
Fran was ill with asthma, a condition which severely restricted her occupational participation. *I couldn’t go anywhere, I couldn’t do anything, not that we had any money to do anything.*

Fran has not worked outside the home since she was married. When the children were young, she *just tagged along at weekends*, watching them play sport. In her late forties and early fifties, she participated in the self-chosen occupations of tennis and exercise classes. Fran says she really enjoyed becoming a grandmother for the first time and spent a lot of time caring for her first grandson.

When she was aged sixty and her husband retired from work, they decided to live permanently in the Shoalhaven where they had a holiday shack in a small coastal village. In the past six years, they have built a new home on the site of their shack and have had two caravanning trips around Australia. Currently, Fran plays bowls regularly and she and her husband attend the monthly local dances. She grows vegetables in a small garden patch and flowers in pots. Until recently, she has had a pet chicken.

Fran was interviewed in her new home, of which she is obviously very proud. For the first interview, she instructed her husband to remain out in the back shed. The second interview was arranged on a day he was not at home. The third interview was held in a coffee shop in Nowra, the administration centre of the Shoalhaven.

Fran was recruited for a focus group from the University of the Third Age, which she had recently joined for some self-improvement classes. She appears younger than her age, with a youthful, short hairstyle, and is fit and active. Fran laughs frequently. At home, she dresses casually, but for the interview in town she wore makeup, jewellery and a smart outfit.

**Doris**

Doris was born in Sydney in 1933, to working class parents who had converted to Jehovah’s Witness during the Depression. Her parents separated when she was aged seven, her father evicting Doris and her mother from the family home. Her younger brother went to live with her father. Doris believes the separation was due to her parents’ basic personality differences, the financial hardships they endured during the early years of their marriage and her mother’s illness.
Doris’s mother had a chronic heart condition, restricting her activities, and so, Doris, by necessity, became very independent in obligatory occupations. They struggled to survive financially on a pension and moved house numerous times, seeking rented accommodation with the use of shared conveniences. During her mother’s recurrent hospitalisations, relatives cared for Doris. She was selected for an opportunity class in primary school and then was accepted into a selective girls’ high school, the same school attended by her mother.

Doris left school after completing her Intermediate Certificate, in order to work. However, she returned a few months later when an uncle offered to finance another two years of schooling so she could attain her Leaving Certificate. Doris then went on to complete a two-year Diploma of Teaching at Sydney Teachers’ College. She really enjoyed the College social life, dancing and attending concerts with a group of friends. She especially enjoyed her activities with the bushwalking club and went on several treks, a particularly memorable one being to Tasmania. Her mother died when she was twenty, in her final year of College.

Doris worked as a primary school teacher in a couple of New South Wales inland rural towns before successfully applying for a move to Wollongong, on the south coast. It was here she met and married her first husband. Although he had told her he was a Swiss engineer, he was in fact a German bricklayer. When the first of their three children was twelve months old, and they had built a garage on their block of land, they travelled to Germany to visit her husband’s family. However, due to limited finances and family tensions, they returned earlier than planned. Doris worked as a teacher between her subsequent two pregnancies.

When her husband undertook work as a contractor in New Guinea, Doris remained in Wollongong with the children. She did move to New Guinea for a brief period but then separated from her husband permanently. She took the children with her to England where she worked as an exchange teacher for twelve months. During that time, they travelled around Europe in a campervan. On returning home, Doris enrolled at university, attending evening classes to obtain additional teaching qualifications. Then she met someone else, and that was even worse (laugh), if you can imagine that. She doesn’t know how she could have been so naïve about it. She married him, but that whole episode only lasted six
It was while she was researching her family history, that she met the man who was to be her next husband. She married a third time in 1982, when she was aged forty-nine. Following her retirement from teaching in 1988, Doris and her husband built a new home on an acre block, which is located on the boundary of a nature reserve in a Shoalhaven village.

Doris and her husband’s current interests include organic gardening, native flora and fauna, and bush walking, and they are both passionate about sustainability and protecting the environment. Doris is a volunteer at the local historical museum, and she has written and self-published two books on her family history. Her participation in these self-chosen occupations is restricted at present as she is caring for her husband who has a terminal illness.

The four interviews with Doris were conducted in her own home. Her husband joined in the refreshments and discussion after each interview. Doris is physically healthy. Her only problem is some back pain, which she manages with regular chiropractic treatment. She tends to dress for comfort rather than for style, and would probably regard money spent on new clothes as a waste.

Mary

Mary was born on a mixed farm in Queensland in 1929. She has two older brothers. She was aged four when her father died suddenly and her mother moved the family to Sydney to be closer to relatives. Mary attended a girls’ boarding school in the southern highlands of New South Wales. Although threatened with expulsion due to some rebellious behaviour, she did complete her Intermediate Certificate, and then began training as a nurse. Having failed her first year exams at a large general hospital she resumed her training at the Children’s Hospital. She later obtained two additional nursing certificates.

Mary worked as a nursing sister in Tasmania and South Australia so she could save sufficient money to travel by boat to England. There she gained a variety of work experience, as a midwife and as a nanny, and had the opportunity to travel around Europe. When her mother became ill, she felt she needed to return home, a few years earlier than she originally planned. She travelled home overland, in a bus with a group of fellow travellers, through Turkey, Jerusalem, Beirut, Istanbul.
It was a real experience. We camped all the way. Needless to say, Mary enjoyed some diverse cultural experiences on the way. A romance with a Pakistani man was cut short when the Australian Trade Commissioner in Karachi intervened at the request of some of her friends.

They were anxious that I could have ended up in a hovel anywhere and been a slave … so maybe it could have happened, I don’t know. But it was one of those exciting experiences. Laugh.

Back home in Australia, Mary continued to work as a nurse, specialising in early childhood until her retirement at about the age of sixty. She has never married. Mary moved from Sydney to Shoalhaven with a female friend twenty years ago. At first, they lived on a small hobby farm for a few years, and then sold up when the workload became too great, buying a suburban house in Nowra.

Mary’s current interests include reading and cooking. She is an active member of the Country Women’s Association (CWA). Due to her back and knee problems, participation in her preferred physical occupations, gardening and travel, is limited. Mary is a large woman, with a shock of white hair, who loves fashion. She regularly attends the local gym for exercise and belongs to a weight watchers’ program. She walks with a distinctive limp, has a wonderful sense of humour and a loud, somewhat raucous laugh. Mary was recruited for a focus group at a CWA meeting.

Alice

Alice was the oldest woman in the study. She was born in 1925 in Sydney. Her father was a bank manager and was posted to outback New South Wales when she was aged five. Even though the family was dreading the heat, dust and flies, they all really enjoyed the experience. Bank managers were very high profile in those days, and her parents were involved in the social life of the time. For Alice, it was so uncomplicated and carefree. After seven years, her father was again promoted, this time to the Shoalhaven, on the south coast of New South Wales. Indeed, this was a popular move. Compared to the outback, the family thought the Shoalhaven was just like paradise. It was just beautiful.

Alice attended a local high school, completing her Intermediate Certificate in 1940. She undertook a twelve month course in typing and shorthand, and then,
because her parents still believed she was *too young to be employed*, was sent to what appears to have been a finishing school in Sydney. On returning home, after one year away at the boarding school, she secured employment in a local bank and remained working there for five years. She did want to join the services during the war, but her position in the bank was regarded as a reserved occupation.

Alice married a local dairy farmer, Vince, in 1949, at the age of twenty. She took on the role of farmer’s wife eagerly, learning about animal husbandry and farming through observation and participation. As was usual for a farm wife, her particular task was *managing the books*. Given her work experience, she handled this task very well for fifty-two years. On reflection, she realises *it has been a great help*, because she has *always kept tabs on everything that goes on*. With farm duties and mothering four children, Alice led an extremely busy life. She was actively involved in the children’s sports, music and social clubs. As they grew older and left home, she joined the local CWA and craft groups. Her particular interest has been researching the family history and, like Doris, she has produced a book.

Vince retired from farming in 1986, and only twelve months later required heart surgery, *a triple bypass and an aortic valve transplant*. *It took about six months before he got back to normal*. For a period there she was quite busy again, taking care of him, *making sure he did all the right things and had the right diet. And the children coming home. They just kept coming home.* Alice especially enjoys the grandchildren, believing that *they keep you up to the minute with what is going on*.

Alice enjoys travelling overseas and has had numerous trips since 1981. She and her husband went together to the United States in 1985 to meet the in-laws of one of their daughters. Although Vince enjoyed his first trip, *he just liked home*, and so Alice has travelled with friends on her subsequent trips abroad. Alice and Vince celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 1998 with a large party of family and friends. Sadly, Vince died suddenly, three days before the first interview was to have taken place. Alice was still very keen to participate in the study and the interviews were conducted about three months later.
Alice is an alert, vivacious, always happy woman, who participates actively within her community. She has had no serious illnesses in the past, and is making sure that she remains healthy, so she can stay living on the farm for as long as she likes. The interviews were conducted in the kitchen of her old family farmhouse, which is replete with heirlooms and antiques. Alice was recruited for a focus group from a meeting at the CWA.

Introducing the researcher

This final section of chapter three introduces the researcher. In view of the significance of the researcher’s subjectivity in qualitative studies (Hasselkus 1997), some background to the researcher involved in this study is considered relevant. Such background material is particularly relevant due to the interpretive nature of this study.

The researcher is a woman who was born in 1953 and grew up in Sydney in a family with two parents, an older brother and a younger sister. After completing year twelve at high school, she undertook a three-year Diploma in Occupational Therapy. She was married in 1974, and upon completion of the diploma course, she and her husband travelled to New Zealand in 1975, where they lived and worked for eighteen months. They continued travelling and working overseas and interstate until settling in the Shoalhaven in 1982.

The researcher has four children. At the time of completing this study, her three boys were aged twenty-five, twenty-two and eighteen, and her daughter was fifteen. Her husband is a physiotherapist who established a private practice when they moved to the Shoalhaven twenty-one years ago. They live on five acres, amidst native flora and fauna, overlooking the Shoalhaven River. Her mother, aged seventy-nine, still resides in the family home in Sydney. Her father died of cancer three years ago.

Since 1975, the researcher has worked as an occupational therapist in a wide variety of fields. Her paid work has been predominantly part-time, as she has managed the family home as well as the family business. Undertaking part-time distance education courses and travelling overseas for conferences have been
dominant themes in the past twenty years of her life. The researcher undertook this study as a full-time distance education student.

**Summary**

In summary, a qualitative research paradigm, incorporating narrative and hermeneutic approaches, and adopting occupational and feminist perspectives, was the most appropriate means of exploring and understanding the concept of occupational potential. The questions that guided the study were:

- What is occupational potential, and how does it develop over time?
- How was the development of the women’s occupational potential facilitated and constrained over time?
- How can understandings gained from the women’s life stories inform future policy, theory, research and practice in a range of sectors?

Embedded within the following three chapters, in the words of the women themselves and in the accompanying interpretative commentary, is compelling material that enhances understanding about the concept of occupational potential. Such understanding has enabled the development of some tentative proposals that address the study’s first two questions. These understandings have subsequent implications for future policy, theory, research and practice, which address the third study question.
Chapter 4
Early Influences on the Development of Occupational Potential

This chapter discusses the importance of early influences on the development of occupational potential throughout the life course, a perspective that has emerged as significant from the in-depth analysis of the women’s life stories. It appears that important foundations of occupational potential, the capacity to become through doing, are laid during childhood and adolescence when individuals are exploring the world and beginning to understand themselves as occupational beings.

In the early years of the women’s lives, as described in their stories, home, school, training institutions and work places were the dominant contexts in which they all participated in a variety of occupations. Despite sharing a common sociotemporal milieu, in which there were clear expectations as to what females did and did not do, for example, most females at the time left school early and did not pursue formal tertiary education, the women recounted significantly different early occupational experiences. These differences were related to individual circumstances such as family structure and its financial situation, the surrounding physical and emotional environments, and specific historical and political events. Overlaying these circumstances were personal characteristics, motivation and meaning ascription.

While the women’s early occupational experiences were diverse, narrative analysis of their stories revealed some common elements that shaped experiences in obligatory and self-chosen occupations and subsequently influenced the development of their occupational potential. Although some of these elements were interdependent, that is, they influenced each other, they are presented here nevertheless under two broad headings: environmental and personal. Extracts from the stories, which illuminate particular themes within these elements, are presented with interpretive commentaries to highlight how these elements of early
occupational experiences shaped the development of the women’s occupational potential.

Environmental influences

In this study, the environment has been considered in its broader sense, to encompass those sociocultural, political, historical, economic and physical aspects of the women’s ‘being-in-place, that is their lifeworld that provided the culturally defined, spatiotemporal setting of their everyday lives’ (Rowles 1991, p. 265). As revealed in the reorganised versions of the women’s life stories presented in chapter three, their environments, or their ‘being-in-place’ (Rowles 1991) when they were young, were quite diverse. Hence, the extent to which their own environments shaped the development of their personal occupational potential varied. The dominant environmental elements that emerged from the analysis were the availability of occupational choice, support and education. These elements are now discussed.

Availability of occupational choice

Analysing the stories revealed that the choices in obligatory and self-chosen occupations available to the women when they were young influenced the development of their occupational potential. Freedom of occupational choice and its antithesis, restriction of occupational choice, played a significant role in the development of the women’s identities and the tone of their life courses. Additionally, it is apparent from the women’s recounting of their early experiences that the availability of occupational choice was either socially determined or controlled by their families.

Having freedom to author personal occupational choices when young can be instrumental in developing an agentic self identity, characterised by self-determination, purposefulness, confidence and meaningfulness (Polkinghorne 1996), and a positive narrative tone (McAdams 1993), which radiates optimism and hope. The women’s stories revealed that being deprived of the opportunity to choose your occupations, due to external restrictions, can create a victimic life tone, in which people feel their lives are out of their control (Polkinghorne 1996). This latter state, termed occupational deprivation, can be socially, culturally or institutionally based (Whiteford 2000). In its extreme, occupational deprivation
can restrict occupational role repertoires, diminish a person’s adaptive responses to new environments, and cause capacities for structuring and using time effectively to atrophy (Wicks, Whiteford & Wilcock 2002). People who experience such deprivation tend to measure success in life by what negative happenings did not occur, or by what they were able to prevent from occurring (Polkinghorne 1996). The following discussions explore some of the themes woven through the women’s stories that illuminate the relationship between freedom of occupational choice and occupational deprivation, and the development of occupational potential.

**Having freedom of choice in everyday occupations**

Consideration of Doris’s account of her early experiences within the context of her whole-of-life narrative supports the notion that opportunity to develop occupational skills in childhood fosters competence and mastery, engenders confidence and raises self-esteem (Reilly 1974). Due to her particular family situation, the occupational freedom in everyday occupations that Doris experienced as a young girl was extensive. In her case, it was more a matter of necessity than due to liberal or irresponsible parenting. As her mother, the sole parent, was chronically ill, confined to bed at home or hospitalised for long periods, Doris was very often left to her own devices and had to fend for herself, as revealed herein:

Doris:

When she was in hospital, I was looking after myself. One way or another, it was very fortunate that my mother had always allowed me to do things. Even at Campbelltown, I was allowed to find my way around the place, go shopping, do jobs, I could cook a bit, and we had a fuel copper there, so I was quite used to that … one time, before I had even started school, Mum sent me on a message to someone who lived at Punchbowl, which was the next railway station. We were a mile from the railway. I had to catch the train, catch the right train, get out at Punchbowl, and walk another mile to this friend’s place, because Mum had arranged to go there. And she wasn’t well enough. And I was not old enough to have to pay a fare. Laugh. ... And when I started school, Mum asked someone she saw going past the house, would this bigger girl take me to school, because Mum wasn’t well enough to take me. And the girl just said, there is the headmistress, so I just went in and said, I am here to start school. Laugh.

... I had to be [very independent]. That didn’t bother me. It was just the way it was. It didn’t worry me at all. And I was the big sister. My
brother was much more a follower than I was. And Mum didn’t go crook if you made a mistake, or things like that … As far as I was concerned, yes, that was fine. I liked cooking. I’d choose to do it. I would decide that I was getting the dinner tonight, and sometimes forget it in the middle. Laugh. I liked it, I liked doing things … When I went to my grandmother’s, I loved to help. What I would have really liked, at that time, to have been able to learn music. I taught myself a bit at my grandmother’s, and then later on, when we moved to Dulwich Hill, the neighbours had a piano and I taught myself a bit more. And I would have probably loved to have learned ballet, and things like that, which little girls do, but it was just out of the question.

This extract reveals that when Doris was young, she took for granted the level of freedom she had for doing everyday things because this is what she had only ever experienced. Actually, she enjoyed this aspect of her childhood. As subsequent chapters in her life story reveal, the high degree of occupational freedom Doris enjoyed as a young girl enabled her to become competent in a range of everyday occupations throughout her life course. Indeed, the occupational freedom she experienced fostered an ability to be self-directed and, consequently, a sense of efficacy.

While having such freedom was empowering for Doris, engendering an agentic identity and confidence that she could do just about anything, it may not always have such a positive effect. In fact, for some children, high levels of occupational freedom, without the imposition of boundaries, may create anxiety or even decompensation (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980), which could limit occupational potential. In other words, the influence of personal characteristics and the level of family support and guidance may mitigate the influence of occupational freedom on the development of occupational potential.

**Having opportunities for fun**

Having opportunities for fun and enjoyment when young is equally significant in the development of occupational potential. The women’s stories show that taking up the available opportunities for fun promoted competence in personal and social skills that were useful throughout the remainder of the life course. Whereas Doris had freedom of choice, born of necessity, in relation to everyday occupations, Alice was granted permission to have fun when she was an adolescent during the war years. Due to the historical circumstances at that time, the opportunities for
participation in social or self-chosen occupations available for Alice and her female contemporaries were possibly exceptional. In fact, as the following extracts from Alice’s story show, members of her rural community considered it the duty of young women to engage in social activities with servicemen.

Alice:
A lot of the men, like my father and his friends in the committees, had also been in World War I and they just knew what was required, and I suppose they just realised that the young servicemen who were down here on leave, wanted to have fun, they wanted to get away from the war.

And then, of course, they established all the army bases. And the navy base and the airforce base were also established here in Nowra, so the local girls had one wonderful time. We were just so much in demand, for dances. They would send a bus in from the army bases and all the local girls would meet on the corner at the post office and they would take them out and we would attend the dances and things and they would deliver us back by midnight, to the same place. Laugh. So we were very well looked after. A lot of the boys there joined in the churches, too, and they got a bit of social life there too. They were able to go into the homes, off base.

We had a wonderful social life. And then we had a committee, called the Shoalhaven Patriotic and War Fund, and there was a younger set they included in that. We would arrange barbecues and beach parties. There were so many young fellows here who just missed home, missed being at home and their own social lives, so we made quite a happy place for them, and we enjoyed ourselves as well.

Oh, dear. I remember I found a diary some years ago, which I had kept through those years, and I think I had been to a party or a dance or a meeting of the Patriotic and War Fund meeting every night for six weeks. I can’t imagine how I would have been able to keep up with all that activity at that particular time, but, then of course, when you are young, you can do anything, can’t you?

These comments made by Alice raise some interesting points. First, there is some congruency between the findings in this study and those of Elder’s (1999) well-known life course study that researched the long-term social implications of being a child during the Great Depression. While this study has adopted an occupational perspective, and focused on women only, analysis of the stories has revealed some positive effects on the development of occupational potential resulting from some of the social changes brought about by World War II. Sylvia’s comments, however, indicate that opportunity for enjoyment, such as described by Alice, was
restricted to a particular cohort. Sylvia realises that she was probably eight years too young to have had similar fun, and stated, we were protected against the marauding Yanks. (Laugh.) Yes, certainly in my case, we were very protected about going out at night, or alone or anything like that.

Second, it is possible that the strong social expectations that young women would take up those opportunities for enjoyment, like Alice did, could have created or even constrained occupational potential for some. For example, for those women who preferred to seek their own sources of pleasure and fun, rather than participate in the organised group activities, the social expectations could have created feelings of rejection and anxiety. Also, some marginalised groups such as lesbians, may have felt social pressure to engage in social activities with men.

**Being deprived of choice**
The stories gathered for this study show that at least two of the women were deprived of doing what they wanted in their early years, which in turn impacted on them becoming who they wanted to be. Both Sylvia and Maureen had definite intentions in relation to their future careers, but their fathers forbade them from realising those plans. The following extracts highlight the power of the gender regime, that is, the micro-level gender politics experienced by individual women in their homes, workplaces, or communities (Connell 1987). They also illustrate the power of motivation to do what is personally meaningful. As is revealed, even though both women accepted that in those days, you did what your parents told you to do (Maureen) and that as young girls of their generation, one didn’t have too much freedom of choice (Sylvia), they both persevered in their endeavours to do work that interested them. Yet, considering the life stories of these two women, such deprivation at a young age undoubtedly had a negative impact on their subsequent life course and identity development.

Sylvia:
I left school at fourteen and eight months, because my father didn’t believe in educating women. I bet that is a common story for you. And I went to Miss Hale’s Business College for a year. Who else went to Miss Hale’s Business College? My mother said that I would like it. But I didn’t really like it. I didn’t like school, truthfully. Not that I disliked it [school], but I found it unsatisfying in some way, on the edge of being a bit boring. She said, never mind, because your life will really start because you will go into the bank. ... [My] parents were
Depression parents, so they sought out anything that was secure. I didn’t ever say anything, but I thought, tick, tick, tick, I am not going into the bank, being naughty. So, I went to work in the last year of the Pacific war, in the Department of Information. I worked for the man who was in charge of the photography coming down from the war areas, the war-zone. He would get the photographs and compose the press releases for the newspapers the next morning, and I would have to present them to the Censor and do all that sort of thing. It was a marvellous job for a, what was I, not quite sixteen. And I met so many interesting people who came in to be interviewed. And the press releases and so forth.

Oh, I wanted to be a journalist, but Dad wouldn’t let me. He could have easily as anything got me a cadetship, but he said it was too sordid for women. And I think I said, I don’t mind, not having the slightest clue what sordid meant, and he said, well, it will be either sordid or you will be doing the society ladies at the Black and White Ball, and all those sorts of things. I thought, I wasn’t very keen on that. So sordid didn’t put me off, but the Black and White Ball did. No, I wasn’t really put off. I was very frustrated, in fact. So, I suppose, hence the attraction of the quasi-writing thing with the press releases and the playwrights and then advertising, so it was all on the edge of that creative writing stuff. And I wasn’t doing it.

As this extracts reveals, Sylvia sought out ways of compensating for the occupational deprivation she endured. Although she was definitely not a passive victim, choosing instead to participate in work that was somehow associated with journalism, she was never fully satisfied occupationally, and in fact was frustrated from being engaged in what she felt were fringe occupations. Interestingly, this extract also highlights the discrimination in the workplace experienced by Australian women in the 1940s. It would appear that the work of women journalists at that time was restricted to covering social events, as real news was considered too harsh for them. Having limited choices in the type of work they undertook certainly would have limited their potential as journalists.

As the next extract reveals, Maureen was so keen to participate in her chosen occupation of teaching that she was prepared to lead an occupationally restricted life in a convent for a period. Again, it was the gender regime within the family, influenced by the gender order (Connell 1987), that was responsible for constraining the development of her occupational potential by limiting her choice of career.
Maureen:
I liked school. I was good at school. I applied myself to it, too. I wouldn’t say I was brilliant, but I studied hard and I did well, until I got up to the Intermediate. I was almost fifteen when I sat for the Intermediate. I think we sat for the exams in early November, and I was fifteen on the eighteenth. Then my father informed me that I was going to Business College, which I didn’t want to do. I said I wanted to be a schoolteacher. No, he said, you can’t do that. That is too hard. You have to put up with unruly children and all sorts of things. I said, well, I want to be a dressmaker. He said, no, you have to put up with people changing their minds and all this sort of thing. It was going to be office work. So, I went to Business College for about a year, just over I think. … it was St Luke’s in Sydney. And then the nuns found me a job as a shorthand typist. [So] I went there. It must have been less than a year at Business College because I was still fifteen. They weren’t supposed to employ anyone under sixteen, so they paid me the sixteen year old’s wage, which was three pound nineteen and nine pence a fortnight. And most of it went on fares and my board. There wasn’t much left. I remember putting a hat on the lay-by once, and I couldn’t get it. I think it was only about fifteen shillings, or something like that. Laugh. But I couldn’t pay it off. I didn’t have enough money. I had been there about six months and Mother’s brother said that if I wanted to go back to school, he would help. And I realised then, that it was partly financial that my parents didn’t want me to go on, because I was the eldest of the family of four. But my parents were still against that. And then I got a bright idea. To become a teacher, I could become a nun. My parents were against that too. But I went and saw the nuns that had been teaching me at Stanmore and they talked to my mother, and they said, give it a go. They talked her into it. So then I ended up at Granville Convent, at school, and we lived in the Convent at Rosehill. But I got so homesick after about six months there, that I couldn’t stand it. Because I had never been away from home before, so I decided that I would give that up. So I went home again.

Although both Sylvia and Maureen were deprived of opportunities to pursue their careers of choice when they were young, Sylvia possibly came closer to realising her aspirations. However, throughout her life story, the resultant frustration is palpable. Maureen, on the other hand, is unforgiving for being denied the opportunity of doing what she wanted, to the extent that she believes her life has been wasted. As is characteristic of a victim, Maureen still, at the age of seventy-five, blames others for her occupational dissatisfaction.

These two examples of occupational deprivation experienced when young, illustrate the negative impact it can have on the development of occupational potential. They also highlight the significance of the gender regime and gender
order in the lives of women of this particular generation. Certainly, many women today have opportunities equal to men to pursue their career of choice. In some instances, females are even encouraged to pursue what have been predominately male careers, such as engineering, science and agriculture.

There is a final comment to make before concluding this discussion on the availability of choice in regard to occupations. Just as freedom of choice may be constraining sometimes, there could be instances where occupational deprivation may be enabling. That is, preventing someone from doing something may benefit that person, and even others, in the long term. An example could be Alice’s inability to join the services due to the wartime regulations about reserved occupations. By not being allowed to enlist, Alice really had no other choice than to remain working as a bank clerk in her own community. While in this position, she acquired valuable skills in finance and management, which she was able to use in her future roles as farm manager and homemaker, and contributed to the war effort on the home front as well. In essence, this example highlights how, depending on circumstances, environmental elements have varying effects on the realisation of occupational capacities and the subsequent development of occupational potential.

**Support — An essential ingredient**

Support in one’s early years has emerged as another environmental element that influences the development of occupational potential. Merely having the necessary skills or talent is rarely enough for people to succeed in their desired field and achieve their objectives. As Handy’s (1999) biographical subjects reveal, people who are considered successful in achieving their objectives, very often have had mentors who shared time, knowledge and resources in the critical developmental stages of their journey to success. Having support when young, in the form of emotional, financial or practical assistance or advice, is an essential ingredient in the recipe for developing occupational potential.

**Advice**

Sometimes, when young and inexperienced in life matters, people can benefit from the advice of others who are more worldly and mature. Whether a young person accepts advice often depends on several factors, such as whether the advice
was sought, or merely given, and the person’s opinion of the advice giver. As the extracts below reveal, Alice benefited from heeding advice from a respected other, whereas Maureen lived to regret her dismissal of her parents’ advice.

**Accepting advice**

When young and faced with conflicting occupational needs, it can be difficult to know what to do. In such instances, support from another person can often greatly assist when making occupational choices. In the following extract, Alice recounts how a predicament she had in relation to her future occupational life course was resolved by turning to a woman whose opinion she valued and trusted.

Alice:
We decided to get married. That was in 1948, I think, and then my father suddenly died. In September 1948, he died very suddenly of a heart attack and, anyway, that kind of threw a spanner in the works for a bit. We wondered what we were going to do, because Mum was left in the residence there, and my two younger brothers who were ten and eleven at the time, and that was a bit awkward really …

I did really want to stay home and take care of her, plus I was ten years older than the boys, and I thought I would postpone my wedding, and then one of our friends said to me, one day, you know, you have your own life to lead. You shouldn’t really be postponing your life, putting it on hold, because you have met this man, and you think it is the right thing to do. You should go and get married. And I thought, you know, she is a very sensible lady, so we went ahead and we got married.

As the remainder of Alice’s life story shows, heeding the advice of this ‘sensible’ lady provided positive long-term outcomes. Not only did Alice enjoy fifty-three years of marriage, but also, as a married woman, she was in a stronger position than as a single woman to provide ongoing support to her family, and her husband was able to play an important role in the development of her younger siblings.

**Dismissing advice**

Of course, for whatever reason, people do not necessarily accept the advice of others, which can sometimes have negative consequences on the development of occupational potential. The following extract illustrates this point.

Maureen:
I went to work in a real estate office in Challis House, in Martin Place. Business agents they were, actually, selling for the businesses. And I
went to court and got a licence — a sub-agent’s licence to take clients out to view these places. By that time I was nineteen and, anyway, I went out one evening to show a gentleman a place, and then after a while I started dating him. He was fifteen years older than me. I ended up marrying him … which was an absolute disaster. My parents were very much against it in the first place, but they wouldn’t give me any reason why they were against it. So I went against their wishes and I married him. And, as I say, it was a disaster from go to whoa. I left him three times and by the time I was twenty-four, twenty-five, I got pregnant. He had asked me before we were married if I wanted children and I said yes. He said, oh, well, I don’t really, but if you want them, that’s all right. I should have got a warning bell then. But, anyway, when I was pregnant … he was working then as a commercial traveller and away sometimes for weeks on end. He came home and I told him that I had booked into King George Hospital for the baby and I was 13 weeks pregnant. And he said, well, you will have to do something about it. You are not going to have it. We had quite an argument, and in the end, he walked out. He didn’t want any kids. And about three weeks after he left, walked out, I miscarried. So, I was by this time, twenty-four, twenty-five, something like that, so I just decided then that I was just going to be an aunty. My sisters by this time were having babies.

It is difficult to understand the basis of Maureen’s dismissal of her parents’ advice that, if heeded, may have significantly influenced her life course. Perhaps she was still hurting from their refusal to allow her to go teaching. Given these two examples, it seems that the amount of trust and respect held for the advice giver influences whether the advice is accepted or not.

**Encouragement**

Analysis of the women’s stories revealed that receiving encouragement when young had a facilitatory influence on the development of occupational potential. The stories show that encouragement is a form of support that can instil confidence to do something positive for oneself. Encouragement may be as simple as a verbal or non-verbal gesture that indicates someone’s belief in another. At times, knowing someone believes in you can bolster your self-belief, such knowledge providing the impetus to pursue meaningful goals and aspirations. The extracts below illustrate how encouragement can influence the development of occupational potential.
**Being prompted**

An episode in Fran’s story shows how she needed active encouragement from another person in order to develop occupational plans. In fact, she needed to be prompted to participate in meaningful occupation by a co-actor. In the following extract from Fran’s account of her adolescent years, the co-actor who prompted her to participate in some leisure occupations was someone who was completely the opposite to her. For example, whereas Fran was only ever the observer, a follower, someone who just tagged along, she teamed up and travelled with a young woman with a vibrant personality, who came from a prominent show business family. Perhaps disparate personalities can complement each other occupationally.

Fran:
I don’t know if you remember Bobby Dunton, the English actor? Well, I met up with his sister. She was just the same build as [her brother] and the same personality. And she asked me … she said that she wanted to travel. She was working at Crawford Park. And she said she wanted to travel. Would I like to go with her? I said, oh, yes, I’ll come, so I saved up a bit of money and we went. But she was real fun to be with. We would end up in a hotel of a night and she would get a cane and a hat off somebody and she would perform and dance.

[We went] just around Australia, everywhere. … Hitch hiking, [in] cars. I really enjoyed that. Just lying around doing nothing. So I think basically I am lazy. Laugh. It was very good. I really enjoyed it.

From reading the whole account of her childhood and adolescence, it seems very doubtful that Fran would have ever done anything like travel and hitchhiking had another not prompted her. Hence, having a co-actor was very significant in terms of the development of her occupational potential. It is also interesting to note that the only other times that Fran reported to have had fun was when others prompted her. It is as if she lacked sufficient intrinsic motivation to engage in meaningful occupation and needed other people to extend her occupationally. In a later episode in her story she recounts that the eight years she was socialising with her two friends, Dawn and Florence, were the best years of her life. These additional co-actors played a similarly significant role later in her life.

For Fran, being prompted by a co-actor enabled her to develop as an occupational being and the resultant occupational behaviours were positive. However, this may
not always be the outcome and individuals could be prompted by a co-actor to engage in anti-social occupational behaviours that they would not normally do. Although there was no evidence in the women’s stories of any grossly anti-social behaviour prompted by a co-actor, the following extract from Mary’s story does highlight the type of mischief young girls can get up to when ‘egged on’ by others.

Mary:
I had been a little bit of a devil because I had nearly been expelled from school. But it was a stupid reason, because I had failed in my scripture memory [test] … Three of us had to stay behind and learn our scripture memory work. Every comma and semicolon that was wrong was taken as a mark off, so it was fairly easy to [fail]. Laugh. And everybody else in the school had been on a picnic and we were pretty cheesed off. So we decided we were going to go for a walk down to the pine forest. There was this lovely pine forest behind the school, in the school grounds. We went off into the pine forest. It was summer, and then one of the seniors saw us and started screaming about there being ghosts in the pine forest. Anyway, a couple of our friends found us and said, for goodness sake, come back, so we skirted back another way. And the littlies were still there and they got hysterical. These kids might have only been six, seven or eight. So they got hysterical when they heard there were ghosts in the pine forest. Now, the girl who did it, she was a year older than me, in fact I think she was in the leaving certificate year, fifth year. Anyway, Bron and I, we had just about had it, we were very close, but we were imaginative and we did all sorts of things, and she [the headmistress] said, this is it, this is the end of it, I have had it, I am going to expel you. But of course, it had to go to a board meeting and that is where we got our skins saved, and so we didn’t get expelled.

Financial assistance
Although not essential, access to financial support when young significantly influences the likelihood of attaining one’s occupational goals. It became apparent from reading all the stories that the three women from middle class backgrounds, Sylvia, Mary and Alice, experienced less of a struggle in engaging in occupations of choice. Sylvia and Mary, for example, were able to travel abroad before they turned twenty-four. It must be acknowledged that they both worked to pay for their trips, but their families would have been in a position to provide financial assistance. Mary’s family even had connections with the British aristocracy. As the following extract reveals, during her time in the United Kingdom, Mary was
exposed to a range of unique occupational experiences, the likes of which would have been enjoyed by only the rich minority.

Mary:
But it was such a different life. But it was wonderful, because early on, after I had got there, before I started working in England, and this was the society that I would be working in, so I had a bit of an idea. Percy [the butler] used to take me shooting with him. If they were having visitors or putting on a nice game meal … I mean, you never shot a peasant or partridge and not hang it for a week. If there was going to be something happening, he would have to go out and get a few birds for the pot. [And] I would go out with him and be his brush. You walk out ahead with a stick and shake the thing and you think, good heavens, I hope he doesn’t shoot over my shoulder. Laugh. I was pretty sure he wouldn’t. He hadn’t killed anyone up to that stage. But, still, there was always that feeling that that gun was behind you.

Mary’s experience of shooting game birds on the estate of a wealthy British family friend is such a stark contrast to the daily struggles endured by Fran and her mother just to ‘make ends meet’, as described in the following extract. As they had barely enough money to cover the mortgage and essential food items, it is not surprising that there are very few accounts in Fran’s story of her participation in self-chosen occupations.

Fran:
We never had any money. She had to pay [the house] off and we never had anything. I remember we were coming home once and Mum said there was bread and butter and paste for tea tonight. When I got there, we never had a fridge, it was only an icebox and the ice had run out, it was all blown and running off … Yes, so we never had anything. And my mum’s bank was the gas tin. You put your twenty cents in for the gas. Well, my mum, if she had any extra money, used to put it into the gas box and you couldn’t get it back out. And when the gasman came to empty it, he would give it back to her. Yes, they all used to give it back to you. I remember we used to get it back. Sometimes we would be sitting there waiting for it. And my mum was a smoker. I can remember getting all the butts and undoing them for her and getting all the spare tobacco. Laugh. And rolling them up. She was a smoker, and she liked to drink. She very much liked her beer.

An extract from Doris’s life story concludes this section on the influence of support on the development of occupational potential. It highlights how the different forms of support she received, both emotional and financial, enabled her to do what she wanted to.
Doris:
I suppose the thing I forgot to mention, after third form, I did leave school. We were at Cronulla at the time, and I got my Intermediate Certificate and left, and I got a job at Kodak, thinking I was going to get into photography, you know, in a creative sort of way, and I found myself sorting reams of other people’s photos, and I didn’t stay there very long and then I got another job working for someone who had a dressmaking business. She designed dresses and they had a lot of beading and that sort of decoration. She owned a boutique in one of the arcades in Sydney and she wanted a girl to train who would understand all about the fashion and well-made clothes. I was there a little while, and the uncle, who worked in Rabaul, came home on furlough and he said, why have you left school? *Laugh*. And he then said, all his children had finished their schooling, and how about I send you some regular money and you go back to school. And I didn’t need a lot of persuasion.

I went back to school. He got my bursary reinstated, and I did very badly at the next exam, *laugh*, because I had already missed a couple of months of that year, but I caught up with that. By the end of the year I was okay. When you had done your Leaving Certificate, it had to lead to something. Not that it was drummed into us, but it was so obvious … I [also] got a lot of encouragement from Mum. Not a lot of help, because she had to leave school young. Because of her illness, she left school, I think, it was in first form. She got ill and was away for a year or more. She did go back for a little while. Her oldest brother was killed in the first world war, and her mother was a bit distraught, and she needed her at home. So Mum left school. She wasn’t real happy herself at school, because she had no friends. They had all moved on, and she had missed so much, and was out of her own age group. I never heard her complain about having left school, but she would just often say, I used to like French, but she only got such a little bit of it. So, she couldn’t help in that way but, certainly … and she took me places all the time, whenever she was able to. Like to Powerhouse Museum, when it was at Ultimo, and the other museum. There were only the two museums in Sydney at that time. We went to places like Vaucluse House. Anywhere she felt was of value.

For Doris, it was a combination of her mother’s encouragement to learn, her uncle’s financial contributions, the practical and educational support from her school and its ethos, as well as her exposure to places of cultural value that enabled her to complete her Leaving Certificate and subsequently commence teaching training. Such educational opportunities undoubtedly have a positive influence on the development of occupational potential, as will be discussed next.


Education

In the 1940s and 1950s, when the women in this study went to school, the majority of students left school at the age of fourteen years and nine months, or upon completion of the Intermediate Certificate. Only a small percentage of students, predominantly male, went on to complete their Leaving Certificate, which involved another two years of schooling. In many cases, continuation at school was dependent on receiving a Commonwealth Bursary to cover costs.

All six women in this study completed their Intermediate Certificate. Doris was the only one who continued at school, gaining her Leaving Certificate, which then enabled her to go on to Teachers’ College. Mary completed her nursing training, Fran undertook an apprenticeship in a dressmaking business, and the other three women completed training at a business college, where they acquired typing, bookkeeping and general clerical skills. In effect, the education of these six women and their subsequent careers seem representative of the majority of women of their generation, who sought employment as teachers, nurses or secretaries, when judged by the information provided by the focus group participants.

As attending school was a compulsory occupation for each of the women in the study, it is one of the few childhood occupations in which they all participated. The women’s stories show that strong friendships, good results, a supportive learning environment and a sense of challenge were characteristics of a positive school experience. Feeling as if you did not belong, wanting to leave, being bored and consistently getting low grades were indicators of a negative school experience. Most likely, a positive school experience fostered an ongoing desire to learn and to acquire additional skills, and was a significant factor in a woman’s decision to undertake further education. There is no question that a higher education provided additional skills and knowledge that broadened personal occupational choices and significantly influenced the development of occupational potential.

Individual learning styles

Although individual learning styles fall under the category of personal characteristics, which is discussed in the following section, they are included in
the discussion on environmental elements because they would have played an important role in the women’s school experiences. In fact, this discussion will highlight how environmental and personal elements coalesce to influence the development of occupational potential.

The stories revealed that the women had quite different occupational experiences at school. One of the components of an occupational experience is perception. People perceive occupations in terms of how well they perform the occupation. For example, an occupation may be perceived as boring if it is considered too easy, whereas an occupation that demands numerous different skills may be regarded as challenging (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). If a person has none of the necessary skills and, hence, has difficulty participating in an occupation, then it will probably be perceived negatively. How the women in this study performed at school and how subsequently they perceived the school experience were related to how their personal learning styles fitted within the learning environment.

There are numerous ways in which humans learn and process information. For example, there are people who learn more readily through listening, through seeing or through moving, doing and touching. Research has shown that if people do not have the opportunity to utilise their preferred learning styles, then they may not benefit as much as they could from the particular learning environment to which they are exposed (Gardner 1983). It is probable that the women in the study who had negative school experiences were taught in learning environments that did not cater for their individual learning styles.

**Having negative school experiences**

Fran was one of the women for whom school was a negative experience, as the following extract shows.

Fran:
It never did a thing for me. I can’t remember a thing about it. I went to Stanmore school when I left primary, and I can’t remember being there very often. I never did. I can’t remember what I did. I didn’t wag school to do anything special. I just wagged school and went and slept in a park or something. I don’t know what I did. I just wasn’t at school very often. I never got caught, because I never took the whole day off. I just took periods off, here and there. So my mother never knew. Nobody ever caught me or made me go back. But I never learnt
anything. I never did any good at school. I left school [after] I sat for my Intermediate and obviously I didn’t do very well. My mum was worried about me, and the headmistress took me to a tailoring business … I did an apprenticeship there. I did that, which put me in good stead, because from then on, when I was married, I made all my daughters’ wedding frocks and everything. I never bought anything. I even made my husband’s clothes because he was too lazy to buy them and I couldn’t stand it any longer. But that was a mistake, because when I made them and they looked quite all right, and he would say, well, I am happy with them. But I said, no, I am not sewing for you too. You have to go out and get your own. Yes, that put me in good stead.

Possibly, Fran did not attend school regularly school because she had difficulty with conceptual or logical thinking. *I can’t work out three plus four* is a comment she makes later in her story. She is someone who learns through doing because she enjoyed her dressmaking apprenticeship. Although she benefited from the skills acquired during her apprenticeship, as will be discussed in a later chapter, Fran regrets her lack of formal education because it limited her employment potential.

As a previous extract shows, Sylvia also perceived school negatively. She found school *unsatisfying in some way, on the edge of being a bit boring*. Given that she had the intellectual capacity to complete and enjoy *three years’ political science and one year international relations as a non-examination student at the Australian National University*, it is possible she experienced boredom at school because the work was too easy and insufficiently challenging. Considering Sylvia’s current self-chosen occupations and interests, which include current affairs, politics, opera, literature and art, it is reasonable to suggest that Sylvia’s school environment did not cater to her personal learning style. Fortunately for both Sylvia and Fran, although they had a negative school experience, its constraining effect on occupational potential was mitigated by the training opportunities afforded them post-school. The classes Sylvia attended at the university satisfied her linguistic learning style, just as dressmaking was an appropriate occupation for Fran.

**Having positive school experiences**

From the following account, it seems that Alice had a very positive school experience, one that enabled her to maximise her individual learning styles,
learning through doing and through socialising. Seeing that Alice still enjoys attending craft classes with her friends, it would appear that the boarding school she attended in Sydney more than adequately met her learning needs, positively influencing her occupational potential.

Alice:
Yes, I stayed there until, I think it was 1940, and I did the Intermediate Certificate examination there. Then I went back to Berry and I did twelve months there in a typing/shorthand course at the Convent School. And then, after that, they still decided I was too young to be employed, so they sent me off to Sydney. That was a lovely part of my life. I met some very, very nice friends there. Just did interesting things, and I suppose became a bit interested in religion, more so because it was presented to us each day and we had to have scripture lessons and to go to church in a special outfit each Sunday. And those friends I made up there are still friends. Yes, I still have contact with them.

I boarded and that was the time the Japanese submarines came into Sydney Harbour. So that was scary, but we were assured that we were too far away. And the war effort there was knitting. The girls were all donated khaki wool and needles, and we were all expected to knit garments for the men overseas … so we did jumpers and socks and balaclavas and mittens. They were sent off to wherever they needed to be sent. So that was a competitive thing, really, to see who could … make the most. \textit{Laugh}. I think that is where some of the skills that I have today, I learnt there.

The next extract shows that Doris also had a positive experience at school, despite not having all the material things her schoolmates had.

Doris:
Yes, I enjoyed my schoolwork. There was nothing, really, that I didn’t like. A few things that happened, like the art teacher making us all stand up one day, very early on, if we didn’t have our pastels, and I didn’t have any. \textit{Laugh}. And I must have smiled self-consciously or something because did she go crook! So I dropped art at the first opportunity. \textit{Laugh}. I don’t know if they wondered why. But everything else was [okay].

… I kept up with the work in class. I often didn’t have what the others had in the way of [clothes], even though it was school uniform. I had fewer pairs of whatever. But that didn’t worry me. It wasn’t a major thing. I think that was Mum’s ability to say, no, those things really don’t matter.

It is notable that Doris and Alice, the two women in the study who are most satisfied with their occupational life course, both enjoyed school, which equipped
them with intellectual, personal and social skills that were beneficial in later life. Also, their positive school experiences have enabled the utilisation and realisation of their occupational capacities. As Alice and Doris both undertook further education, it seems that a positive experience at school can instil a desire to continue learning. Doris went on to complete formal tertiary education, and Alice has continually endeavoured to learn new and different skills. Hence, ongoing education is another critical factor in the realisation of one’s occupational potential. Realising occupational potential is like attaining a personal Utopia (Wilcock, A. 2001, pers. comm., 11 March), an optimum state that will never actually exist as it is essentially without limits. In fact, individuals most probably never really know their occupational limitations, as it is not possible to quantify occupational potential. If this is in fact the case, then ongoing education could continue to push the boundaries of one’s potential.

Having discussed some of the extrinsic influences on the development of the women’s occupational potential, the focus is now on intrinsic or personal influences.

**Personal influences**

The six participants in this study are unique, special women, each with individual personal characteristics and values which are embodied within their unique personalities. For these reasons, their experiences are being presented in a way that respects and celebrates their individuality and recognises their personal differences. The women’s accounts of their occupational participation throughout the life course, that is, what they have done, how they have done it and why, provide insight into their personal characteristics and values. Some of these, which have enabled and constrained the development of their occupational potential, will now be discussed. Such a discussion is appropriate in this chapter on early influences on the development of occupational potential because personality is essentially formed by the end of adolescence (Craig 1986).

The basic sources of personal characteristics are heredity and environment. However, a person’s genetic inheritance interacts with and is shaped by environmental factors, and so a self-structure emerges that becomes an important influence in shaping further development and behaviour. The development of
conscience and values begins early in the socialisation process, and is influenced by the environment through imitation of parental example, rewards and punishment and social learning (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980).

Considering each woman’s unique genetic inheritance and environmental background, it is not surprising that a range of diverse personal characteristics and values emerged from the analysis of the stories. Several of the women share similar personal characteristics and values, yet the influence that these have had on their occupational potential have varied. A few of the shared characteristics and values will now be discussed and relevant extracts from the transcripts will illustrate their differing effects.

**Being passionate**

Being passionate means having very strong feelings about something. The women’s stories reveal that this particular personal characteristic may be either enabling or constraining, depending on what it is the person is passionate about. Two of the women in the study could be considered as passionate as they both felt so strongly about something that they refused to be swayed or diverted from their passion. Although the objects of their passion were markedly different, the strength of their passion and level of commitment were equal.

As revealed by Sylvia’s story, being passionate about something can engender a sense of purpose and direction in one’s life course, which in turn can facilitate the development and realisation of occupational potential. When she was an adolescent, Sylvia was passionate about Europe and the cultures that it had to offer. As the following extract shows, her family experiences aroused her passion, and it was through long-term planning, hard work, and finally some negotiation, that she was able to quell her passion for Europe. The occupational strategies that she adopted early in life as a result of her passion undoubtedly enabled her to satisfy other occupational needs, empowering her to do other things that she wanted to do.

Sylvia:
I suppose I was terribly preoccupied with this dream to go to Europe. Because I was lucky in a way, for my father was what you would call, I suppose, a bit of an intellectual. He was a journalist. His background was accountancy but he went into financial journalism and he was
editor of a newspaper in Sydney, a financial editor. And the friends he brought into the home, for years and years and years, were all talkers. There was one who was a poet, earning his money by journalism. So once again, as I say, I was horrible. I was allowed to stay up. On Sunday nights they would come in and have tea, cold meat and beetroot, and all that sort of thing. As long as I didn’t make a move or say a word, I could sit up and they would talk on and on, completely ignoring me. But, I can remember, quite clearly, the passion generated in our lounge room through the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Now, when was that, 1935? And then, coming shortly on that, the invasion of Abyssinia by the Italians, and the Spanish Civil War. All these things were things that were talked about in the house, as well as books that were being written and the terrible state of publishing in Australia, because these people wrote books that they couldn’t ever get published. Hopeless. Some of them did. And I really took it on board and never forgot it. It was just the way I grew up. But, as for my vision, it was to do this Europe thing, of which I wasn’t totally ignorant about because of the people Dad knew and brought into the house when I was a child. All these things that they would talk about. Also, Dad liked music. We were ABC listeners all through my childhood. There was sort of music in the background. My great grandmother sang and played piano and had a pianola and her main pianola rolls were opera, so that is where I got my taste of opera. I remember, I could barely reach the pedal, and hammering out Samson and Delilah and thinking it was absolutely marvellous. So, I was very fortunate, that whilst I had no hope of a conventional education through the normal channels, I was on the edges of it.

And, round about that time, when I was seventeen, I met the man who was to be my husband. And right from the beginning, we touched on it before, this attitude of my generation, of being joined at the hip, what the husband did, was what you did, and so forth, and without knowing it, we didn’t set up that sort of relationship. I was seventeen and he was fresh from a very difficult war, and I wasn’t looking for a husband and he wasn’t looking for wife. But we had this lovely friendship, and he was very welcome in my home. He and Dad got on very well together. He didn’t have a father himself. And I had other boyfriends. Sometimes I would go out with Keith and other times I would go out with other young men I knew. And it sort of set a pattern, I think. It didn’t seem so at the time but, in retrospect, I believe that thread of independence started then, between each other, I mean. And it has continued all our lives. And then I was nineteen, I think, he said, I think we should get married. And I said, well, not now. And in fact, I had been saving up for years and years, putting shillings in the piggy bank, to go to Europe, and I had four jobs in those last two years before we were married, and I said, I will not get married unless you say we can go to Europe together. So, because he was an Englishman and he had a bit of family to say goodbye, he agreed to that. We married when I was twenty and he was twenty-five.
And in the course of that year, we dropped out and went to Europe for a year.

Since Fran was young, she also has had a passion. Her passion developed as a result of family experiences, too. However, in contrast to the enabling influence of Sylvia’s passion, Fran’s passion has constrained the development of her occupational potential over time. Fran has a passion to be in control of her own life, at all times. Her words, nobody tells me what to do! exemplify this passion. As the following extract shows, it is quite possible that Fran developed this passion as a result of witnessing her father disempower her mother and that she adopted this passion as a defence mechanism to ensure nothing similar ever happened to her.

Fran:
I am an only child. I was raised by my mother. My father was a wife-beater. I come from Redfern, in the very heart of working class people. My father was a drunken bastard. Never to me. He never smacked me, but I remember terrible things for my mum and it makes you a loner because you can’t run to a neighbour, because they have their own problems …. You know, when you have a father or parent [who is violent], it is different today, you get the police in. But [back then], the police would give him a biff and roll him in the gutter and leave him there, but when he sobered up, he was twice as bad because you had called the police. And you couldn’t go next door. People didn’t want you. You can’t go and live with anybody because he would just come and tear up someone else’s house. Basically, I always laugh, when people say, you just pack up and go. You can’t pack up and go. Nobody really wants you.

There are several examples scattered throughout Fran’s story which illustrate her passionate dislike of being told what to do. In each case, it was this passion that limited her capacity to do things which were meaningful to her, or which could help her develop occupationally.

Fran:
Harry and I thought we were just going to get married. And he said, well, I had better tell me mum and dad. And I said, all right then, if you have got to. And they came. And Mum came. Well, I wasn’t twenty-one. My aunt said she would put on the spread. And she cooked and cooked, and my mother said, (oh, the things you remember) my mum said, your aunty has done this for you, so when you get up, you have to tell your aunty how much you love her, which I did. And I forgot. And it always blew me. I never said, thank you, Aunty Veronica. I never did that. And then my Aunty Ethel nipped me
in the back, and said, your Aunty Veronica, and by that time, I wouldn’t have done it then, because I was told to do it. Harry did it for me. And that is something I get upset about. Tears.

and:

… I remember Mum had another friend, a very good friend. And we went up to Newcastle, and he wanted to find me a morse code set. And I didn’t want it. He said that if you learn morse code, you are going to be very valuable after the war. And I said, you have got to be nuts. I can remember him trying to push me into doing something. I suppose I was always lazy, obviously.

and:

I think by that time, I might have been working in a factory, making corrugated iron. (I know we had bought a real old car, but it never went. Laugh. It never went. We were always walking or catching the train.) But I couldn’t handle that. That was really a bug-bear to me because I always thought of myself as tough and strong and there were machines that I couldn’t do. There must be a knack to it, but I could never do it. So they put me on guttering. They sat in each other and you carried them off. So I worked there. And my husband said, are you sure you want to work there? You don’t have to do that. I said, leave me alone. I’ll work where I want to work and you work where you want to work.

So strong has been Fran’s passion to maintain control that her life story reveals that she has missed out on at least several opportunities for occupational enhancement due to her refusal to be told what to do.

**Being a dreamer**

There are two types of dreamers. There are those who only ever dream and never get around to doing anything, and there are those whose dreams stimulate them to plan and set goals. The following extract shows that Doris was a dreamer who strove to realise her dreams, such endeavours positively influencing the development of her occupational potential.

Doris:

At times, at high school (I suppose I was insecure and depressed, but I never realised that), I used to have terribly sleepless nights, but what I used to do was keep myself awake, thinking of all the marvellous things I was going to do. I was the heroine of all sorts of stories … I thought about positive things. Things sort of didn’t worry me. I knew my mother wasn’t going to live long. I knew that I was going to be making out of my life what I chose to. I had no one that I could depend on. I was certainly going to get nothing from my father. Even
though, later on, we had contact again, but it was the other way. He was more or less looking to me and my brother for his support.

I suppose my plan in life was to have my own family and my own home. And I had unrealistic dreams. I didn’t really know how a man fitted into that. *Laugh.* And I used to plan houses. Draw plans. That was a hobby a lot of people had at that time. Especially after the war. It began when a few building materials became available, and people were trying to make a home out of the smallest, most compact building you could possibly have. Now, in a lot of them after the war, especially Housing Commission ones, you walked straight into the living room. Now, they might have been three-bedroom, but there was no hall of any sort, or lobby or porch or anything. You walked straight into the living room and that was it. The tiniest laundry, the tiniest kitchen, and very small bedrooms. It was sort of a bit of a game, to see how you could fit in all these things. Lots of people used to do that. They were in the paper all the time, these house plans. Everyone would be studying them, looking at them — *Oh, I don’t like that. Laugh.* And the other thing, I had the names of all my children chosen. I had dozens of children. I had a lot of names picked out.

Considering Doris’s background, which involved her constantly moving to small, rented rooms when young, having a fractured family, being encouraged by her mother, a Jehovah’s Witness, to focus on meaningful things rather than worldly assets, it is probably not surprising that she had such dreams. Doris felt that it was up to her to achieve the things she wanted out of life and, as later episodes in her story reveal, she was successful in fulfilling her dreams. For example, she has built several homes, she has a loving relationship with her three children and six grandchildren, and she has participated in meaningful occupations throughout her life course. Perhaps the reason for her success was her sense of efficacy and self-directedness, the legacy of having freedom when she was young.

As an adolescent, Mary was also a dreamer.

Mary:
I had all sorts of plans. Number one, I wanted to travel. Number two, I’d have liked to have gone to the inland and maybe have been an AIM nurse, Australian Inland Mission. Flying Doctor and all that sort of thing … and I would have liked to have tried to get back on the land. Somewhere. I would have liked to have gone to the country. I also wanted to go back on the land.
However, unlike Doris, Mary only ever fulfilled her dream to travel and, as a result, feels very frustrated, as will be revealed in the chapter presenting the women’s reflections.

In Mary’s case, the reason for unfilled dreams was associated with risk taking, or rather lack of it, a characteristic that also emerged from the analysis and which will now be discussed.

**Being a risk-taker**

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) research has explored to some extent the influence of risk-taking on occupational potential. What has emerged from the analysis of these stories is that being a risk-taker is a characteristic that is shaped to a large extent by family values and the home environment. For example, when Mary was questioned as to why she felt she did not fulfil her dreams, she replied, *I think mainly for not being game enough to take the plunge, and maybe if I had had* a *little more confidence*. On further reflection, Mary appreciates that having parents who struggled through the Depression had a large influence on her approach to risks. Apparently, a common refrain from them was: *You must never get over your head, you must never get in over your head in financial things.*

Fran, on the other hand, grew up in an environment where taking risks was part of everyday life. One had to be tough to survive and survival meant taking risks. The following entertaining extract describes one of the risks Fran took when she was a young girl. She regularly assisted Mr Douglas, despite the risk of being caught by the formidable Mrs Douglas. For Fran, the risk was one worth taking as the return, twenty pence, was something that was very meaningful to her.

Fran:

He was a happy drunk. I used to get ten pence if I got him inside. If I didn’t have any trouble, I got twenty pence. If I got caught, and he was pulled up, and he got into trouble, I only got ten pence. But I used to wait for him at five o’clock, just up the lane. He would walk halfway. I wasn’t allowed out. I would take him home and get him in the back door, and get him into bed, without anyone going mad at him and yelling at him, he would go to sleep. Once he went to sleep, he was out like a light. And the next day he would give me twenty pence, but if Mrs Douglas caught him … *Laugh.*
Being pragmatic

It is reasonable to suggest that the pragmatism, which is a personal characteristic of both Sylvia and Maureen, is related to the fact that they had both been taught not to be risk-takers. Both these women recounted how their occupational lives were also influenced by their parents’ experiences during the Depression. They were taught to be conservative, realistic, and sensible. As Sylvia said, my parents were Depression parents. They sought out anything that was secure. Maureen’s parents lost their house during the Depression, so they were equally opposed to doing anything that was considered a risk.

From the analysis of the women’s stories, it was revealed that, at times, being pragmatic constrained the development of some of the women’s occupational potential. If someone only participates in occupations that have guaranteed successful outcomes, then they can forfeit occupational experiences that could be meaningful. On the other hand, being pragmatic, thinking of all the advantages and disadvantages before embarking on an occupation can be a very worthwhile exercise. Perhaps if Maureen had been more pragmatic, she may not have married her first husband, and could have avoided a disastrous relationship. Yet, as we have already seen, Sylvia’s rather pragmatic approach to getting married was one that facilitated the development of her occupational potential. I will not get married unless you say we can go to Europe together. Sylvia’s pragmatism is a defining feature of her personal characteristics, and has continued to have an enabling influence on her life course.

Being passionate, a dreamer, a risk-taker and pragmatic are just four of the different personal characteristics that impacted in some way on the development of occupational potential of some of the women. Of course, there are more influential characteristics, but these particular ones have been selected for discussion as they have been both enabling and constraining, depending on individual circumstances and how they blended with the women’s other personal characteristics. Two final extracts will complete this discussion on personal influences. These extracts highlight how values can influence the development of occupational potential.
**Being respectful of other people**

The following extracts from Mary’s life story reveal how her values and sense of moral conscience, shaped by those of her parents, influenced her occupational participation and her relationships with other people. Having adopted the belief from an early age that all people are equal, Mary’s choice of occupations throughout the remainder of her life course reflected this value.

Mary:
You see, I had black playmates. My two greatest playmates, whom I just absolutely adored, were Harry and Nigger. I mean, you couldn’t call him Nigger now. Harry was an Islander, a Kanaka, and Nigger was an Aborigine. This was up in Queensland, and after Daddy died, they were always very good, because my parents treated them all as equals. And when I said to someone the other day, of course they had their mia mias down the paddock, they were horrified to think that we didn’t have a cottage for them. I said, I am sure there were cottages for them, there would have been rooms for them, but they didn’t want to sleep there. They loved going back to their mia mias. And whenever Daddy was away, I believe, there was always somebody there, even though we had sharefarmers, there was always somebody there from the Aborigine community. And after Daddy died, there was always someone there. They taught me to milk. Nigger had a beautiful black cow named after him, who was also Nigger, and I used to sit on Nigger’s head and hold onto the horns. I was most probably behind the head and I would hold onto the horns, and I would go around the bails, then she would drop its head and I would slide off. I can remember that very well.

This second extract has been included to show how Mary’s mother’s values continued to have an enabling influence on her later in life, in quite a different environment.

Mary:
… and mother said to me, Mary, why don’t you go out and thank Martha for this lovely dinner and sit and help her wash up. That was sort of a routine thing to do. Grandchildren, quite often, were sent out to see Martha and Percy in the kitchen, and Percy would come out of the butler’s pantry with his gloves on. They never used polish. They only polished with these cotton gloves. And at Greenwich, at the naval place there, they only polished with the bare hand. And they got quite a polish. It must have been ghastly for your hands. Anyway, I went out and asked Martha if I could wipe up, but she said, my dear, you just sit over there and tell me all about your life. I said, if I am going to tell you about my life, I may as well wipe up. So I just picked up a tea towel and wiped. Well, that was the first time that had ever
happened. I got on very well over there because I was just willing to settle in. Everywhere I went, with staff, I was treated as one of them.

Mary’s acceptance of people, whatever their ethnicity or station in life, has enabled her to interact with all people in any situation, thereby enhancing the quality of her occupational experiences.

In summary, this chapter has discussed how analysis of the whole of the women’s stories has revealed that in the early part of their lives, in childhood and adolescence, there were some significant environmental and personal influences that shaped the future development of their occupational potential.

The following chapter discusses the occupational tensions and barriers faced by the women during adulthood and their need to develop strategies to enable them to use their capacities to do what they needed to do and wanted to do.
Chapter 5

Occupational Tensions in Adulthood: Negotiating Occupational Potential

This chapter focuses on some of the occupational issues in adulthood that are relevant to the development and realisation of occupational potential. Primarily, the chapter discusses the occupational tensions that arise in adulthood and how gender issues can magnify these tensions. The chapter also presents some of the occupational strategies, uncovered during the analysis of the life stories, which the women adopted to manage the tensions they experienced.

Occupational tensions

In this study, the term ‘occupational tensions’ refers to the particular experiences of the women when they were prevented from doing what they wanted, or had to choose between doing what they wanted and what was expected by others. After analysing the stories, it was apparent that all the women experienced occupational tensions during their adulthood. In some cases, the tensions were mild and, rather than impeding the development of their occupational potential, enabled it. For example, one woman enriched her own occupational life by becoming actively involved in her children’s occupations instead of merely being the observer and playing a passive role while she engaged in child care, an occupation she was expected to undertake. For others, the tensions they experienced resulted in them making some significant occupational choices that, as perceived by them, negatively impacted on their life course. Such findings reinforce Viktor Frankl’s (1978, p. 106) thesis that humans should not be subjected to too much tension, yet need a ‘moderate amount, a sound amount, a sound dosage of tension’. Frankl maintained that no tension, or too little tension, is as detrimental to people’s wellbeing as too much. Two dominant sources of such occupational tensions in the women’s lives emerged from the stories: becoming an adult, and being a woman, both of which will now be discussed.
Becoming an adult

After analysing the women’s stories from an occupational perspective, it seems that when individuals undergo the inevitable transition from adolescence to adulthood, they experience numerous personal, physical, social and economic changes which may have a significant impact on them occupationally. In adulthood, individuals often take on new occupational roles, such as employee, partner, or parent, and some of the occupations in which they previously participated may take on new purpose and meaning. For example, a child or adolescent usually attends school because it is compulsory to do so, whereas an adult may choose to enrol in some educational classes to further develop personal skills or improve employment prospects. Additionally, occupational participation when young is primarily self-focused to satisfy personal needs through doing and to explore the world and one’s self. Adult occupations, on the other hand, carry responsibilities and involve other people, such as caring for children or managing employees. In comparison to occupations early in the life course, adult occupations are more complex and may require a greater commitment of time and effort. Also, there are social expectations associated with adult occupations, as well as the adult’s personal expectations and motivations for doing. Hence, it has become apparent that, in adulthood, some tensions can arise between doing what you want, doing what is required, and doing what others think you should. How people manage such tensions very probably influences the development of occupational potential.

For the six women in this study, adulthood brought increased occupational responsibilities and the associated occupational tensions that accompany employment, marriage and parenting. The way in which the responsibilities and tensions impacted on their occupational potential varied, depending on each woman’s individual circumstances and the effectiveness of her occupational strategies. The following interpretative commentaries discuss some of these tensions, and selected extracts from the transcripts are included to illuminate how adult responsibilities and roles have influenced the development of their occupational potential. Occupational strategies to manage the tensions are discussed in the next section.
Being the ‘bread winner’

Supporting oneself financially is one of the responsibilities that come with adulthood, and employment is the usual source of income for adults. For Mary, the only single woman in the study, working has always been a necessity, as the following quote explains: I had to go back nursing because I needed some money. I always need money. One can appreciate the tensions that she would have experienced when she was forced to leave employment due to illness, as described below, because her financial security would have been threatened.

Mary:
I got hepatitis pretty badly, and after six, seven months, I was asked by Matron to resign. She said, please Mary, take some time off before you decide to do any more work. I was showing jaundice. I was on night duty, actually, at the time. What happened was that I thought one of the supervisors, in the morning, was maybe sick or something like that, because Matron never came on to take over first thing in the morning. It was always the Deputy Matrons. And she came on, and what she was coming on for was to see what I looked like. I believe I was orange. She said to me, oh, Mary could you come up and see me after breakfast. Go and have your breakfast, have a shower and come up. I didn’t have a shower because I was too tired. I don’t like having a shower before going to bed, because it wakes me up. And I went up and saw her, and she said, I don’t know how to say this nicely but, Mary, I want you to resign. Put your resignation as of … I think I was going on days off the next night … as of, tomorrow night. Sort of back-date it. She said it is not for anything personal. You have not done anything wrong. In fact, I think … blah, blah, blah … and she gave me a nice big [wrap], but she said, have you looked at yourself this morning? And I looked at her and said, how do you mean? and she said, have you seen your skin this morning? I said, I am a bit tanned. Mary, you are orange. And she said, if you don’t stop working … you are not going to … you know … and she said, we can’t keep you on half pay or anything like that anymore. You have run out of everything. I had had sick leave, holiday leave and compensation … So, I went home, absolutely devastated. That was one time I got home and really burst into tears.

Clearly, this compelling extract highlights the importance of employment for Mary’s economic survival and how she seemed to dread the dire financial consequences of unemployment. Her strong reaction to being forced to resign also indicates some grief associated with losing a meaningful occupation.

When an adult becomes a partner and a parent, the additional responsibility of financially supporting dependants often arises. Couples can negotiate between
themselves as to who adopts the role of wage earner, homemaker and or child carer. Whereas today these roles are often shared, at the time when the women in this study were young adults and new parents, it was customary for the male partner to be the wage earner while the female was more usually the homemaker and child carer. In fact, as will be discussed in the following section, married women at that time were often excluded from certain positions of employment.

The other five women in the study, who were married, negotiated ways of contributing to the family income. Doris and Maureen were full-time employed and Sylvia was part-time employed outside the home. Alice, although probably not a wage earner as such, worked on the family farm as manager. Fran was never employed outside the home.

**Having multiple occupations**

In the following extract from Maureen’s life story, the occupational tensions from being both wage earner and homemaker are apparent. In Maureen’s situation, her husband’s ill health and injury prevented him from working, and so she was required to take on the two roles.

Maureen:

At that time, I was working in a place taking phone orders and converting the measurements from ordinary measurement to metric. That was part-time to start with. And we had Sally in a preschool, too, by this time, and Jenny was in school. So, when the business moved, it wasn’t so easy, because they went to full-time work too, after a time, because one of their clients complained about not being able to ring their orders through after three o’clock in the afternoon. So, I didn’t know what I was going to do then. So I had to give up work, and stayed home, and then I started selling Emma Page Jewellery, party plan. So, that was evenings, you see. My husband was home to look after the girls. When Sally was old enough to start school, I thought, I can get some more work now, because she would be at school in school hours. She started school the same day Jenny started high school. I had a very busy day, that day, there’s nearly eight years between them. So I started then looking for something that I could do in school hours. I couldn’t find any office work, or anything that I could do, so I ended up doing housework. I went and applied for a job for a woman in Strathfield, and she wanted three days a week. She had a very big house, three boys, and I worked there school hours until we came down to the coast to live. … Yes, [I did] whatever I could find to do in the hours when the children were at school. I never left them in an empty house … They [the jobs] had to fit in with the children and to pay our way. I always had to work. I always had to do
something … well, he never earned enough money. He blamed me for that, too, because when I first met him, he was working as a sales representative for cable/switch gear, and every Friday night, all the men went down to Erin’s and had a whale of a time, drinking and consorting with women, and I told him I wouldn’t marry him while he was still going [there]. He said, he couldn’t not go, because it was part of the job. But he left the job, and that was a fairly well paid job. And then, after that, he had a succession of jobs, one after the other. In fact, I think he has had about twenty jobs during the time we have been married, maybe more, and he hasn’t worked since he was [injured]. He hasn’t worked twenty-odd years, anyway. So, I have had to work.

Undoubtedly, trying to balance the different demands and schedules of outside employment and mothering, as well as satisfying her personal needs and expectations associated with each occupation, were sources of Maureen’s occupational tensions. It is also evident in this extract that, at times, due to financial pressure, Maureen experienced tensions from doing what she had to, rather than what she would have liked to. For example, housekeeping for someone else was far removed from her preferred occupation of teaching.

**Being busy**

Undoubtedly, parents would agree that being a parent is a particularly challenging occupational role assumed in adulthood. Just as the previous extract shows, when parenting is combined with an additional full-time role, a person’s occupational regime can become rather hectic. The following extract from Alice’s life story highlights the occupational pressures of mothering four children and being a farmer’s wife, two roles that undoubtedly kept her very busy, with rarely a spare moment when she could participate in occupations of her own choice.

Alice:
Oh, there was always the inevitable washing and ironing and, I guess, planning the meals for the evening and, probably, I had a car and a licence, so I could go to town and do the shopping. And that worked quite well as they got older. But when they were all little together, I used to have to do my shopping at lunchtime when Vince came home for his lunch and he would mind the children. Very often, after school, one of them would have a music lesson, a piano lesson, and fortunately the piano teacher lived opposite the high school. It was kind of in our same area.

As for socialising, myself? Well, not really. No, only the mothers that you met in the course of a school day. There wasn’t really time. By the time you got through all the chores and all the necessary things, I
don’t think we … we didn’t go to tea parties and such, like my mother used to … We just didn’t have the time. I think, sometimes, I used to do farm messages, take telephone calls, just generally help with the running of the house. There wasn’t a lot of time for extra curricular activities, unless they were to do with the children and their sport and their music … Oh, you never stopped, never stopped. You didn’t really have to search for it. It was always there waiting for you to do … But, you know, we didn’t really have to go out and look for anything else. Because they [the children] brought so much interest into our lives … We didn’t need to go out looking for anything else …

What is notable in Alice’s extract, with respect to the development of occupational potential, is that despite her busy schedule, she did not experience occupational tensions, as such, because she enjoyed what she was doing and found that sharing in and being involved with the children’s occupations were sufficiently satisfying.

**Facing the realities of responsibility**

In adulthood, some people acquire professional occupational roles in which they have been trained and which have varying degrees of responsibility. Most people select the professional role they wish to assume, the selection based on personal preferences, interests, skills, education and sense of vocation. Nevertheless, being in a profession of choice can still provoke real tensions in relation to personal perceptions about that profession and the actual demands and stress associated with it. In addition, some professions carry particularly high levels of responsibility and stress. The next extract from Mary’s life story has been included because it demonstrates some of the stresses she faced in her occupation as midwife. At times, she was placed in situations where she was required to make life or death decisions.

Mary:
I had two home deliveries and after that I refused to have any more. They were both so complicated, and both mothers ended up in hospital later on. With one friend, oh, it was ghastly, I was hanging onto the forceps, doctor had her hand up, because she knew that the cord must have been there. The head was only showing about that much. I had the forceps on, hanging on to the forceps. She got up, and she said, Mary, beware, I am about to cut the cord. The cord was around the baby’s neck four times. The baby survived! And the husband was leaning on the fundus. Well, even so, the cutting of that cord was so much that I was scared that I was going through the bedroom window. Because they had French doors onto the balcony. Laugh. The balcony
was only about that wide. They lived in Kensington. I thought, my God, I am going [through the window]. I didn’t, and I didn’t drop the baby or anything like that. But it was unbelievable. Actually, I let go the forceps. I let go …

And I had another nasty one. It was my cousin, that’s right. Laugh. I got down there and she had a back-up nurse if we needed one, if she didn’t have the baby in time, she had someone to come … She called me, Mary, Mary, something has gone wrong. I thought she was asleep. I shot upstairs. Mary, I am bleeding, and I think I am coming into labour. And I don’t think I am ready for labour. So I rang up. I rang the doctor. Rang David. I told the doctor what I had found. The head was well high. Margaret was bleeding. Not rapidly at that stage. But she was bleeding, and that she was having some mild contractions. He and David arrived at about the same time. Also, luckily, he had rung the ambulance. The ambulance arrived a few minutes later and we were down, right down at the tip of South Hampton Peninsula. South Hampton waters goes up like that. And we had to get up to South Hampton Hospital, through the New Forest and all the rest of it. Even the ambulance couldn’t go all that fast because of all the deer and horses and things like that running free. So Margaret was heavily sedated and I was in the ambulance with her and he was in the car behind us and suddenly …. Sometimes, when they go into second stage, and they are multiplets and they go into second stage and they have been sedated, they come out with this terrific ‘moooo’. It was involuntary, but just like a cow. So Margaret went ‘moo’. I yelled stop …. The doctor nearly ended up in the back of the ambulance. And the baby was born, thank you. Placenta first, of course …. So we all turned around and went back home again.

Mary no longer wanted to face such stress and work under high levels of pressure, as described above, and decided to make a career change. Her decision to move out of midwifery and to become an early childhood sister was possibly her means of reducing occupational tensions, by undertaking work where her expectations were more congruent with reality. Mary’s decision to move out of midwifery and into early childhood development proved to be a favourable one. She must have experienced fewer occupational tensions in her new profession, because she remained an early childhood sister until her retirement.

The discussion will now focus on additional occupational tensions that the women experienced in adulthood, primarily because of their gender.
Being a woman

What woman today would accept losing her job or nationality on marriage? Who would deny women the right to equal pay and economic independence? (Lake 1999)

Gender makes a difference to the way the life course is experienced (eds Glasse & Hendricks 1992). Certainly, as adults, the women in this study experienced gender inequalities in the labour market, in education, and in legal systems, which, when reinforced by custom and tradition, placed them at a distinct disadvantage in terms of their occupational potential when compared with their male peers. Poole and Feldman (1999) noted similar inequalities in their research.

Fortunately, as a result of over one hundred years of feminist activism in this country, women today enjoy freedoms and a level of equality that their own mothers, grandmothers and, indeed, the women in this study could never have imagined. The Australian feminist movement has fought for, and been instrumental in winning, political and economic rights, sexual and drinking rights for women, and the rights of women to control their bodies and their destinies. For example, in 1934, married women in New South Wales gained custody rights of their own children and, in 1981, rape in marriage was finally considered a crime in New South Wales. There have been more recent reforms sought by the movement: legislation to require husbands to share their family wage and grant ownership to wives of household savings; motherhood endowment; supporting parent’s benefit; public provision of child care; and equal pay or rate for the job. Such reforms were deemed necessary to enable women to achieve economic independence, as the previous reforms meant participating on men’s terms and assumed that all workers and citizens were autonomous, mobile and free from domestic responsibilities (Lake 1999).

When analysing the stories, it certainly became apparent that gender was a significant factor in the occupational tensions experienced by all the women in this study, impacting on the development of their occupational potential throughout the life course. As already discussed in chapter four, Maureen and Sylvia were deprived of doing what they wanted, deprived of becoming a journalist and teacher, respectively, because of the gender regime. Their fathers, obviously influenced by the gender order, did not think their career choices were
appropriate for young women. There are other examples in the transcripts where
the women were deprived of occupational choices or had to make certain
decisions which would never have been expected of their male counterparts,
primarily on account of their gender.

Because we live in a society, people are obliged to abide by certain laws and
regulations and to respect the rights of others. Such rules are usually considered
acceptable and taken for granted. However, what have been significant in the lives
of these women, in relation to the development of their occupational potential,
were the unwritten rules, those tacit social expectations about what women could
and should do. Following is a discussion of some of the occupational barriers that
were consequences of what Connell (1987) would consider the prevailing gender
regime and gender order. The overt and covert barriers, which the women had to
face regularly during their everyday occupations, had the capability of limiting
their occupational potential. How some of the women seemed overcame them is
considered in the next section on occupational strategies.

**Having limited occupational choices**
The stories revealed that the women had some restricted occupational choices in
adulthood on account of their gender. Explicit and tacit policies and expectations
limited the options available to the women, adding to their occupational tensions
and challenging the development of their occupational potential. The occupational
tensions resulting from such limitations will be discussed and illustrated with
extracts from the transcripts.

**Being constrained by explicit policies**
During the 1940s–1980s, Australian governmental regulations, such as those
listed below, clearly would have limited the occupational options available to
women.

- The women who were employed as temporary public servants during World
  War II were required to leave their positions as soon as the war was over.
- A ban on married women as permanent employees in the Federal Public
  Service existed until 1966.
• There was no maternity leave for female Commonwealth Public Service employees until 1973.

• Although the equal pay determination by the then Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission introduced the principle of ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ in 1967, it was not until 1984 that the Public Service Reform Act introduced the Equal Employment Opportunity Program into the Australian Public Service (Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women 2002).

It follows that the women in this study were at a distinct disadvantage with regard to career development and progression due to policies such as these. But it was not just government policies that disadvantaged women during this period. Some large public institutions also created occupational barriers for women, the explicit social prescriptions associated with the profession of nursing being an excellent example.

A career in nursing was only available to single women, primarily because trainee nurses were required to live in nurses’ residences. Now, at that time, it was quite common for women to marry when they were in their early to mid-twenties because, post-World War II, marriage was considered a source of critical support (Elder 1999). Therefore, for many young women at that time, nursing as a career was not an option. The following extract from one of the focus groups has been included here as it highlights the determination of one woman at that time to pursue her career of choice, in spite of the deception and personal sacrifices entailed.

I always lived on the farm, but I wanted to go off the farm, so I decided to go nursing. In those days, you had to pay to be a nurse. You had to pay for your uniforms. We worked for six months without pay and then we got four and tuppence for the next six months … I was not going to get married or have children until I had ‘done my thing’ or, those times, it was ‘live my life’. But I did get married, at twenty, but I had to keep that secret for my nursing. And of course we were not going to have children for years and years to come. But I did start to have a child. And it was so evident, of course, I had to give up my nursing.

Mary, unlike the majority of her peers, did not marry in her early twenties and, hence, she was able to undertake training as a nurse, something she had wanted to
do since she was a young girl. *I had known I wanted to be a nurse because I had taken Maggie’s (my poor calico doll) appendix out.* Though there is no indication in Mary’s story that she deliberately chose to remain single in order to be a nurse, it seems fortunate for her that she did, because she certainly enjoyed her forty year nursing career which provided occupational opportunities and experiences over the years.

**Being constrained by implicit social prescriptions**

In addition to governmental regulations and explicit social prescriptions, tacit social expectations limited options for some of the women in this study. For example, Mary felt she had no choice other than to have an abortion when she became pregnant during her nurse training. As the next extract reveals, her decision to abort was primarily based on the tacit social and familial expectations that prevailed at that time.

Mary:

[Nursing] Sisters were all unmarried. You could not be married, or be known to be married. As we were talking earlier, you did find that people did put on weight and left or had to leave. Lots of us had abortions when we fell pregnant because not only could you not continue your work, but you couldn’t tell your parents. Well, you could tell your parents, I suppose, but I could never have told my mother. My mother was a Victorian, through and through. I could never have told my mother I was pregnant, I really couldn’t. And I have thought over the years, I wonder if it was a boy or a girl, or how old it might be now … but it was a necessity …. Actually, I didn’t even think of my career. It was the thought of telling my mother … and telling the family. I could imagine, oh, my God, what my brothers would have said …. So, for me, it was personal and, I suppose, mores of the day. And I would say, for nearly all of us, it was more the mores. I mean, Nell, her parents were Methodist ministers. You didn’t tell them you were pregnant. *Laugh.* Actually, I think they knew, but Mother never did, I don’t think.

Indeed, this is a moving account of the pressures and the tensions experienced by young, unmarried women who fell pregnant during the mid-1900s. So powerful were these expectations that Mary was prepared to risk her health and wellbeing at the *grubby* hands of someone she had been told about *through the network,* and to quell possible biological instincts to be a mother. Although Mary states that the primary reason she decided to have an abortion was the fear of her family’s reaction to her being pregnant out of wedlock, other pressures may well have
influenced her decision. Perhaps she had also considered the financial implications of having to leave work due to being pregnant.

Not only did Mary suffer personal loss as a result of such social pressures, but there were also ongoing consequences that impacted on her social occupations, as shown by her following comments.

Mary:
It was a relief, but I was very wary. I didn’t want to go out with men for quite a while. I was very wary. I did go out, but I didn’t want to be kissed. I didn’t want to be touched. That was a no, no. I didn’t want to go through it for a while. Not forever, but for a while.

Certainly, young, unmarried women at this time paid dearly in order to abide by the established conventions, albeit silent ones.

**Having obligations**

In addition to explicit and tacit social expectations, obligations associated with being an adult female determined the direction of the women’s occupational life course, and consequently influenced the development of their occupational potential. ‘A sense of obligation refers to strong emotional dispositions to follow what are perceived as right ways to act’. Obligations are shaped by values, and values shape occupation (Kielhofner 2002, p. 52). To what extent values and obligations are personally or socially determined depends on perspective. For example, in existentialism, emphasis is placed on the inner experiences of individuals in their dealings with social issues, while an interpersonal perspective maintains that there are social roles which prescribe what people do and not do (Coleman, Butcher & Carson 1980). This study adopts the viewpoint that personally determined obligations are inextricable from social prescriptions, which include gendered roles.

**Feeling torn**

From analysis of the women’s stories, it seems obligations, regardless of their origin, can provoke strong occupational tensions. In the extract that follows, it is possible to sense Sylvia’s agony as she was pulled in two directions. Should she go and work, fulfilling her personal occupational needs? Or should she stay with the family, to which she felt strongly obligated? In this instance, Sylvia’s sense of
obligation overrode her personal needs and, as a result, her career in the film industry did not eventuate.

Sylvia:
If you come up to the mid-1980s, through to the 1990s, you have already by then got a different breed of women, generally speaking, the ones who say, yes, I am going to do it. But we weren’t like that really, in the 1970s. Not too many of us. Although, I did have a friend who worked as a scriptwriter at the Film and Television School at Lindfield. She was pretty single-minded. And she went into film production and she was extremely successful. And she made films in New South Wales, and then she got funding for a film crew in South Australia to make [a new film], and she had to go on location in South Australia for, she estimated at that time, six months. And nothing held her back. Joyce was going to go. And how I knew her in the first place, was because her daughter and my daughter in primary school were best friends. And she asked me if I would go to South Australia with her and be her production assistant. Oh, what a temptation. Oh, and I didn’t do it, of course. Naturally. Joyce went, and she was the talk of the North Shore. How could she leave those children! And that was nothing, that wouldn’t influence me in the slightest, because I knew that was a load of rot. But I personally couldn’t have made that choice, because it was everybody: the children, the mother, the grandmother, the husband. I just couldn’t do it. But, mind you, when I get bitter and twisted, laugh, sometimes, I think, God, I was a fool. But I would have been a fool if I had gone, because if I had come back and things were unhappy, if the olds were lonely, or something like that, I wouldn’t have felt guilty, I don’t like that very much, but I certainly would have felt sad. So, all I am saying is that I think that is pretty much the difference between many, many women today, to what they were thirty years ago. They are not quite so torn, are they, between responsibilities? But it is like all sweeping statements, it is not totally true.

This powerful extract highlights some important issues that are relevant to this discussion on the influence of gender on occupational potential. First, it underscores the tensions involved with doing what one could and what one should: Oh, what a temptation. Second, it is another example of limited choices available to women: I didn’t do it. Of course. Naturally. Third, it illustrates what was socially expected of women at that time: How could she leave those children? Finally, it raises a significant question regarding women today: They are not quite so torn, are they? Perhaps women today are equally as torn, but those who choose to work are more readily accepted than those who did so thirty years ago.
**Being the ‘ham in the sandwich’**

Other women in the study experienced varying degrees of occupational tensions resulting from a conflict of interest between personal occupational needs and obligations. Being a female member of the ‘sandwich generation’, caught between the needs of children and ageing parents (eds Glasse & Hendricks 1992) was a factor that contributed to this type of tension, as the following extracts demonstrate.

Alice:

Actually, you know, my father had died while my mother was in Nowra, and I had these two young brothers. They used to come down here every school holidays and at Christmas time. That kind of kept me rather busy, keeping an eye on her. And the boys used to go out and they would help on the farm, which was good, because Vince was very good to them, trying to take the place of their father, I suppose. That was a good thing for them. And Mum was a very dependent person. I think women of that generation were. She wasn’t invalid. Not that kind of help. She needed a lot of moral support. They would come down here for a break from town. Yes, that was the way it was. I suppose you felt you were obligated to do it, but it was expected of you, too. The neighbours, everybody, expected you to stay together as a family, and do what you could to help out in those days.

Just as Sylvia felt obligated to care for all members of her family, Alice’s dilemma was how to satisfy multiple obligations at the one time: the obligations of being a daughter and an older sister, which had both personal and social foundations, and personal obligations to her fiancé. Alice felt an increased sense of responsibility for her mother and younger brothers when her father died. She spent a reasonable amount of time looking after her mother’s welfare and, although she did not complain about doing so, this commitment would undoubtedly have reduced the time available for her self-chosen and leisure occupations. The second last sentence in this extract highlights the personal and social components of obligation: *you were obligated to do it, but it was expected of you, too.*

**Being the eldest**

Alice and Sylvia both felt obligated to their parents because they were the only daughters in the family. However, being the eldest daughter in a family carried additional obligations in relation to caring for ageing parents. In the next extract,
Maureen, the eldest of four daughters, describes how she was expected to stop what she was doing in order to care for her mother.

Maureen: Yes. Well, even in the last three to four years before I took my mother to live with us, every time she wanted something, she used to ring me to come up. And at that stage, I had a husband, I still have, to look after as well. And when it first started, my youngest daughter was still at home, but I was still expected to go, although I had two [younger] sisters living in Sydney where my mother was. She would say, can you come up for a few days? And she used to rationalise it, in her own mind, by saying it was a break for me, a break from home. But she would want her bed changed, and her house vacuumed, and her washing done, and taken to do some shopping to stock up her freezer, and that sort of stuff. I would go up for two to three days at a time. And, one time, it was on New Year’s Day when I got the phone call. She wasn’t well at that time. She really wasn’t well. It was a dreadful day. It was raining cats and dogs, and I had to drive up to Sydney to do what she wanted. But she wasn’t normally a very demanding person, just the same. She was very easy, actually. When she was living with us, she was quite easy. Though she could be very stubborn at times.

This extract shows that, even though Maureen had other obligations to her children and her husband, her obligations to her widowed mother who was living some distance away, took precedence at times. Hence, when Maureen took on the role of caregiver of her mother, she was diverted from fulfilling her other, concurrent roles, that of ‘bread winner’, mother and housekeeper.

**Experiencing interruptions**

An occupational life course is rarely without interruption. A critical event, defined as a period of moving from one state of certainty to another with an interval of uncertainty and change in between (Golan 1981), is often the cause of an interruption, instigating a change in the trajectory of a person’s life course. Such an event results in occupational tensions and stress, while a person reassesses previous occupational choices and makes any necessary occupational adaptations. The way that people react and respond to such an event is usually dependent upon whether the event was voluntary or involuntary, perceived as positive or negative, and the level of social resources available (Meltzer 2001).

Interruptions to the occupational life course were common for the women in this study. Pregnancies, moving house, moving interstate, illnesses, or the death of a
family member were some of the familial events and personal crises that created interruptions for the women. The impact of these interruptions on the development of the women’s occupational potential varied widely, depending on factors similar to those stated above: whether the event was planned or unexpected, whether assistance was required and/or received, and the level of emotional involvement. Although only the women’s perspectives on these events are available for analysis, it is reasonable to suggest that in most cases the women’s life courses were interrupted to a greater degree than those of their male partners.

The following extract from Sylvia’s life story provides an excellent illustration of how critical events changed her life course trajectory. Even though most of the events described in this extract could be considered ‘normal’ occurrences within a family’s life in the era represented, Sylvia was the one who was required to continually adapt her occupational plans nevertheless.

Sylvia:
Yes, but by the time I was expecting Elizabeth [my third child], it was all too hard. I couldn’t even contemplate [working] … in fact, I had been getting quite excited because, I thought, here I had these two babies, and I was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel and I could go back and work again. Because, by that time, my professor was saying, every time I get a nice woman, she gets pregnant. And the boys are beginning to talk. That was quite a joke. So, I thought, okay, about another eighteen months, and I will be able to go back into the workforce then but, sadly, Keith was offered a promotion in Adelaide.

So, that is where we went. And it was impossible there [for] married women. South Australia has always been depressed. Always. A married woman getting a job would be rare enough, but a married woman with children was absolutely hopeless. Anyway, I had other obligations by then because, by that time, my father’s health had deteriorated and he retired early. I had my grandmother, my mother and my father. And they all said, well, I think we will go to Adelaide too. Well, it was lovely of them in a way, but it was a terrible responsibility, and Keith saw this more clearly than I did because he said, this is just a phase in my career, I am not staying in Adelaide forever, I have no intention. So, we said this to them, but they didn’t really take that terribly seriously. And, so we had to move ourselves out of Canberra, and then go up to Sydney and sell two houses, and buy three houses in Adelaide, with two little children. That was very frantic. And then, sure enough, we only lasted five years and Keith was sort of head-hunted (they call it that these days)
from radio to television, back in Sydney. The big thing was, what will the three oldies do? But they were really nice about it and said, no, we love it here. It is an easier city here for us, being old. They were only, each of them, ten minutes from the centre of the city by bus, and so forth. So, at that point, that’s how it stayed. My grandmother in her house in North Adelaide, and my mother and father in their house in Warnervale. And one just knew that it wasn’t going to stay that way. However, it lasted a few years, with much ‘toing and froing’, backwards and forwards.

And, yes, that is just normal family situation, really, and then when Dad died. God, when did he die? My mind has gone blank. But he died a long time before my mother and my grandmother, and I had to go over and see what they wanted to do then. But they both wanted to come back to Sydney. So, my grandmother was ninety-three by then, so we said, okay. Well, there weren’t any retirement villages then, so the only option was a nursing home, so she said, alright, only for a little while. She was always sure she would settle there for a little while and then buy a house or flat. Well, anyway, we were in Lindfield, and my mother bought a unit in Lindfield, and we got Grandmother into a nursing home in Lindfield. I don’t know if you know it. Well, anyway, it was all right, a two minute walk to my mother’s unit. So we tottered on for some years like that. So, as far as me really doing anything for myself, it was not …

It is interesting to note that this extract has not been edited. Sylvia actually stopped speaking at this point in the interview, apparently unable to find the right words to complete her sentence. Perhaps she realised that the impact of these interruptions on her occupational potential have been greater than she cares to admit.

According to Sylvia’s account, women were expected to be caregivers and co-ordinate family affairs, rather than pursue their own plans. Aside from possibly being considered interruptions in their occupational life course, such demanding, time consuming and, as Sylvia says, terribly responsible occupations probably left little time or energy for fulfilling personal occupational objectives.

The examples given in this chapter show that being a woman added significantly to the occupational tensions the study participants experienced in adulthood. In some instances, such as Mary’s decision to have an abortion, the tension appeared relatively mild, as the appropriate choice seemed so obvious when the set of complex factors was considered. Perhaps this helped in her acceptance of the situation. For others, the temptation to participate in personally meaningful
occupations in preference to those considered socially more acceptable was particularly strong. Although Sylvia chose to fulfil her obligations, the pain and disappointment she felt at the time can be felt in her words. The long-term ramifications of limited occupational choices and sense of obligation on the development of the women’s occupational potential will become apparent in the following chapter, where the women’s reflections on their life course will be discussed.

Having considered some of the gender-based occupational tensions that influenced the women’s occupational potential, it is now timely to consider some of the occupational strategies they adopted to overcome such tensions.

**Occupational strategies**

Just as women have ways of knowing (Belenky et al. 1986) and ways of learning (Pamphilon 1997), analysis of the life stories seems to indicate that the women in this study have unique ways of doing. It has become apparent that the women developed various occupational strategies to enable them to negotiate barriers and reduce occupational tensions that were constraining the development of their occupational potential over time.

Though still sharing a common sociotemporal milieu, the six women in this study recounted very diverse occupational experiences in adulthood. The diversity of experiences appears to be due to their individual ways of doing, which often reflected their personal needs, values and philosophical approaches to life. Some of these unique occupational strategies which influenced the women’s occupational potential to a greater or lesser extent will be discussed.

**Creating independence**

The married women in this study realised that being independent of their spouses at times enhanced their occupational potential in adulthood by increasing their opportunities for participating in occupations of choice. The women adopted various strategies to create independence. Sylvia, for whom independence was extremely important, used several strategies. Some of the women adopted similar strategies, but in each instance the strategy was related to personal needs and
circumstances. Some selected extracts from the transcripts will illuminate such strategies.

**Maintaining a separate identity**

Even when she was very young, Sylvia needed her independence. As she says in the very beginning of her interview: *But in amongst the expectations of rigidity, I suppose, I did have something that made me say, quite young, this is my life.* It is also apparent from a previous extract that was included to reveal the strength of her passion to go to Europe, that maintaining a separate identity in marriage has been one of her ways of remaining independent. Sylvia stated that she and Keith have never been *joined at the hip* like many other couples of her generation, and that there has always been a *thread of independence* in their relationship.

Although it was the norm fifty years ago for married couples to do the same things, together, Sylvia endeavoured to maintain an occupational identity separate from that of her husband. Her story reveals that she and her husband do share common interests and participate in some occupations together; however, it also reveals that she has always done many things independently. It is as if she has concentrated on what she could do as an individual, rather than what she should do as a partner.

**Establishing financial independence**

An additional, yet related, strategy adopted by Sylvia, that enabled her to do what she wanted, was establishing financial independence. The next extract reveals that, from observing her parents’ relationship, she realised that financial dependence was disempowering and constrained the development of occupational potential by limiting occupational choices. She was determined to avoid being in a position whereby her husband had power over her.

*Sylvia:*

Well, I believed in financial independence, because financial independence is power. You can’t sort of ‘cock a snoot’ at your husband’s role as Mr Right if you haven’t got a bit of money. So, I always knew that money was power, because this was one of the things I observed with my mother and father. We weren’t poor, but everything that we got was what Dad wanted. You know, you recognise that. And I can remember my poor mother went for years after refrigerators were available. Mr Halstrom, with his Silent Knight.
And we still had the iceman cometh and all that struggle. No washing machine. We still had to do the laundry out the back and boil the copper and whack in the pot stick. Well, that was all right before the war, when I was a tiny child and we sort of had someone in to help on a regular basis and, you know, she couldn’t have the refrigerator and she couldn’t have the washing machine.

I am not quite sure that I had the words for it, but I observed that it didn’t seem quite fair to me. These were things that she wanted and she needed and there was absolutely no financial reason why she shouldn’t have them. Why was he saying no? But it had to be power. But I didn’t know that word. But I knew it wasn’t right. Laugh.

Sylvia felt there was a kind of injustice in a marriage if the wife was financially dependent on her husband, and so one of the reasons she always sought some part-time work was so that she could generate her own income, ensuring her financial independence.

In some ways, Doris was similar to Sylvia, in that she was always financially independent. In fact, Doris’s story reveals that she always invested her money wisely, and this is probably what ensured her survival, post divorces. It seems from the extract below that she realised financial independence, through ensuring security, created occupational opportunities and enhanced occupational potential.

Doris:
I had it in my mind, all along, that if I didn’t marry (I had had a few boyfriends, but none of them was quite right), if I didn’t marry, I was still going to have my own home. I had always wanted that. So, okay, I bought a car and I had some money to buy a block of land …. Also, I had been investing a bit of money, and I had some shares, which I sold. That was our fare to go overseas.

Fran and Alice were the two married women in the study who did not work outside the home and therefore neither earned income in her own right. This was not a particular issue for Alice as she was involved with the running of the farm business. In fact, as she says, the book-keeping was a great help ... because I have always kept tabs on everything that goes on. So, even though she did not generate personal income, Alice never felt disempowered. In some respects, her book-keeping role gave her control of the family finances. However, never being employed was more significant for Fran. She said, Harry was basically going to work, so I could have a good time. I spent money. In fact, as will be discussed in
the next chapter, Fran regrets never working, and therefore never earning her own income.

**Pursuing personal leisure interests**

Whereas it has been shown that when the women in this study were adults, they were constrained in relation to career development due to explicit policies, it was in the domain of leisure, they could ‘do their own thing’. That is, it was socially acceptable, within reason, for women to pursue and participate in their personal leisure interests. The following extracts reveal that at least two of the women utilised this social mandate as a means of enhancing their occupational potential. In each instance, there probably would have been negotiations with her spouse as to when she could ‘do her own thing’.

Alice:
I don’t mind going in and joining organisations on my own. Vince was a quietish person. He never wanted to go out. Farmers are often like that anyway. … But I just had to have more in my life than that, so I used to go out and do my own thing, anyway.

Doris:
We had been here for some months, and I decided that I was planting the wrong trees, not all natives, and I knew natives were the way to go, because we did want to bring the birds. And a lot of trees that we had planted had died. Then I saw a thing in the papers for the Society for Growing Australian Plants. And I started to go. Now, Allan has never been one to join things like that. The most he used to do, when he was on his own, was just go down to the club. Maybe meet a few work mates, or people he knew from work or around town. But he didn’t ever join groups. I tended to, if I found something that I thought would appeal. I tried various things. I dropped the ones I didn’t like.

What these extracts reveal is that for some of the women, pursuing their own leisure interests was a means of enhancing their occupational opportunities and acknowledging their personal occupational interests, independent of their husbands. These women realised their husbands had different occupational needs with respect to leisure. To ensure that they were not constrained by doing only what their husbands wanted, these women needed to find avenues for meeting their personal occupational needs.
Getting out of the house

‘Getting out of the house’, away from their everyday occupations, was another strategy adopted by some of the women. They recognised that a break in routine, doing something completely different from mundane activities, if only for a short while, was a way of reducing occupational tensions. Maureen is a woman who enjoys doing things and being involved with other people. She finds staying at home with her husband, who is content doing very little, unenjoyable, in fact depressing. As the next extract shows, Maureen has learnt over time to structure her weekly timetable so that she gets out of the house at least once a day.

Maureen:
But I have to get out of the house. I can’t sit at home all day. My husband just sits in a chair reading a book or watching TV, or he goes and lies down or sits out on the front veranda. He was sitting out there smoking like a chimney, but he got on these [nicotine] patches and he gave it up. But then last week, he has taken it up again.

Well, this week I have only got tomorrow at home. I was home Monday. Next week I have only got one day home. Mostly only half days. Ron is not real happy about it. But I just have to go out. I can’t stay there all the time. It is too depressing … He won’t do anything for himself if I am home. I have got to the stage where I have to [look after myself]. If I crack up … And there is not as much friction at home when I am out a bit, either. If I am home all the time, I get irritable.

For Maureen, when she can get away for short periods, the occupational benefits outweigh the emotional costs, if only marginally. Yes, she gets to do what she wants, but has to endure her husband’s displeasure. She is aware this is a crucial strategy for her general wellbeing and mental health because she fears ‘cracking up’ if she stays at home all the time in an unsatisfying occupational and emotional environment.

Likewise, at times, Fran found staying at home all the time was unsatisfactory and, for her, finally getting a driver’s licence at the age of fifty enhanced her occupational potential by broadening her occupational choices.

Fran
What did I do? I played tennis. I had started to play tennis by that time. I wasn’t any good. It was just a matter of getting out and meeting people and having a hit. And I learnt to drive the car at that time. Yes, it did [make a difference]. Yes. From then on if I was
lonely, I would just hop in the car and go to Roselands or Bankstown. I would just walk around and then come home. Yes, it did make a big difference.

**Creating personal space**

Creating personal space in which to do things independently was another strategy adopted by Sylvia. Her need to be independent extended beyond her family relationships to her work. Whereas other women found working and doing with others empowering and stimulating, Sylvia has always enjoyed being alone. Even when she was young, she enjoyed her life as an only child: *I was always contented, very contented with my own company.* It is notable that most of the jobs in which she was employed were solitary positions: *I always sought work where I worked alone, and I didn’t know I was doing it until I was quite old and I looked back and saw what I had done.* She has always found her own company more than adequate and has sought personal space to do what she wants to do.

**Enriching occupational experiences**

*You know, wherever you are in life, I think you just make life interesting for yourself.*

This quote from Alice’s story embodies what has emerged as a uniquely female way of participating in obligatory and self-chosen occupations. Some of the women realised that enriching what may be considered ordinary or mundane occupations was a successful means of enhancing their occupational potential. In some respects, this strategy was akin to accepting what they had to do, yet managing to get the most out of it for themselves. This is a pragmatic strategy that accomplishes what needs to be done, but enhances the women’s occupational potential in the process.

**Becoming immersed in available occupations**

As a mother, Alice was obligated to transport her four children to their various extracurricular activities. Not only was this a time-consuming and possibly boring activity, it had the capacity for restricting the time available for Alice to participate in occupations of her choice. However, rather than resenting this and being deprived of self-chosen occupations, Alice used these obligatory occupations to her own advantage by becoming immersed in them herself. As the following extract reveals, Alice found that by becoming actively involved in the
children’s leisure occupations, rather than merely being an observer, she enriched the experience for herself, enhancing her occupational potential.

Alice:
While the children were involved with their interests, I also took an active part in their organisations. I was on the committee of the Nowra Athletic Club and held various offices including Secretary and organiser of the Festival … I was also a member of the Nowra Dance School … on the committee, eventually Treasurer, Secretary and finally President … and I was awarded Life Membership. I was also on the committee of the Tennis Club, became Treasurer and helped raise funds at fetes. Also, the ladies in the Tennis Club committee catered for the official luncheon of the local Show, in the club rooms, and at other times served luncheons to members of the public in the pavilion next to the ‘added area’ at the showground. Also, one year we worked in a tent. In the Girl Guides, I have served as Secretary, Cultural Officer, International Officer, Delegate to State Conference for three years and then Publicity Officer.

Becoming immersed in the children’s organisations had long-term benefits for others, as well as for Alice. Not only was she helping the community groups in which she participated, but also she was acquiring additional skills and knowledge. Alice utilised these skills later when she joined her own organisation, the CWA.

Creating alternative occupations
Whereas Alice enhanced her occupational potential by becoming immersed in available occupations, Mary enriched her experiences by creating alternative situations whereby she could participate in personally meaningful occupations. That Mary was single, without dependants, may account for her more carefree approach to lived experience. Certainly, her personal characteristics and her financial position at the time would have been influential in her decision to travel home from England on a bus, rather than by ship. Selected excerpts from her transcript highlight the rich and exciting experiences she enjoyed as a result of her decision to make the most of her holiday, shortened on account of her mother’s illness.

Mary:
I left New Year 1961 and came back December 1964. I was away a full three years. I had wanted to go away five years and immigrate home, but Mum got sick and I decided that I really ought to come home …. I had to come home. So, I came home by bus. … I heard
about this bus going. It wasn’t urgent, urgent. Mother had had her cancer operation, and I knew she wasn’t well, [but] I didn’t have to be there instantly ….

… It was a real experience. We camped all the way. There was only one place where we actually stayed inside a building and that was in Jerusalem …. [We came] through Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria. Some places we would stay a full twenty-four hours …. At Cologne, where the beautiful cathedral was bombed, we stopped there. That was being rebuilt and we had a good look around there. We got some other food. We were cooking ourselves, dried food. Then we came down to Salzburg, and had a full twenty-four hours there. And we walked around Salzburg, the castle, and went to the cathedral. We were lucky enough to hear an evening [service]. In the Church of England, it is called evensong. I suppose it is in the Roman Catholic, I don’t know, but anyway, a lovely choral service there. And then, through one of the Russian states, and down to Sofia. We didn’t like those particular countries which were under the Russian rule. We felt that you could feel the poverty, you feel the poor and the anxiety, and all the rest of it. It was quite interesting watching these peasant women coming along with a little bag under their arm and a tiny little stick with a wheel in the middle of, spinning their wool into thread as they were walking along. Then, we went to Istanbul. We had about three days in Istanbul. That was a magnificent city … and then we went down to Antioch and some of the old biblical villages, up through the mountains. The Gates of Hell, was the local name for it, but I don’t know its real name. But down in Syria … that was another country we went through very quickly. We didn’t like it. In fact, they took our passports and wouldn’t give them back to us. So Tom said, we are going, we want to get to the British Embassy and get our passports back. We had only gone a couple of hundred metres and they started shooting at our tyres. We were all on the floor, so Tom stopped. They said, what is wrong with you that you run away like this. We said that we had been there for four hours and we wanted our passports back or we are going to the Embassy. He said, if you can go to the Embassy on no tyres, you can go. Because there were no telephones that we were allowed to use there, we said, let’s just drive straight through … So we drove straight through Syria, and we got just inside the border of Lebanon and we camped on the beach.

Mary felt she had an obligation to return home to be with her mother. She fulfilled her obligation, even though it meant reducing her overseas holiday by two years. However, by deciding to travel overland by bus, rather than by more conventional means, she ensured that the return trip was a memorable one. Undoubtedly, Mary would have been aware of some of the risks involved in this form of travel, but she was prepared to take risks in order to participate in a personally meaningful experience.
Although the next strategy to be discussed, improvising, is by comparison much safer, it nevertheless was another means adopted by some of the women to enrich their occupational experiences.

**Improvising**

At times, some of the women appreciated that to make life interesting for themselves through doing, they needed to improvise. Rather than missing out entirely because of not having the means, they created ways through substitution and ingenuity, and very often the outcomes were very enjoyable.

Doris:
… when I was at College, nobody had much money. And if we were going to do anything, you **had** to do it the cheapest way. We sewed, we knitted, we walked … learning to cope on minimal income. And how to pool resources and how to create cheap entertainment.

[The need to improvise] was really brought home to me when my second son was about eight years old. He had been invited to a birthday party. The mother worked and she had a little child, about a year old, and the eight year old. She put on a **very** elaborate birthday party. Absolutely every single thing was bought, and very elaborate. My son had never ever had anything like that. *Laugh*. Even though I was working, it was always all home-made, it was all improvised. There was a time when Phil was seven, when we had just come back from New Guinea … and we went up the north coast to a cousin up there. She had a family about the same ages as mine. And for Phil’s birthday, what did we have but a little tiny campfire and potatoes thrown in it. And I cooked a few other things. But potatoes cooked in the fire, it was a big deal. It was the fact that we were doing it, not having it done for us.

This extract illustrates how Doris enhanced her occupational potential by improvising occupations of necessity as well as occupations of meaning. To ensure that she was not deprived of certain occupations, she devised ways of doing that were within her financial means. The final sentence in this extract also highlights the power of occupation, and the significance of the occupational experience.

**Being willing to try**

A further strategy that has the potential for enriching occupational experiences is being prepared to try something new. This is a strategy that Doris used effectively throughout her life course to increase the occupational interests in her life. It is
notable that Doris apparently learnt this strategy from her mother, someone who was limited in terms of occupational participation. This is a strategy that, according to Doris, can open up opportunities that may not otherwise be available.

Doris:
... the thing I learnt fairly young, you mightn’t think you are going to be interested in something but, at least if you keep a bit of an open mind, you never know. I hear some things from Allan’s grandson, oh, that’s boring. Have you ever tried it? No, I am not interested. Decision. Full stop. I have sometimes said to him, you can’t say too much, but I do say, unless you try something, and find out, how do you know it is not interesting. It’s like trying a new food. If you have never tried it, how can you say you don’t like it.

I think that is something that I learnt from my mother, very young. She didn’t have that opportunity, with her health, and women at that time, when they were married they stayed at home, and she really didn’t have a career at all. But I think she was interested in people and she showed it. And she let me realise that if you kept an open mind and showed some interest in things, you never knew how interesting it was going to be … she might never have said it. I can’t remember her ever saying it in words, but I guess I picked that up.

This extract highlights how a desire to learn and a willingness to experiment can enhance the development of occupational potential. Using such a strategy requires some confidence and self-belief to enable someone to step out of the known and into the domain of the unknown.

There are two final strategies to be discussed prior to the conclusion of this section on how the women reconciled the occupational tensions that they experienced in adulthood. These particular strategies tend to stand alone, as they reflect the unique philosophical approaches of the two women who implemented them.

**Adopting ‘enlightened self-interest’**
The strategy of adopting enlightened self-interest is an attempt at satisfying personal occupational needs as well as meeting the needs of significant others. It is not surprising that Sylvia, whose previous extracts have highlighted her need to be independent, has developed this particular strategy. It is also interesting to note that adopting enlightened self-interest is a strategy that has been developed over
time, with much thought and consideration. The following extract explains this particular strategy for fostering the development of occupational potential.

Sylvia:
I suppose I started thinking about it twenty-odd years ago, really, at least. I had a reputation within the family of being fairly forthright. The kids would sort of laugh and always say, you always know where you stand with Mum. And I thought, does that mean that I am domineering, formidable, or bossy, or is this a good thing, that they always know where they stand with Mum? And I decided that it was a good thing. And then, moving along from that, I felt that it had to be tempered a little bit, with one’s own self interest. If everyone knows where they stand with you, and if you say, no, I am not going to have you for the weekend of the Queen’s birthday, I would rather go down the coast and walk along the beach or something like that, that is the enlightened bit. It’s the bit where they know where they stand with you. And the self-interest is being met at the same time. There is no devious, hidden agenda in me saying that I don’t want you to come to me for that weekend. It is not that I don’t love you, or I am cranky with you for any reason. I am not sulking. It is just that I would rather do something else. I think it appeals to me, because I like to be upfront, but I also don’t like to always do what somebody else thinks I should do. Laugh. So, it is a nice little two bob each way, I suppose you could say. And it works. It works for me. I hope it works most of the time for the people I care about. Does that make sense to you?

All I know is that, over time, I have thought it through. I have applied it to various things that have cropped up and wondered whether this was the right thing to do or not. And, for me, personally, I am comfortable with it. I have now reached the point where I hope it is understood by the ones I care about, and if it isn’t, tough, because there is integrity and there is honesty in it. And that is a pretty good thing to give. Once again, we are talking about giving. Women always give. Well, that is not true, but I think that they always want to give. The fact that it might turn out to be that they are giving the thing that isn’t valued (laugh) is disappointing, but it is still a gift, just the same. But anyway, you might like to try it and see. Laugh.

‘Enlightened self-interest’ is about recognising your own needs, accepting that at times your needs may conflict with the needs of others, and finding a way in which all parties are satisfied and no one is hurt. It is very much like a ‘win-win’ situation.

Having ‘no regrets’
Having ‘no regrets’ is an appropriate strategy on which to conclude. This strategy is one that is shaped by an optimistic approach to life and grounded in the
philosophy that people can make the most out of the things they do. Doris is one of the women who, on reflection, realises that she made some unfavourable decisions during her life course. However, rather than dwelling on those things she did that did not facilitate her potential, she always tried to find positive outcomes in everything.

Doris:
But I never, ever thought … I didn’t ever regret anything. I think that was the thing. Sometimes you hear people say, if I had only done such and such, I would have made twice as much money out of that. I never, ever think that if only I had done something differently, I would have been better off.

Having ‘no regrets’ is a strategy that has enabled Doris to progress in her life course, instead of staying stuck, filled with regret and remorse and unable to move forward.

In summary, the strategies the women have adopted to overcome some of the occupational tensions they experienced in adulthood, and to facilitate the development of their occupational potential, have been quite varied. These strategies have been shaped by their philosophies and occupational needs and influenced by the contextual backgrounds of their personal and social environments. The extent to which these strategies were successful, as judged by each woman on reflection of her occupational life course, will be considered in the following chapter.
Chapter 6

Occupational Potential in Late Adulthood: Influences, Reflections and Expectations

Chapter six focuses on occupational potential in late adulthood. It discusses some of the elements identified from the analysis of the women’s stories which appear influential in this particular phase of their occupational life course. The chapter includes a presentation of the women’s reflections of their occupational potential over time and their thoughts about their future occupational potential. As in the previous two chapters, extracts are included from the women’s stories, together with interpretative commentaries that highlight the themes uncovered during the analysis.

Prior to commencing this discussion, it is important to put the women’s late adulthood into perspective by considering some of the critical sociocultural and environmental factors that provide the contextual framework to this phase of their lives. Appreciation of such factors enhances understandings of the elements that have influenced the development of the women’s occupational potential and enables a better comprehension of their reflections and expectations. From the analysis of the women’s life stories, the dominant factors are ageing, gender and rurality.

Ageing, or growing older, is a normal, continuous process. People start to age the moment they are born. As people age, they undergo biological, social, psychological and even spiritual changes (eds Birren & Bengston 1988). People also have changing occupational experiences and evolve as occupational beings as they grow older. For example, in a family, as children grow older they may change from being care recipients to care givers, whereas the reverse may happen for their parents. This example also highlights that people do not age in isolation, that is, significant others, such as partners and children age at the same time. Sometimes, it is necessary for a person to make occupational adaptations due to physical changes that accompany ageing. A case in point is Maureen, who has sewed all her life. Due to the development of arthritis in her hands over the past
few years, she can no longer sew. Occupational adaptation in this instance would involve constructing a new, positive occupational identity and achieving competence in new occupations (Kielhofner 2002). Such changing occupational experiences and occupational adaptations due to ageing are necessary and normal features of a person’s life course.

Recent research has shown that many older people successfully make the occupational adaptations that accompany ageing (eds Baltes & Baltes 1993; Ranzijn & Grbich 2001; Ranzijn, Harford & Andrew 2002) and continue to lead productive and occupationally meaningful lives. For others, the commonly held myths that equate ageing in late adulthood with ‘frailty, sickness, loneliness, mental vacuity, physical helplessness, unproductiveness, rigidity of outlook, financial dependence, and powerlessness’ (Job 1984, p. 10) can provide social barriers to the realisation of occupational potential. Such barriers can be greater when the older person is a woman.

When we look at ageing in late adulthood ‘through a gender lens ’ (Feldman & Poole 1999, p. 8), it can be seen that there is a prevalence of derogatory stereotypes concerning older women and western culture seems less than tolerant of the ageing process and its physical manifestations in women (eds Poole & Feldman 1999). If there is no relief from the occupational tensions arising in adulthood, and if the pressure is compounded by such social views of late adulthood, it is possible to appreciate how these social forces may mitigate, overtly and covertly, the development of older women’s occupational potential. However, for some women, for example, those who have already developed successful occupational strategies, late adulthood seems to represent the possibility of experiencing a new evolving stage of life (Friedan 1993). This may take the form of participation in new, meaningful occupations and reinvention of their occupational identities.

Environmental factors also impact on occupational potential in late adulthood. If older people remain in their usual environment, then they have already adapted to the setting and its constraints, and their occupational identity need not change. However, if they move to a new location, as many older people do, they often need to adapt to a different lifestyle, establish new networks and re-establish an
occupational identity. Just as wellbeing is enhanced when individuals’ needs are in equilibrium with characteristics of the environment (Howe & Briggs 1982; Christiansen & Baum 1997), occupational potential is enhanced when individuals’ occupational needs match the opportunities afforded by the environment at large.

The women in this study highlight the importance of the match between individual needs and opportunities afforded by the environment. For example, Alice has lived in the Shoalhaven for sixty-four years, since she was a young girl. However, the other five women in the study moved to the Shoalhaven when they retired. Sylvia, Fran, Maureen and Mary moved from Sydney, the state capital city, ten, six, twenty-four and twenty years ago, respectively. Doris moved from Wollongong, a major regional centre in New South Wales, twelve years ago. The women’s move to a rural coastal area is indicative of a growing trend among retirees in Australia (Salt 2001). From the women’s stories, it is apparent that they moved to the Shoalhaven for various reasons: to improve their quality of life, for an easier lifestyle, for economic advantages, and for a greater sense of community. For most of the women in the study, living in a rural coastal community has met their occupational needs and contributed positively to their occupational evolution in late adulthood. For some, issues such as distance from family, have created occupational barriers.

Having addressed some of the broad physical, social and environmental factors that seemingly impacted on the women’s occupational participation in late adulthood, some of the specific elements that have influenced the continued development and realisation of their occupational potential will now be discussed.

**Influences on occupational potential**

The extent to which certain elements, such as retirement, grandparenthood and health, have influenced each woman’s occupational potential in late adulthood depends on several factors. These factors include: personal characteristics, both physical and emotional; the familial, economic and geographic contexts of her occupational experiences during this period; and her previous occupational history. Extracts from the transcripts, together with interpretative commentaries, will highlight the dominant themes which have been illuminated within these elements through narrative analysis.
Being retired

Retirement, one of life’s critical events, signals a person’s maturity, both in terms of age and experience. In fact, it is often regarded as a major rite of passage from adulthood to late adulthood. Retirement can be viewed in two ways. In its narrow sense, it means the cessation of paid employment. More broadly, it implies withdrawal from mainstream social and community activities (Golan 1981). From an occupational perspective, retirement is considered an occupational transition. Research has shown that it has consequences for temporality, balance and meaning of occupations (Jonsson, Borell & Sadlo 2000). From the analysis of the women’s stories, it is apparent retirement brings about changes in people’s occupational routines and, as such, influences the development and realisation of their occupational potential. With the ageing of the world’s population, retirement is particularly relevant to the concept of occupational potential, as people are now living longer beyond retirement than ever before and, hence, have the opportunity to engage in occupations unrelated to their employment for longer periods.

As the stories reveal, the effect of retirement on each woman’s occupational potential has been contingent on several factors: whether she retired from full or part-time work; her age and health at the time of retirement; when her partner retired; and her occupational repertoire pre-retirement. The three women who worked full-time, Maureen, Doris and Mary, retired at the ages of fifty-eight, fifty-five and sixty, respectively. Sylvia ceased her part-time work at the age of fifty-five. Alice was sixty-one when her husband retired from the farm, subsequently reducing her work commitments, and Fran was sixty when her husband retired. For some of the women, retirement has been a positive experience, enhancing their occupational potential by enabling them to participate in additional, meaningful occupations. However, others have viewed retirement as disempowering and felt it inhibited their levels of occupational participation.

Losing personal space and normal routine

Retirement from work can result in changes to a person’s occupational place and purpose. Such changes affect not only the retiree, but also family members. For example, Fran, who had not worked outside the home since marriage, was
significantly affected by her husband’s retirement. As the following extract reveals, retirement has meant occupational adaptations for both of them.

Fran:
It hasn’t been easy, retirement. I guess these last six years have been the worst of our married life. Retirement, I don’t think, brings you together. You are too close, I don’t know. Yes. You want to get up and wash up. I have to give him jobs to keep him busy, and then he is under my feet. And then he only half does it. He doesn’t wipe under the tablecloth, and he doesn’t wipe this down. And the stove is all dirty, and three or four glasses will sit on the sink for three days, and I say, haven’t you washed them up? Yes. I say, well, why don’t you wipe them up and put them away? He says, you didn’t tell me to. It hasn’t been easy living together. I think, you go through six months, it is very good. We are going through a good period now, but we have been through a month that has been really rough, and it hasn’t been the best time of our lives. So, it is really good that I have my days out and he has his days out. But when I first came down here, I didn’t know anybody, but, as I have come down here, people I bowled with in Sydney have moved down too, so I have a couple of friends that I can walk with on a Wednesday or Friday, or we go to the pictures together. You see, Harry isn’t interested in the movies. I mean, he is unhappy too. I mean he was a man that played sport all the time. He was always active. He likes his bowls, but he is not used to sitting, neither. I mean, we both have our problems.

Both Fran and her husband have had difficulty adjusting to his retirement, and it has affected their relationship. Fran feels that she can no longer do what she wants and has to adjust her routine to accommodate her husband’s occupational needs. Also, she has been used to doing things in the house alone and feels cramped by his continual presence. For someone like Fran, who has had a somewhat limited repertoire of occupations in the first instance, the possibility of losing some of her normal occupations because of the presence of her husband is quite anxiety provoking. Also, as was revealed in chapter four, Fran likes to be in control and having someone else in her domain threatens her sense of efficacy. In this instance, the development of Fran’s occupational potential has been constrained by retirement. Her husband’s retirement has interrupted her routine for everyday occupations and impinged on her personal occupational space.

Fran’s experience has been somewhat similar to Maureen’s, the difference being that Maureen’s husband has been retired for twenty-four years, whereas Harry retired just six years ago. Maureen has adjusted to the situation over time and
continues to use her strategy of ‘getting out of the house’ to ensure her occupational potential is not constrained to any great degree by her husband’s continual presence in the house.

**Having opportunity to indulge in meaningful occupations**

Retirement for Sylvia, on the other hand, has enhanced the development of her occupational potential. Being retired has provided her with additional time and opportunity to indulge in her favourite, most meaningful occupations, of which there are several. As revealed in the following extract, she has adapted fairly readily to retirement, and has had no difficulty in doing what she wants.

Sylvia:
Well, I played bridge once a week. I played tennis once a week. At the weekend, we shared an interest in boating and we did recreational family sailing, with Keith doing racing with the yacht squadron. We entertained a lot. I subscribed to everything then; the opera, the ballet, the theatre. I went for some of the time with Keith, but he gradually dropped out and became more …. I suppose, the pressure of work in the television industry changed. There were tremendous pressures, so I think he was probably pretty tired, so he didn’t go to a lot of those things with me, but he played bridge in those days, so once a fortnight on a Wednesday night we had another couple we played bridge with. And then I went to short courses with WEA. But the best ones were at Adult Education at the University of Sydney. They had continuums. Often they ran for a year. In one case, closer to two years. That one had a trip to Greece at the end of it, so I went to Greece with that group. But Keith didn’t go.

Given Sylvia’s extensive range of interests pre-retirement, and her independent streak, it is not surprising that she has had no difficulty in productively filling her free time post-retirement and participating in occupations, with or without her husband.

**Discovering new occupations**

Being retired has also enhanced Doris’s occupational potential. Prior to retiring, she already participated in an extensive range of meaningful occupations and was anticipating that in retirement she would have more time to enjoy them. As it happened, quite by chance, she has become engaged in additional self-chosen occupations which she is enjoying immensely, as the next extract shows.
Doris:
The whole of the [Australian Native Plant] Society was invited over to the museum, because we maintain a garden over there. We were invited over there for a volunteers’ barbecue. So Allan came and others from our group. This is where I first met Violet Hooper, and she was looking for volunteers to help in the museum, to do guiding. Well, I went immediately and said, yes, I have been a teacher, I can do that. She grabbed me. *Laugh. Laugh.* And very soon after that she rang me and said, would I like to come to her house and be involved with the filing, which I did … Yes, I am really enjoying it … Gee, nobody ever told me about that when I was thinking about careers, nobody mentioned it … I am over at the museum every Tuesday doing filing and Allan comes over and does odd jobs and whatever.

Being retired has opened up new occupational avenues for Doris and her husband. This is an example of where her particular occupational strategy, ‘being willing to try something new’, has enriched her occupational experiences and, as other parts of her story show, augmented their social relationships and activities as well.

**Being a grandparent**

Becoming a grandparent is also considered a critical life event in late adulthood. As opposed to retirement, which is either planned or mandatory, Margaret Mead is reported to have stated that ‘grandparenthood is one life transition over which you have no control. It’s done to you’ (Sheehy 1995, p. 396). Having grandchildren can create a sense of continuity of generations and be one way of connecting with the future. For many older people, grandparenthood can be a prerogative they anticipate with pleasure, yet for others it may challenge their personal identity and sense of time and future (Sheehy 1995).

All the women, except Mary, who never had children, became grandparents in late adulthood. It is interesting to note that only two of the women have grandchildren living in the local area and, in both cases, their daughters and their families moved to the Shoalhaven after the women retired there. Perhaps the daughters wanted their children to have easy access to their grandmothers. The other three women regret that they only see their grandchildren infrequently. The five women all reported that they enjoy spending time with their grandchildren and all feel that this additional role has enhanced their occupational potential to some extent. Some of the ways in which being a grandparent has positively influenced their occupational potential will now be discussed.
Keeping up-to-date

As the next extract shows, Alice appreciates spending time with her grandchildren and doing things with them because she feels it is one means of being involved with the younger generation.

Alice:
You know, your children, then your grandchildren, they keep you up to the minute with what is going on, and you have to try to listen to their ideas and keep up to modern times. We went to the movies yesterday and we saw one called *American Sweethearts*, and it was one of these American movies where they shout and yell and scream, fast talk. It was a terrible movie. And I wondered what Melinda thought, and she thought it was terrible too. So, there you go. *Laugh.* So, at least that way you know what children are thinking, what their standards are.

Alice feels it is important to keep abreast of the attitudes and ideas of younger people. Although she does enjoy spending time with friends her own age and still maintains her personal values as she ages, being with her grandchildren enables her to do different things, things that she would not normally do. By participating in occupations with a younger generation, she continues to shape her occupational identity and evolve as an occupational being.

Filling a void

When Fran became a grandparent, she acquired an additional occupational role which broadened her occupational experiences, adding meaning and enjoyment to her everyday occupations.

Fran:
Yes, I looked after Sam. In school holidays and things like that … I loved it. Yes, I did enjoy having Sam. He was good fun. … he took a part of my life … and by that time, we had this weekender down here. And he used to come down with us every time. We couldn’t move without him. He was always there.

For Fran, a person with a limited number of meaningful occupations, becoming a grandparent was a significant event for her in late adulthood. Taking care of her grandson when he was a baby became a new occupation for her, and enhanced her self-identity and sense of purpose. Even today, when Sam is a teenager, she still feels ‘special’ when she spends time with him, as the next extract reveals.
Fran:
I love it when the sixteen year old comes up, and I am one of the kids. Come on, Nan, put on your swimmers. We are going for a swim. I think, oh. Oh, come on Nan, you’ll be right, he says, So, I say, alright, I’ll go for a swim. I love that when he says that. [Other times he’ll say], come on Nan, you know where to walk. You take us for a long walk. You know, I like that.

Being valued for the things you know and do
Traditionally, a grandmother epitomises the wisdom of the older woman (Sheehy 1995). This is the situation in Maureen’s family, and it is an aspect of grandparenthood that is enhancing her occupational potential in her later years. In the following extract, you can sense her pleasure in being able to do things that are meaningful for her and meaningful for others.

Maureen:
My granddaughter rang me the other day. She said, Grandma, I have got a homework project to do and I need some help. She said, Mum spent hours last night trying to help me, but she couldn’t find the answers. And … she had sheep, cow, horse …. There were five different animals, anyway. She is only in second class, you see. And she had to name the male and the female and the offspring. Bull, cow and calf, sort of thing. She knew some of them, but she didn’t know the lot of them …. So she rang me to find out what they all were before she could put her homework in. [And then] she came in last weekend and stayed the weekend, and she bought in some track pants. Her mother bought them for school. She said, Grandma, these are too long. Can you take them up for me? So, we had to chop a bit off and hem them up. But they all know where to come when they want anything done. The daughters and the granddaughters.

It is interesting to note that when asked how being able to help her grandchildren made her feel, Maureen replied, *needed*. There is a significant difference for Maureen in being needed by her husband and being needed by her grandchildren. It appears her grandchildren respect her wisdom and value the skills and knowledge that she has to offer whereas her husband just expects that she will do things for him. Being valued and appreciated, therefore, enhances occupational potential.

From the women’s accounts, being a grandparent can be an occupationally rewarding experience in late adulthood. Possibly, due to the reduction in the occupational tensions that were a feature of adulthood, the women have the time and energy to enjoy their grandchildren in a way that is different to how they
participated with their children. Alice even goes so far as to suggest that, based on observations of her friends, women who do not have grandchildren seem to miss out on the opportunity for some meaningful occupations. The final following extract embodies this sentiment.

Alice:
Yes, yes. I often wonder … I have one or two friends who don’t have any family, and they keep themselves busy, but I always think that there is a kind of emptiness there.

**Having health problems**

Sometimes, as people age, they experience a decline in their physical health. Painful joints due to wear and tear over time, osteoporosis resulting from hormonal changes, heart problems and obesity are some common health problems of older women (Ritchie 1987). At the time of the interviews, all the women were living independently, were mobile without the use of aids, and maintained that they were in relatively good health. However, some reported that they have some health problems. For example, Sylvia has a thyroid problem that is being managed. Maureen has joint problems, although a total hip replacement a few years ago significantly reduced her pain levels. Mary is on medication for depression. Both Doris and Mary report having back pain at times. The extent to which such problems impact on occupational potential depends on several factors, such as a person’s attitude to the problem, the number of other health problems present, the extent to which occupational participation is compromised by the problem, and the availability of support. Some of the themes related to how health problems influence occupational potential in late adulthood are presented next.

**Missing out on meaningful occupations**

Although Mary’s depression is under control, it is her current physical problems that are constraining her occupational potential by restricting her ability to do the things that are meaningful to her. Mary’s story reveals that she enjoys bushwalking, gardening and walking the dogs. She would also really like to be the Australian CWA representative in the South Pacific, but she realises that *the physical requirements are now a little bit beyond her.*
Mary:
I have been told that there is nothing that can be done for my back. I was told they could ease the pain in my leg, but I don’t have that much pain in my leg. I just don’t have that much movement in my leg, particularly when I get tired. I am good in the morning, but by night time I am falling over them. But it is my back that plays up. So I won’t be able to do the walks and things …

… I have a horrible feeling that maybe life has just caught up a little bit. I mean, it’s not the wanting to, it is the ability to …

Although she is trying very hard to keep on her feet, by following a regular gym routine and by joining a weight loss program, Mary has accepted that her physical problems are limiting further development of her occupational potential.

Having a salvation from obligatory occupations

Back pain is among the health problems that Maureen reports. Admittedly, problems are not as severe as Mary’s but, rather than letting such problems prevent her from doing the things she wants, she has found means of adapting to her problems.

Maureen:
Sometimes I get a bit of backache. It depends on what I do. If I am sensible … but sometimes I do things that I shouldn’t … I pay for it if I get into the garden for too long. I can do a little bit at a time. But generally my health is pretty good. I was worried years ago when I had the heart attack, but I have had no problems since. I am not even on tablets now … they said it was stress-induced. But I had had angina years before that too, but I haven’t had that for a while. Probably because my lifestyle is not as hectic as it used to be. When I was in Sydney and I was working, I had to take Jenny to school and pick her up on the way. And my husband, when he was working, he didn’t like me doing things on the weekend. Weekends were meant to be for relaxing, which meant that I had to get washing and ironing, cooking and cleaning done before and after work as well, to try to keep the weekends reasonably free. And some of the work was pretty heavy too, some of the housework. Climbing up on ladders and cleaning chandeliers and cleaning windows and all sorts of stuff. [The work load is not as heavy now] … besides that, if I think that I will do that tomorrow and I get up in the morning and I don’t feel like doing it, I don’t do it. It just gets done the next day or whenever. The only thing that I am finding a bit difficult at the moment is the kitchen floor. It has good vinyl on it, but with everything getting slopped on it all the time, it is almost a full time job keeping it clean. Other than that, it is easy enough to keep clean. I get the windows cleaned. Twice a year. In the meantime, I get the inside done and I hose the outside, and I get the carpets cleaned twice a year. And I just vacuum in between. Any
of the other jobs, like little carpentry jobs and painting, those sorts of jobs, I find someone to do them. I used to do those sorts of things myself too. I painted ceilings and painted walls, but I don’t anymore, because I know that I will pay for it if I do.

As this extract shows, Maureen had a very heavy workload in the past: working, child caring and housecleaning. It shows that she was very diligent in her housework and desperately tried to get everything done. This extract also highlights the gender expectations within her family. Being a woman, it was expected that she do all the domestic chores, even though she was also working outside the home, while her husband used the weekends for rest and relaxation. The extract also shows that even if she is not actually doing the work, she is responsible for co-ordinating it, nevertheless.

Fortunately for Maureen, who now has some physical restrictions, possibly resulting from such a rigorous work routine in the past, her workload is significantly less in late adulthood. These days, she feels less pressured to get everything done. A major contributor to the stress reduction is her modified attitude, and well as an improvement in their financial situation. She is now more relaxed and content to leave some things to the next day, as if her obligations have changed over time. They now have the financial means to pay for some assistance.

This may seem ironic, but Maureen’s health problems in late adulthood have been kind of occupational salvations for her, enhancing her potential to be do more personally meaningful things. Due to her physical constraints, she has had to find alternative ways of doing things in order to reduce her pain and discomfort. In fact, these alternatives have been beneficial to her occupationally. They have reduced the number of her obligatory occupations and freed up time for her self-chosen ones. Primarily, she has adopted a more relaxed attitude to housework and is considering more of her personal needs.

**Managing finances**

From the analysis of the women’s stories, it seems individuals’ financial situations in late adulthood are determined to a large extent by their financial position in adulthood. For example, an adult may implement some financial planning strategies for the future, such as investments or superannuation, or there may be
two adults contributing to the family income. The level of income people generate in adulthood is often dependent on educational levels, with qualified people usually earning more than those who are unqualified. Additionally, how people use their money is largely determined by their personal and familial values, previous financial experiences, and their exposure to information about savings plans and investment schemes.

Older adults may be ‘asset rich’, that is, they may own their home and car, but at the same time may be considered ‘cash poor’ if their only source of income is a fortnightly pension. Older individuals on fixed incomes tend to avoid loans and additional expenses. Others have monetary reserves, in the form of invested funds, on which they can draw for additional expenses such as a holiday or new furniture. Some older adults make major financial decisions at the time of retirement, such as selling their home, moving to a new area or going on an overseas trip, prior to embarking on a new phase of not being employed and therefore no longer generating a regular wage.

From the analysis of their stories, it seems that the women have quite different financial situations, for the varying reasons mentioned above. All the women own their homes and motor vehicles. Five of them sold their urban homes and purchased new homes in the Shoalhaven on their retirement. Some are on the pension, while others are self-funded superannuants. Some of the women have investments. In adulthood, a number of the women have made sound financial judgments which are standing them in good stead in their late adulthood. One woman regrets the financial decisions she made on retirement.

What is apparent is that, in most instances, the amount of financial leverage they have has varied little over time, although the financial pressures have eased as the number of dependants they were supporting decreased. The women have adapted occupationally to their financial resources, that is, they know which occupations they can afford and those they cannot. Consequentially, there have been no major changes to their occupational participation as they have aged. However, as revealed in the next extract, Maureen’s inheritance from her mother’s estate will make a substantial difference to her levels of occupational participation. For the
first time, ever, she can do what she has always wanted to do but had been unable to afford.

Maureen:
We have spent quite a lot of our capital [recently]. We spent five thousand dollars not so long ago, updating the car. Actually the car is two years older than the one I had before, but it is a bigger and better car. And I have spent money on air conditioning and various things around the place, so that has reduced our other income. I’ll get some money out of Mum’s estate when it comes along. And we are having a few disagreements about that. One minute he says, when you get your money, we’ll do so and so. Another time, he’ll say, it is your money, do what you like with it. And then he will say, you don’t want to spend too much of that money. You don’t want to go mad with it. But then on the other hand, he’ll say he needs so and so. So, I don’t know what will actually happen when it arrives. I want to give some of it to the girls. And he is not in favour of that. He says, oh, they will only spend it. I say, well, if there is something that they need, why shouldn’t they spend it. But anyway, we will wait and see. Wait and see how much we get first. At the present time, if I really want something, I really have to save up for it. I might even get to do the trip to Perth, yet.

Maureen has been dreaming of going to Perth since she was sixteen years old: I heard so much about it from the servicemen who came from Perth. I’ll go, when I get the money, I’ll go.

Just as financial support when young influences the development of their occupational potential, it is apparent, from analysing the stories, that the women’s occupational potential in late adulthood is enhanced if they are in a comfortable financial situation, with sufficient available funds to do the things in which they are interested. The women in this study have varying levels of financial contentment, as the following extracts reveal.

Fran:
Financially? Oooh. Things are not tight. But we don’t have money to throw away. Harry keeps me in tow. We are on a pension and we have a small investment. We take the interest. And yes, but I am frightened to spend that investment money … .And we have two cars. We run two cars, because that was a must when I came here. That is the first thing I bought before the house was even finished. I bought the car. I thought, once you start buying things for the house, you’ll run out of money, so I bought that straight away.
Fran and her husband, who only ever had the one income in adulthood, are now on a pension and, although they need to be careful with their spending, are financially comfortable. Fran’s story reveals that they made some major financial decisions when Harry retired: they sold their home in Sydney and built a new home in the Shoalhaven, and they had a caravanning trip around Australia. It also reveals that they have adjusted occupationally to their financial situation, participating in low cost, easily accessible occupations such as bowling and dancing.

Mary is somewhat occupationally constrained by lack of access to ready funds. A victim of downward spiralling interest rates, Mary’s financial planning went awry and her ‘nest egg’ for the future dissipated, as the following extract reveals.

Mary:
Financially, I haven’t got a hope. *Laugh. Laugh. Mr Keating* [past Australian Prime Minister] and a bit too much pride did that. *Laugh. Laugh.* I rolled over my superannuation, and that is where Mr Keating did it, because, of course, we went down from seventeen to four per cent [interest], and I was too proud to go onto the dole, because I had retired early. So … umm … and I ran through my money. So, you know, that’s that. So, you do what you can with what you have got. I have an investment in our property … [and I get] the age pension. That’s another thing that I did wrong. My doctor wanted me to go for sickness, and I didn’t feel I was sick enough. And she said, Mary, let me be the judge of that. I will get you your sickness benefits. If I had retired when I did and got sickness benefits, and if she could have got it for me, I most probably, well, I would have been much better off than I am.

In some respects, Mary epitomises the ‘disadvantaged elderly woman’ (Arber & Ginn 1991). Despite working for most of her adult life, Mary has a relative lack of financial and material resources. This situation, compounded by her functional disability, as previously discussed, and the fact that she has remained single and childless which limits her access to caring and supportive resources, significantly constrains her ability to fulfil her occupational potential in this stage of her life.

Alice, a single woman since her husband’s death, by comparison, has less financial concerns.
Alice:
Well, we went to a solicitor a few years ago and we worked out the
finances there, so that either one of us would be okay. And so that is
working out alright …

Marriage, a family business and some sound financial planning have enabled
Alice to be in a position in late adulthood whereby she is relatively free to do what
she wants. At the time of the interviews, she was planning another overseas trip.

**Having a dependent husband**
Recent Australian demographic data reflect a global picture and confirm that
Australian women outlive men by approximately seven years, with women
comprising fifty-six per cent of the population aged sixty-five years and over.
There is also a tendency for men to marry younger women (ABS 2001, 2002a).
Due to these factors, there is a growing number of older women who have a
functionally dependent husband. From some of the women’s stories, it seems that
caring for someone is a time-consuming and demanding occupation which can
impact on the carer’s occupational potential because it leaves little time or energy
for one’s self-chosen occupations. On the other hand, for some of the women,
caring is a meaningful occupation, one that creates a new occupational identity
and enhances feelings of self-worth. Of the four women in this study who are
married, three have functionally dependent husbands. Doris’s husband has a
terminal illness, Sylvia’s husband is reliant on her for transport due to his eyesight
problem, and Maureen’s husband has had long-term physical and mental health
problems.

The degree to which having a dependent husband influences occupational
potential, like all the other elements discussed so far, depends on different factors.
The stories highlight the following significant factors: the level of the spouse’s
dependency; the period he has been dependent; the extent to which the woman is
satisfied with the occupational adaptations she is required to make; the quality of
the couple’s relationship; the woman’s occupational repertoire prior to her
husband’s dependency; the level to which her routine is disrupted; and the
woman’s need to be occupationally independent.
As the extracts below illustrate, the three women in the study are affected differently, in terms of their occupational potential, by their husbands’ dependency.

**Adapting and creating opportunities**

Doris’s resourcefulness and adaptability, fostered in her younger days when she cared for her dependent mother, have been beneficial while caring for her husband. As a person with a wide range of interests and strong occupational needs, she has created ways of ensuring her needs are met, while still caring for her husband, as the following extract reveals.

Doris:
I don’t feel that there are things that I really want to do that I can’t, because we have had to modify a lot of things. One of the things that we have done up until now, each year, about November, we have been up to Lamington National Park. We did that following that bad episode, in 1996. I sort of felt that we needed something really good to look forward to. Now, I had been up there a number of times, but it was always just camping. And I decided that we were going to go up there and stay at the Guest House and do the luxury thing. And I didn’t know if he would be well enough to go. He was, he was able to. But I do all the driving now.

… [but the modifications] are getting more than minor, because we won’t be going up there now. It is too far. [Instead] we are going with the Australian Plant Society for four days, up to Wiseman’s Ferry, which is very nice. We get a bus, and one of our members drives. Quite a few of the members are not very active, so there is always somebody to do an easy thing, and some of the others can do harder things if they want.

In some respects, it is probably fortunate that Doris and her husband share many of the same interests. By adapting to her husband’s increasing weakness, they both have been able to be occupationally satisfied.

**Feeling the strain**

Maureen has had much more difficulty coping with her husband’s functional dependency. Admittedly, he has been dependent for a much longer time, and it seems from Maureen’s account that they are occupationally incompatible. While Doris has been finding ways to do things with her husband, Maureen is more intent on doing things by herself.
Maureen:
I do need to get out of the house some of the time. I also thought at one stage of getting rid of the car, as a way of being able to do my own thing, on my own, but I think that would be cutting off my nose to spite my face, at this stage. *Laugh.* Well, I would have to go by myself, because he couldn’t walk. But then there would probably be wet days, or real hot summer days when I wouldn’t feel like walking either. So I thought I won’t do that yet. I will keep the car for a while, while I consider that I am still able to drive properly. I hope I have the sense to know when I am not.

Caring for her husband for an extended period of time has been a trying experience for Maureen, depriving her of her occupational freedom. The strain has been so great she has even considered taking some quite drastic steps to enable her to participate in some occupations independently.

**Being a widow**
As the trend of women living longer than men is expected to continue, it is likely that widowhood will become a ‘normal’ transitional phase in the life course for a significant number of older women. There is no doubt that becoming a widow brings about many changes to a woman’s life, including financial, social and occupational changes. Just as research has found that a woman’s past life greatly influences her attitude to and experience of widowhood (Feldman *et al.* 2002), it seems her past occupational life course influences the occupational potential of a widow. For example, if a woman was responsible for caring for an infirm spouse prior to his death, she may experience occupational freedom on becoming a widow. If her occupational contributions to the marriage relationship were unrecognised and she felt that she was an invisible partner, she may enjoy autonomy for the first time for many years. Alternatively, if she was dependent on her spouse, she may feel vulnerable, inadequate, and occupationally incompetent in managing by herself. And if she had always had occupational interests separate from those of her spouse, she may not experience too many changes once she becomes a widow.

At the time of the interviews, only one of the women in this study was a widow. Alice and her husband, Vince, had been married almost fifty-three years at the time of his death. He died three months prior to her first interview for this study. Although he had had heart surgery many years before, his sudden death was quite
unexpected, nevertheless, as he previously had been well and relatively active. As revealed by her story and highlighted by some of the extracts that have been included to date, Alice has always had a broad repertoire of occupational interests and a high level of occupational competence in many areas. From quite early in their relationship, she was often occupied independently of her husband. Such factors have influenced her occupational potential in widowhood in a positive way.

**Making occupational adaptations**

Although widowhood has not constrained her capacity to do what she wants, Alice has found that it has been necessary to make some occupational adaptations, as the following extract shows.

Alice:
Yes, I find a steamer very useful. I can put in three to four different kinds of vegetables in a steamer and I can cook them all at once, and I don’t eat red meats anymore. I have mostly chicken and fish, just light meals …. And I use the microwave, to heat up frozen pies, which I buy at the supermarket. You find that you are looking for easy ways to do things. And occasionally I go out to dinner with friends, and we would have a splurge and have nice, rich things. Occasionally, I think it is alright to do that.

Adaptations are necessary for even the most routine of occupations. Since becoming a widow, Alice has been finding new ways of doing things, such as cooking food for one person. She has also been using her network of friends to her advantage. Such findings are concurrent with other research, which has found that widowhood can engender new directions and alternative possibilities for older women (Feldman et al. 2002).

**Setting new goals**

In addition to making some occupational adaptations, widowhood has given Alice some new goals to achieve.

Alice:
Yes, that’s right. I have to work on that to make sure that I am going to remain healthy, so that I can remain here as long as I like, because I would hate to move out. There are so many memories here. And, also, it is great for the family. There is heaps of room, and they know they can come down anytime, for weekends, or holidays, or whatever.
As a means of preserving the past and remembering the good times, Alice is determined to remain living in the family home for as long as possible. Such a goal has engendered within her the will to stay strong and healthy. She has continued her daily exercise program and, as the previous extract illustrates, ensures that her diet is adequate. It almost seems that the death of her husband has strengthened her will to live.

Contrary to popular belief that late adulthood brings about deterioration in one’s quality of life and a decline in the level of occupational participation and engagement in community activities, most of the women in this study have continued to live occupationally satisfying lives in the later phase of their life course. Indeed, for some of the women, late adulthood has been a period in their lives in which they have continued to evolve as occupational beings, reinventing themselves as they participate in new and meaningful occupations.

In brief, some of the elements which have significantly influenced occupational potential in late adulthood include retirement, grandparenthood, health, financial position and marital status. The extent of the influence of such elements is dependent on additional issues, such as degree of occupational compatibility with a husband, level of occupational independence, extent of occupational repertoire and freedom from financial restraints.

**Reflections**

Volition is reflected in the wide range of thoughts and feelings people have about the things they have done, are doing or might do (Kielhofner 2002, p. 15).

As the above quote implies, embedded within the women’s reflections are their feelings about themselves as actors in the world, as well as their personal values and interests (Kielhofner 2002). In order to acknowledge the women’s individual values and respect their uniqueness, their commentaries on the extent to which they feel they have realised their occupational potential in the past are presented and discussed individually.

Prior to sharing and interpreting the women’s reflections, it is valuable to consider how the story telling process has affected the women. Purportedly, reflecting on
one’s life helps people to ‘find, clarify and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime’ and assists them ‘in making positive choices at a crossroad in life’, contributing to successful adaptation in later life (Birren & Deutchman 1991, p. 1). For some of the women in this study, reflecting on the past as they told their life stories certainly has been a positive experience, as the following two extracts exemplify.

Mary:
... but I have thoroughly enjoyed going back. And it has made me realise what a good life I have had. Because you do get bogged down in the now … it does make you appreciate what the past has been. And I think it makes you feel stronger for the future.

Alice:
Looking back, it has been even more wonderful than I realised at the time.

For some of the others, the process has stimulated them to consider the future. Maureen’s words encapsulate such a reaction.

Maureen:
Well, now I am going to give more thought to what I will do in the future than I have given it before.

Regardless of the differing responses, however, it does appear that the life story telling process can be a ‘powerful experience’ (Atkinson 1998, p. 3), for the teller and the listener alike. Indeed, there could have been no better way to hear about the unique experiences and perspectives of the women ‘than in their own voices’ (Atkinson 1998, p. 5). The following extracts selected from each woman’s life story offer clear insights into their personal perspectives of their occupational potential over time.

**Sylvia: Not such a bad shot at it**

This first extract is Sylvia’s response to the question: ‘Is Sylvia who she could have been?’ Although Sylvia accepts who she is today and what she has done in her life, one can sense that she does harbour some regrets, which she tries to dismiss, possibly as a defence mechanism.

Yes, given all the other things that make up Sylvia. Yes, I think [so] .... It is unanswerable, really. I have been given tremendous opportunities, but they always had a cut-off point, because of the
value of university education, which I didn’t have. Plus, once again, we come back to the fact that I was a woman in those days. So, I think, given all the givens, I probably haven’t made such a bad shot of it. But, also, it doesn’t do to dwell on what might have been. To have regrets is natural, and you wouldn’t be really a terribly thoughtful person … if you didn’t look back on some things, analyse them, be critical of them, for them to be a matter of regret. But we all know grumble-bums who sit and say, I could have done that, if only …. Don’t do it, move on.

Two important issues emerge from Sylvia’s reflections of her occupational potential overtime: the importance of education and the influence of gender on the development of occupational potential. Sylvia believes tertiary education, something which was not available to her, is a means of extending people’s occupational opportunities and that being female constrained her capacity to do.

**Maureen: Something has been wasted**

Maureen is convinced that her occupational potential has been unfulfilled. In the following extract, in which she explains what she would have liked to have done, her anger and resentment are very evident.

I certainly would have liked to have taught school. I feel as though something has been wasted, because I had the ability to do it, and I wasn’t allowed to …. [My life] wasn’t exactly, all the way, as I chose to lead it. Sometimes, it was the way I had to lead it. I wanted to be a teacher, but it wasn’t to be. I ended up working in offices, which I hated. I don’t really think it could have been much different. As I say, we were told what to do and that was it. And being the eldest in the family, too, I think made it was even more so …. But in those days, you didn’t have the options that girls have today. They do more of their own thing today than what we did, and we had no financial support. There was no AUStudy [Australian government financial scheme for students] or any of those sorts of things, so you just had to live at home and do what you were told, to keep the peace.

Maureen, like Sylvia, thinks that the gender regime, the micro-level of gender politics, which was largely influenced by the gender order, was a major factor that constrained her potential, particularly when she was a young woman. She feels that her occupational choices were limited because she was female, and especially because she was the eldest daughter.
Fran: I would have liked a job

Of all the women in the study, Fran has the most regrets when she reflects on her occupational life course. The poignant extract that follows is Fran’s response to the question: ‘Are there things you wanted to do, but didn’t? If you had your time again, are there things you would make sure you did?’

I’ve never worked. I regret never working. I regret never going to do schoolwork, because now I find it difficult. Sob. I would have liked to have worked. I would have liked to have worked in a shoe shop, or in a clothes shop. But I would have loved, not so much to have used my brain or be a good secretary, but I would have liked just to have worked. When I have worked, I have worked cleaning toilets, and other people’s dirty houses. And that’s, not degrading, but I think …. Sob. I would have liked a job for a lady, to dress up and to put on some shoes and to look good and to have gone out. Yes, I would have liked to have done that …. I always say to my daughter, Jenny, now, try and get out into [something]. But she is like me, she is at the bottom of the heap. She hasn’t got two bob to rub together, and she rents her house, and has three grown up girls. There is no way she can get a decent dress to go anywhere. Yes, so I would have liked to have gone to work.

… and I would have liked to have been able to talk better. I swear, and now I swear to get people’s backs up. Laugh. Sob. But, I swore on the green last Sunday. I had a terrible day at bowls. I said, SHIT, in a really low, Redfern voice. And this man, he is a good man, but the look he gave me was disgusting. And I thought, you should have done better than that, Gert. Sob. If I were younger, I would try and stem my bad temper, to talk a bit better, and to get a job. Sob. And I think that is why I don’t go out with people, because I don’t talk properly. Sob, sob.

… [and] I wish I wasn’t so bad tempered. Sob. And I try not to be. And then, I do really good for a long while, and then somebody just looks at me some way and, oh, all the worst comes out of me, and I do terrible things. I mean, I am as strong as a bull when things like that happen. I get up on my high horse, and I am so ashamed when I walk away. I can’t do nothing about it. I try. And, as I say, I do good for a long while. That is why I was so worried when I went into that [focus group], with all those ladies. I thought, oh, this is a mistake. Just sit on your hands and keep your mouth shut. Laugh.

Indeed, these are extremely moving extracts which highlight the potency of life story telling, for teller and listener alike. Not only did the question that was posed to Fran unleash an outpouring of strong, mixed emotions on her part, but also her responses certainly had a powerful effect on the researcher, both as a person and
as a woman, at the time of the interview. Even now, re-reading her words evokes intense feelings. Given the length of her response, it is apparent that Fran previously had given considerable thought to the issue of her occupational potential, even though this may have been the first time she had been asked about it directly. In fact, this was probably the first time most of the women had even been asked to focus solely on themselves.

In Fran’s reflections, lack of education again emerges as a constraining influence on occupational potential because it limited the types of jobs in which she could have been employed. She also believes some of her personal characteristics, her bad temper and her inclination to swear, have negatively affected her potential.

**Doris: There's nothing I really wanted to do that I didn't do**

Doris’s reflections on her occupational life course differ markedly from Fran’s. Doris recognises she was opportunistic. She also appreciates that when making occupational choices, inevitably, some other occupations are forfeited. Essentially, Doris is satisfied with what she has done in her life.

Well, looking back, I don’t really know of the things that I really wanted to do that I didn’t do. I took a lot of opportunities and did things, and sometimes that did mean that you had to make a choice and you missed out on something else, but usually it seemed that the things I did filled up the gaps of what I didn’t do. I can’t think, looking back, of major things that I didn’t do, that I wished I had. I know now, looking back, I could have been other things, other than a teacher, though I enjoyed teaching. I wouldn’t have not been a teacher, though I could have done other things.

This extract resounds with Doris’s pragmatism, one of her defining characteristics that has positively enhanced her occupational potential throughout her life course. She is grateful for having done the things that she has, and believes that there is not too much she has missed out on doing. And even if she had, given her philosophy and approach to life, it is doubtful that she would have any regrets. She tends to echo her mother’s sentiments in this extract. It is apparent from other parts of her story that Doris’s mother did not believe in wasting time on the things you could not do anything about.
**Mary:** *I didn’t follow through*

The following extract, selected to represent Mary’s reflections of her occupational potential, reveals a degree of dissatisfaction with her life course. Her story reveals that she did some wonderful things, probably much more than most people even dream of doing. Yet, there were many more things she would have liked to have done.

Yes, there are some unfulfilled … At the time, you sort of feel really … very … not depressed … that is too heavy a word … but I feel very distressed about all the opportunities that I let go. But then, I did take … looking back on it, I did make the most of the opportunities I got, and thoroughly enjoyed them. I would have loved to have seen more of Europe though. I would have loved to have gone to the Hebrides and places like that, but you can’t do everything …. I don’t know whether I would have come home if I had gone up to the Hebrides, actually.

I see myself as a person who has missed so many opportunities. I get very frustrated with all the things I would have liked to have done but never did. I didn’t follow through. I would have loved to have worked out in the Centre [of Australia] and … a little bit of that was because there wasn’t a position the first time. I did look into the Bush Nursing, but I don’t think I was considered the right [type] …. I was only a children’s nurse. But I did want to work for the Australian Inland Mission, which had quite a lot of work for children’s nurses out there. I had a couple of friends who worked out there. I would have loved to have done that. Another time, I would have loved to have gone and worked up in the Islands as a non-missionary sister.

Some of Mary’s occupational needs, which remain unsatisfied, relate to doing things for other people. It is as if she feels that she had a mission in life, and this mission has not been accomplished, as yet. This is probably not surprising, given her account of her family’s support of and assistance to indigenous people and people who were disadvantaged. She has adopted her parents’ attitudes and values, which also possibly explains her career as a health professional.

**Alice:** *I have been blessed*

Like Doris, when Alice reflects on her life course, she is very satisfied with the things she has done.

All in all, I think I have had a pretty good life …. Yes, I am lucky, I suppose, I have always been healthy. But I didn’t ever drink, to excess, a social drink. I didn’t ever smoke. … There are some
wonderful things that you can do in life. I don’t know why you have to get all depressed. I guess it is more than that. I think it is probably more to do with your physical make-up, isn’t it, more than often. I guess in many ways, I have been blessed.

It is interesting that Alice attributes her high level of occupational satisfaction to luck and physical characteristics, though she does recognise the influence of attitude on the development of occupational potential. From Alice’s story, it appears that she was one who always made the most out of every situation, looked for the good rather than the bad, and believed in making life as interesting and enjoyable as possible. Alice feels there is no excuse in letting things get you down.

As these selected extracts reveal, the women’s reflections on their occupational potential over time are varied. This is to be expected, given the diversity of their occupational experiences as disclosed in the previous two chapters and the beginning of this chapter. While acknowledging the individual nature of these reflections, there are, however, some common themes that emerge from them. Regret, frustration and satisfaction are the more dominant motifs, and these present with varying intensity. Some of the women expressed mixed emotions when they reflected on their occupational life course.

It is important to remember that ‘telling a life story evokes and guides reminiscence, that is, the recall of events from the past, and directs individuals to examine memories from the perspective of the present’ (Birren & Deutchman 1991, p. 1). Hence, the women’s comments, as shown in the previous section, contained their current thoughts about their past occupational participation. Such thoughts were undoubtedly coloured by their perceptions of the opportunities and choices available to women today. Similarly, as the women viewed their futures, through glasses tinted with their past and present experiences, there was a range of diverse comments, as will now be shown in the following section.

**Expectations**

This closing section, on the women’s occupational expectations, has been included because ‘a life story is a story in progress’ (Atkinson 1998, p. 67). Just as a person has a past occupational life, there is also a future occupational life to consider. Most of these comments by the women were gathered during their last
interview, and were usually made in response to a general query as to what they still wanted to do. They were invited to dream, even fantasise a little, about their future occupational life course. Again, the women’s responses were diverse, but given what we now know about them from the preceding extracts, perhaps not unexpected.

**Sylvia: I have found a sort of contentment**

Sylvia is quite content to continue doing the things she currently enjoys. Over time, Sylvia has developed a rich repertoire of meaningful occupations and she would like to participate in those occupations that obviously give her pleasure. She would really like to be divested of certain roles and responsibilities which she finds uncomfortable. Freedom from non-meaningful occupations would obviously enable her to indulge more fully in her own occupational interests.

In many ways, I have found a sort of contentment that I wouldn’t particularly want to move out of. I think that I have moved into more a passive stage where I know what interests bring me pleasure, and a sort of enrichment, if you like, and I am contented with those as well but, at the same time, they are fairly passive. I don’t think I have got too much dynamism anymore. And neither do I especially want it. I think, I think I would like to be a little more … trouble-free, and yet, if I measure my troubles up against the rest of the world, laugh, I feel ashamed. Yes, I would like to have less troubles. I would really like to stop feeling as though I am the centre of the family. I always thought, in fact, I tried it, when the children were moving out and doing things, getting into their thirties, to move away from the hierarchical thing of ‘mother’. And not make the kind of demands that are stereotypically made, mother-children, and so forth. I put it to them that if they wanted to be in my company, that was fine, but it simply didn’t work, and it has never worked, and always the buck seems to stop with me, and I think I don’t want that anymore. I haven’t wanted it really for a long time, but I became accepting of it. But now, I am quite positive that I don’t want it. And, I would like to be less depressive. I would like a few dreams to reach fulfilment. Not my own, but the way I see my country, the way I see people’s aspirations. I would like more nobility, I think. I really don’t want to do anything very much, specifically. I don’t want to go to the moon, or Antarctica, or even to Bali, actually. Laugh. But I love to search out experiences within what have now proven to be my really total interests. I get a lot from reading. I get a lot from music. I get a lot from the beauty of where I live. And I think that will do me.

And I want to die quickly. I don’t want to be really awful and vile for years. I believe in voluntary euthanasia, but I don’t think I am smart enough to get the right mix. And I suppose, really, I don’t care much
when that happens, but I don’t want it to be nasty. Not only for my own sake, because nobody enjoys pain or loss of dignity, but I don’t want my family to go through it. So, that is what, pretty much, I think, what elderly people think about old people.

Throughout her life, Sylvia has felt constrained and hindered by her gender. She feels resentment at what she regards as social injustice that is endured by women at times. It is also perhaps significant that of the six women in the study, Sylvia is the only one who considers death amongst her expectations. It is possible that she is feeling vulnerable and such a feeling may explain her desire to focus on her own needs at present.

**Maureen: I want to do something**

Given that Maureen’s reflections reveal that she feels her talents and skills have been wasted, because she was not able to participate in her chosen occupation of teaching, it is probably not surprising that today she would still like an opportunity to make a contribution to others.

I feel as if I want to do something, achieve something. I don’t know what I am going to be capable of doing. I also feel it has to be something that is going to have some gain. I just have to give it some more thought.

… now, that is something that I would like to be able to do if I could, but I can’t — to change the way a lot of these young people think today, to be able to help them help themselves more.

These expectations are typical of Maureen’s attitudes and perspectives. Her story reveals that she was never one to focus on her own needs. Rather, she spent her lifetime looking after others. Even now, in late adulthood, she is concerned with others rather than considering ways of helping herself. Perhaps it is difficult for her to be self-centred after a lifetime of being altruistic.

**Fran: Doing things to improve myself**

Conversely, Fran feels that this is the period in her life when she wants to be focusing on doing things that are going to improve her social skills and enhance her occupational repertoire.

I have joined U3A [University of the Third Age]. Before I joined, I read that they take you to show you how to [use an ATM — automatic teller machine], and I thought I will join and they will have that course
again. But, they didn’t. But never mind, they might next year. I thought that was going to be my shining light last year. I joined it and I got the thing [the program]. But, I don’t want to sew anymore. I don’t want to garden. Or learn to do roses. I have done all those sorts of things. But, I would have done the other thing to improve myself. And I keep looking [in the program] to see if there are things to improve myself … My daughter-in-law in Melbourne comes from a more than middle class family, and when we go down, we eat with candelabras and all this sort of thing, and they bring the wine out, and all this sort of thing. And, oh, I would just like to go down there and enjoy them as people. I live on tenterhooks. Yes, I have to be careful with what I do. I just thought that if I did a course for confidence, or something like that. As I said, last Christmas, I was really ‘gung ho’, and I was going to get in and do it. And I thought the U3A would do it, but it wasn’t really what I needed. But next year, I will try that other adult education, and see if there is something about self-confidence … or even courses for bad temper. Laugh. … I am sixty-six, and I want to start to learn to use an ATM. It is a bit stupid.

I would like an interest, down here, to go to Nowra and do an interesting thing. Like bowls, that is an interesting thing. But I don’t know what I need to do. I have passed the sewing. The little bit of gardening I do up the back, I have a nice little bit up there that keeps me busy. And I have Chook [my pet rooster]. I grow a few things in pots. I don’t want to learn how to grow roses. There are things I would like to do, but I just can’t put my finger on it. I don’t know what to do. I don’t have an education to do anything clever or smart. So I am restricted. I am too old to go and get a little job. I thought about going and being a Pink Lady in the hospital, and things like that. My husband thinks that is ridiculous. What do you want to go and do that for? But, you know, I go back to bowls and things happen, but I think I am really quite past it now.

Fran would like to enrich her occupational life. She is now ready to try doing new and interesting things. Indeed, as her life story reveals, her occupational life course to date seems relatively insipid when compared with that of some of the other women in the study. It is interesting that it is at this stage of her life, late adulthood, when she realises there are a lot more things that she could be doing. It is as if she feels her lack of certain occupational skills puts her at a disadvantage. What is most noteworthy is that she is prepared to reinvent herself, to create and shape a new and meaningful life for herself.

Doris: I have more than enough to do

Doris’s ability to plan for the future is hampered by the shadow cast by her husband’s terminal illness. She is finding it difficult to consider her future
occupational life course when she knows some changes are imminent. In fact, it seems as if she is fatiguing a little from the demands of caring for a dependent husband, and that his needs are absorbing the energy and time she would normally devote to her own occupational needs.

Okay, there are still lots of places for me to go, maybe later on my own. I don’t know whether it will be the same. I don’t know whether I will want to, whether going back to some of the same places that Allan and I went to would make you feel too much, like when Allan and I were here, we did this and that, so I just don’t know how I will feel about that in the future. Being retired now, I don’t have to think about earning a living. There is no career path I feel I want to take up. I have hobby paths.

At the moment, I don’t need any mental stimulus. I have more than enough. Laugh. And in the future, well, I am still thinking about [writing] my life story. Maybe. And I have kept a diary, a fairly detailed diary of Allan’s illness, and I may at some stage write that up because the thing he had got is a pretty unusual thing ….

From Doris’s account, it is known that she has many interests and that she has led a full and satisfying life. Although there is an hiatus in her occupational regime at present, she has some plans for the future, such as publishing another book.

**Mary: Making a contribution**

Mary’s expectations are neither grand nor unrealistic. She appreciates that her travelling days are over, due to financial constraints, and from what was revealed about her health status, due to her physical limitations as well. However, like Maureen, Mary still has a need to help other people.

Well, I am looking around [for things to do]. I am going to start my drawing again, my art again. And then I want to … I think I might try taking up Telecross, I think it is. The telephone system for the Red Cross. It’s only just ringing up a person at eight o’clock and as long as you let them know when you are away.

I think I have done my overseas trips, unless I won something. But at the present moment, I don’t think I would want to travel. If I did … I would love to go to China, I would love to go to South America. I would love to go to Mexico, and I would love to go right down the bottom, to Peru more than Argentina. I would like to have a look down there. Um …

One of my dreams, I was thinking about it a little while ago, was to become the ACWW representative for Australia for the South Pacific.
Mary’s story has revealed that she has always been involved with other people, so probably it is to be expected that she would like to continue doing things with and for others. She still has dreams of travelling to far off, exotic places, so her love of excitement and new experiences still exists.

**Alice: Expanding horizons**

Alice believes the future is for expanding one’s horizons, both geographically and mentally. As the final extract in this chapter reveals, Alice intends to go travelling, overseas and within Australia. She also believes that continuing to be involved with the CWA is one way of ensuring that she continues to grow mentally. Since it has been revealed that Alice has led an occupationally enriched life, it can be assumed that she has a cache of meaningful occupations on which to draw in the future to enable her to develop and flourish occupationally.

I think I will do a bit of travelling while I can. I have plans to go to New Zealand next March … with a friend. It is a nineteen day trip. Yes, both Islands. We may as well see it all, laugh, while we can. You never know, we mightn’t be in a fit position to go back again. So you have to do it all while you can. Yes, I always said that I wanted to go overseas, while I could, and then maybe see Australia later on. Yes, I have got invitations to go back to Perth. I have a cousin there. I can go down to Melbourne anytime, I am very fortunate, though, I have contacts. So when I want to travel, I have places to go to. But at the moment, I am very happy. I just want to settle in. It is three months today, I think, yes, since Vince died. I just need to settle in and find out where I am, and what’s going to happen from then on. But I certainly intend to carry on. I will probably start on another branch of family history, maybe my side. I have got lots of information. I just have to put it all together …. And CWA. I won’t ever give that up because I have got so many friends. And it is an outlet for our craft …. They just do a wonderful job. They are an interesting lot of women. We have interesting guest speakers. A country of study, a different country of study each year. So, you know, it just expands your horizons.

The same enthusiasm for living life to the fullest that was evident in other parts of her story exudes from this extract. She recognises that she still needs to adjust to widowhood, yet is determined to remain involved in the occupations which hold meaning for her. Alice has a sponge-like need to absorb interesting things and it is possible she will never be satiated occupationally.
The women’s expectations range from wishing to maintain the occupational status quo, to wanting to participate in new and previously untried occupations. For some of the women, their expectations are directly shaped by their reflections. Fran, for example, who expressed a high degree of regret in her reflections, is eager to make amends in the future and has a lengthy list of desired occupations in which to engage.

In summary, this chapter has discussed some of the elements that have influenced the women’s occupational potential in late adulthood. Retirement, grandparenthood, and health, financial and marital status have emerged from their stories as being significant influences during this phase of the life course. Each woman’s reflections have provided meaningful insights into her personal experience of her occupational life course to date, whilst her expectations embody her unique characteristics.

Chapters four, five and six have presented and interpreted the words of the women who shared their life stories for this study. Each of these chapters has focused on a different stage of the women’s occupational life courses: childhood and adolescence, adulthood, and late adulthood. Together, they represent the women’s occupational experiences over time. The experiences embedded within the women’s stories have been the means by which it has been possible to elucidate understandings of occupational potential. As stated at the outset of this thesis, this was the primary purpose of the study. The following chapter is a discussion of the findings and, as such, represents the synthesis of the main themes illuminated by the analysis.
Chapter seven presents the synthesised findings of this study and an in-depth discussion of the previously unexplored concept of occupational potential. The understandings about occupational potential, which emerged from interpreting the data from an occupational perspective, illuminate some of the more generic features of occupational potential and its inherent nature. These general understandings are presented first, as they address the principal question that guided this study. The additional understandings, which became apparent when a feminist perspective was applied to the data, are presented next. These supplementary findings, which highlight the gendered nature of occupational potential, address the study’s second question. As is characteristic of qualitative research, particularly research conducted within an interpretive paradigm, the findings presented in this chapter are tentative and are not intended as an attempt at developing a universal theory of occupational potential. Rather, the findings remain grounded in the narratives of the participants of the study described in this thesis.

**Discussion of the study findings**

**Understanding human occupational potential**

The principal understanding gained from this study is that occupational potential is a highly complex concept. Occupational potential has been revealed as a multi-dimensional and dynamic human phenomenon that encompasses a person’s needs and capacities, which reflect and are influenced by characteristics of the person and the environment. Contrary to the researcher’s pre-understandings that occupational potential was largely predetermined due to specific personal attributes, occupational potential has emerged from the study as being a fluid phenomenon that evolves as capacities are exercised at different stages of the life course. In spite of its apparent unpredictability, some core features of
occupational potential have been elucidated through the research described in this thesis.

Features of occupational potential

- Occupational potential evolves over time

Overall, the study findings suggest that occupational potential evolves over time. As a way of reflecting the evolutionary nature of occupational potential, the term ‘becoming’ is used in this discussion as a synonym for the development and realisation of occupational potential. There are some sound reasons for using this term, which literally means ‘to come to be’ (Hayward & Sparkes 1975, p. 99). ‘Becoming’ is already a familiar concept in humanistic psychology (Allport 1955), as well as in occupational therapy (Fidler & Fidler 1978, 1983; Wilcock 1999c; Hasselkus 2002). ‘Becoming’ embodies the concepts of transformation and self-actualisation, which are inherent in humanist theories (Maslow 1954; Rogers 1961; Rogers & Stevens 1967;) and is compatible with occupational therapy’s optimistic view of human nature (Reilly 1962). The use of the term ‘becoming’ in this thesis also reflects the assumption of occupational scientists and occupational therapists that occupation has the power to transform people’s lives (Townsend 1997). Additionally, ‘becoming’ implies the future, and fits with the idea of an ongoing process. This was an important consideration because the study revealed that occupational potential continues to develop throughout the life course. A final reason for ‘becoming’ being an appropriate term in this discussion, is that it is associated with the philosophical question, ‘what is it, to be?’ (Heidegger 1962). Heidegger’s (1962) ‘being-in-the-world’ was one of the three constructs from hermeneutic phenomenology that informed this study, guiding how the data were viewed and understood.

From the study, it is apparent that the development of occupational potential begins in childhood and continues throughout the later stages of a person’s life. Indeed, the life stories of the study participants highlight how significant foundations for the development of occupational potential are laid during the early stages of a person’s life course. The stories suggest that support, opportunity and education, received when individuals are young, provide a strong basis for the utilisation of their capacities during childhood, thereby facilitating the
development of occupational potential at the adolescent stage. The strength of such foundations is crucial in the negotiation of the occupational tensions and pressures faced in adulthood.

Indeed, as the study showed, being an adult produces occupational tensions and pressures related to participating in multiple occupations, the responsibilities of earning an income, and caring for dependants. In spite of such occupational tensions experienced by adults, the greatest surge in the development of occupational potential occurs during the adult years. Analysis of the data reveals there are two reasons for this surge. First, during adulthood, people refine their occupational adaptations that enable them to do what they need and want to do. Second, adulthood is a period in people’s lives when they are most likely to have the resources, such as education, skills, experience and available finance, to expedite the use of their capacities and thereby maximise the development and realisation of their occupational potential.

The continued growth and development of people’s occupational potential in late adulthood are very much dependent on its evolution during the previous life stages. If, over time, people acquire a full repertoire of meaningful occupations, practise various successful occupational adaptations, and have a history of satisfying occupational participation, they will be ‘occupationally rich’ in late adulthood. Conversely, if people have been deprived of meaningful occupational participation, for whatever reason, they will be ‘occupationally poor’ older adults. The stories revealed that people continue to reinvent themselves, occupationally, in the later stages of their lives. Contrary to popular belief that older adulthood is a period of rest and retirement from occupational participation, occupational potential can continue to expand and develop during this stage of the life course. Older people with sufficient physical, cognitive and financial resources, in addition to their personal aspirations, may continue to participate in exhausting occupational routines in order to satisfy their personal occupational needs.

Doris’s story effectively illuminates the different stages of ‘becoming’ and how people undergo occupational reinventions. Her story shows that people do not necessarily stay transfixed once they become who they want to be. Doris loved school and enjoyed being a student. With the financial and moral support from her
uncle she was enabled to return to high school to become a senior student. Then, she wanted to become a student at teachers’ college. On completion of her tertiary studies, she became a teacher. After several years working in the field, she undertook further studies at university part-time to become more highly qualified. As an older woman, Doris is currently using her teaching skills at a local museum, and thoroughly enjoying this current stage in her ‘becoming’.

- There is a relationship between patterns of occupational participation and ‘becoming’

The second core feature of the concept of occupational potential is the relationship between people’s patterns of occupational participation and their ‘becoming’. The women’s accounts of their occupational experiences are supported by the belief that ‘being and becoming emanate from everyday doing’ (Hasselkus 2002, p. 16). Similarly, the women’s perceptions of the development of their occupational potential strengthen the assumption that ‘it is through doing that one becomes’ (Fidler & Fidler 1978, p. 308). Their stories revealed how, through doing, they learnt about themselves and their environments, discovered meaning, exercised their choices and experienced control (Townsend 1997). As Heidegger would contend, people come to understand themselves and their existence by way of the things they do and the people with whom they are involved (Dreyfus 1991). The women’s self-understanding, as gained through their patterns of occupational participation, provided the basis for deciding who they wanted to become.

It was apparent from the stories that a diverse range of occupational experiences, especially when young, facilitated the development and realisation of the women’s occupational potential. For example, Mary and Sylvia, the two women who travelled overseas as young adults, were exposed to a rich variety of social, cultural and political experiences that undoubtedly broadened their views of who they were, and subsequently shaped their ideas as to who they wanted to become. The women who had comparatively limited occupational experiences in the childhood and adolescent stages of their lives, such as Maureen and Fran, had somewhat narrower occupational aspirations.
• Each person’s ‘becoming’ is unique

The third core feature of the concept of occupational potential is that each person’s ‘becoming’ is unique. The study revealed how, to some extent, the developmental path of a person’s occupational potential is unpredictable. The reasons for its unpredictability, and therefore its uniqueness, reside in the various factors that influence it. The noticeable differential in the occupational potential of Fran and Doris effectively exemplifies how uniqueness is created. Although both female, and both born into working class families during a similar period in Australia’s social and economic history, their subsequent occupational life course varied significantly, as did their reflections of their occupational potential over time. It was evident from their stories that the interaction between each woman’s personal characteristics, and her family and social supports, influenced the way she managed the occupational opportunities as they were presented to her. The infinite variety of possible outcomes resulting from interactions between the individual and the environment makes the difference. That the development of each person’s occupational potential is unique, adds to the complex nature of the concept.

Influences on the development of occupational potential

As suggested above, a combination of different influences affects the development of people’s occupational potential at different stages of their life courses. These influences can be broadly categorised into personal and environmental, and then further grouped as either enhancing or constraining. Depending on who the person is, and the circumstances he or she is in, a particular influence may be enhancing for one person and constraining for another. In addition, there is an interaction between environmental and personal influences, further affecting the development of occupational potential. These findings resonate with some theoretical models used in occupational therapy: the Ecology of Human Performance Model (Dunn et al. 1994), which also recognises the unique and dynamic characteristics of people and their contexts; the Person-Environment Occupational Performance Model, described by Christiansen and Baum (1997); the Canadian Occupational Performance Model (ed. Townsend 1997); and the Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner 2002). These models feature the interaction between person, performance and the environment. The
subsequent discussion is peppered with examples from the women’s stories that illustrate such interaction.

**Environmental influences**

There are different levels within the environment per se that influence the utilisation of people’s capacities, and the subsequent development and realisation of their occupational potential. In this discussion, these levels are described as ‘micro’, ‘meso’ and ‘macro’, terms consistent with those identified by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in the ecology of human development. Additionally, within each level, there are a variety of environmental elements.

The micro-level of the environment is the family unit and the person’s network of close friends. Within the family, a person engages in personally meaningful occupations and develops significant interpersonal relationships with family members. Such engagement reflects family values, to a greater or lesser extent, and reinforces the development of personal belief systems. In turn, the personal belief system influences the development of occupational interests of the family member. The availability of role models and various means of support from within the family and friendship network also play major functions in developing occupational potential. Doris’s life story exemplifies this particular point. Although she chose not to be a practising Jehovah’s Witness, as was her mother, Doris has internalised some of the Jehovah’s Witness values, particularly those values relating to the productive use of time.

When conceptualising the environment in such a way, the meso-level incorporates larger groups and institutions, such as school and the workplace. At this level, it is apparent that a person may or may not have the opportunity to engage in activities that enable the development of skills, abilities and general occupational competence. A rural context could also be considered an element within the meso environment. In spite of the literature review highlighting the influence of rurality on women’s occupational participation, and notwithstanding the researcher’s pre-understandings, rurality per se, however, did not appear to significantly influence the development of the occupational potential of the six women in this particular study. In-depth analysis of the women’s life stories illuminated three reasons for this finding. First, the influence of gender, as discussed in the following section,
overrode all other influences. Second, only one of the six women participating in this study experienced childhood and adolescence in a rural environment. This is important, given the finding that major foundations for the development of occupational potential are laid during the early stage of the life course. The final reason is that, as analysis has revealed, occupational potential develops over time and five of the six women in this study only lived in a rural community during their retirement years. Therefore it was only in the later stage of their life course that rurality could impact upon the development of their occupational potential.

The third level of the environment that influences the development of occupational potential is the macro environment, or the broader society, within which the micro and meso environments are embedded. The study revealed how Australian economic and social policies as well as historical events influenced the development of the women’s occupational potential. The legislative constraints that deprived women of certain career options, and the relative freedom in relation to social occupations bestowed on them during World War II, are two such examples. Figure 7.1 is a schematic representation of the different levels and elements within the environment that influence the development of occupational potential.

**Figure 7.1: The different environmental levels and elements that influence the development of occupational potential**
**Personal influences**

- **Personal needs, goals, values and meaning ascription**

The study showed that personal needs and goals have a significant effect on the development of occupational potential. While the literature review revealed that there are universal human needs, to eat, to sleep, to have stimulation, the study revealed a host of other needs associated with occupational participation that reflect people’s values and their life goals. In the women’s life stories, such needs form into individual constellations, stimulating the patterns of occupational participation people develop over time.

Occupations that have purpose and value, as judged by individuals, are considered to be personally meaningful occupations (Klinger 1998). From participating in personally meaningful occupations, individuals derive a sense of worth and self-efficacy, and develop their self-identities (Christiansen 2000). The study revealed that if people have significant personal goals, then they strive to participate in occupations that will enable them to fulfil those goals. Christiansen (1999) has found that goals which are viewed as personally significant motivate people to participate in particular patterns of occupations that are self-relevant and self-defining. The study has also shown that people who participate in personally meaningful occupations throughout the life course are more likely to develop and fulfil their occupational potential. Those women in the study who had a range of significantly meaningful occupational goals, such as Alice, Sylvia and Doris, participated in a variety of personally meaningful occupations, which inevitably enhanced their occupational experiences. According to their accounts, they often gained additional meaning from these experiences, all of which contributed to the ongoing development of their occupational potential. This particular finding parallels the belief that ‘occupation and meaning are inextricably intertwined, each contributing to each other again and again across our life spans’ (Hasselkus 2002, p. 14), and illustrates how occupation arises from meaning and meaning arises from occupation. At the same time, however, the women who participated in a few, yet deeply significant and personally meaningful occupations also realised their occupational potential. Thus, both the quality and the quantity of meaningful occupations are considerations in the development of occupational potential.
In respect to the association between meaning, occupation and potential, the study findings have more congruence with the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (ed. Townsend 1997) than with other occupational therapy models. In the Canadian model, the experience of meaning in everyday life, which is referred to as ‘spirituality’ (Urbanowski & Vargo 1994), is embedded as a core component in all parts of person-environment-occupation interactions. Frankl’s (1963) belief that the search for meaning is a distinguishing feature of humans, and that, to a large extent, people discover meaning through doing, is also consistent with the study findings. The driving force of occupational meanings and goals was exemplified in the stories shared by Doris and Alice. Clearly, their occupational aspirations drove them to overcome the occupational constraints that they faced, enabling them to exercise their occupational capacities and realise their occupational potential. Both women have participated in a wide variety of occupations that reflect their personal values and have facilitated the fulfilment of their personal aspirations. Consequently, both women perceive that they have become who they wanted to be. In comparison, Fran, who regrets not becoming who she wanted to be, lacked any strong personal aspirations at each stage of her life, which was reflected in her limited repertoire of meaningful occupations.

While it is important to acknowledge that although personal meaning construction is individual and determined by personal needs and goals, it is also shaped by and reflective of social meaning construction to some extent. For example, Mary’s unfulfilled goal was to become a nursing sister and work in indigenous communities. From Mary’s story, it seems that such a goal was largely influenced by her childhood experiences on the family farm where Aboriginal workers were employed, and by her mother’s social work activities with Torres Strait Islanders. Fran’s goal of working in a dress shop was undoubtedly influenced by observing her mother work long, hard hours in inner-city factories. At the same time, it is important to consider the relativity of personal meaning and the subsequent relativity of occupational potential. That is, what is regarded as personally meaningful for one person may not be meaningful for another person, or by society at large. Although none of the women in the study had personal values that were in conflict with social values of the time, their personal values and goals, as exemplified by their diverse patterns of occupational participation, were
very different from each other. Consequently, what one person perceives to be the realisation of his or her occupational potential may not necessarily be considered so by another person. Scheffler (1985) similarly alludes to the issue of relativity of potential, and emphasises the need to be sensitive to the social context, as well as people’s beliefs, feelings and values when considering their perceptions of their potential. Clearly, the relativity of occupational potential is a very complex issue. For example, difficulties arise when a person strives to become someone who is considered socially unacceptable and inappropriate. Individuals have their own point of reference when determining if and when their occupational potential, or the occupational potential of others, has been realised.

- **Personal capacities**
  The influence of personal capacities on the development of occupational potential has also been highlighted by this study. Although personal capacities, physical, cognitive and creative, are determined by each person’s unique genetic code, or ‘blueprint’ (Craig 1986, p. 116), the utilisation and realisation of personal capacities are dependent, to a large degree, on environmental influences throughout a person’s life course. There were numerous examples in the women’s stories where the realisation of capacities, that is, when capacities are exercised to their fullest extent, was influenced by the level and appropriateness of education, family and financial support. The availability of opportunities to exercise capacities has also emerged as a major positive factor in the realisation of personal capacities. Accordingly, constraints on the utilisation of capacities have a negative affect on their realisation. This particular finding reinforces the idea that capacities clamour to be used, and if they are not used, they atrophy or disappear (Maslow 1968).

The different educational experiences described by Fran and Alice highlight the importance of context for realising capacities. As in Gardner’s (1993, 1999) research, this study has highlighted that an individual’s personal capacities are activated and influenced by environmental modification. For example, Alice seemed to thrive educationally and occupationally within her boarding school environment, which enabled her to maximise the use of her social capacities. It is apparent from Fran’s story that her school environment did not facilitate the use
of any of her inherent capacities and, as a result, her school experience was very unsatisfying and had a detrimental effect on the development of her occupational potential.

- **Occupational persona**

  In addition to the influence of personal needs and capacities, the study illuminated the effect of the occupational persona (Whiteford & Wicks 2000) on the development of occupational potential. Occupational persona, specifically oriented to doing, is defined as:

  that dimension of self, shaped by a myriad of factors, both biological and sociocultural, which is predisposed, as well as driven toward, engagement in certain types of occupations. Through the process of such engagement and the outcomes generated, the occupational persona is shaped and to some extent reinvented over time (Whiteford & Wicks 2000, p. 48).

The different travel experiences recounted by Maureen and Mary effectively illustrate how their occupational personae, shaped by very different biological and sociocultural factors, influenced the development of their occupational potential. In the interviews, Maureen presented as conservative and pragmatic, and her story revealed she was occupationally constrained, to some extent, by limited finances, family responsibilities, a fear of flying and a susceptibility to seasickness. Consequently, at the age of seventy-two, Maureen had only travelled interstate, by car or train, on a few occasions and had still not fulfilled her long-held dream of travelling to Perth. On the other hand, Mary, as a young, single women, travelled by ship to the United Kingdom, where she lived on the estate of wealthy and privileged family friends. Mary then returned home, travelling overland in a double-decker bus from England to Karachi, and revelling in the adventures, occupational challenges and romance along the way. Needless to say, the occupational experiences that each woman recounted in her life story were quite different, due to each woman’s unique occupational persona. Occupational persona influences a person’s patterns of occupational participation, which can affect the realisation of capacities and subsequently influence the development of occupational potential.
Gender-specific understandings of occupational potential

When the life stories gathered for this study were also analysed from a feminist perspective, the gendered nature of occupational potential was illuminated. Considered this way, the influences that facilitated and constrained the development of the women’s occupational potential, and the unique ways in which they adapted to the occupational constraints they experienced over time, became apparent. Analysis also revealed that, in some instances, ‘women make their own lives, but do so in conditions not of their own making’ (ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989, p. 5).

The influence of being a woman

Being a woman was illuminated by this study as having a significant influence on the development of occupational potential. The stories shared by the women in the study revealed gender influenced the development of their occupational potential at every stage of the life course. The occupations associated with being a woman, and the options for occupational participation available to women were, to some extent, biologically and socially determined. Moreover, there was an interaction between these determinants and personal values, interests and aspirations.

The interaction of biological and social determinants is illustrated most clearly by the following example. Childbearing is one of the two biologically determined occupations for women, the other being breastfeeding (Alston 1995). As the stories revealed, five of the women in this study became mothers, while one chose to abort a pregnancy. Although their decisions about motherhood were based probably on their personal needs and interests, and likely made in conjunction with their partners, there were also significant social expectations of women during the post-World War II period, when the women in this study were having their families. Australian women were encouraged to populate the country and, as a result, there was a high birth rate in the period 1945–1961. In fact, the fertility rate in Australia peaked at 3.6 babies per woman in 1961 (Aged & Community Services Australia n.d.), and so the children of the women in this study are all members of the post-war baby-boom cohort. There was also a social expectation at this time that children be born to married couples, as illuminated by Mary’s personal decision to have an abortion. Yet another consideration for the women in
this study was the availability of convenient and relatively safe contraception. Although the oral contraceptive pill became available to Australian women in the 1960s, it was more widely used by women younger than those in this study. The development of the Pill and its availability has subsequently had a significant impact on women’s decisions to become mothers (O'Malley, Wood & Foulkes 2003). While the women in this study had some choice about becoming mothers, some other significant factors that deprived the women of opportunities for participating in self-chosen occupations, due to the politics of gender, emerged from their stories.

Gendered power relationships, which were embedded within the prevailing Australian patriarchal ideology, became apparent as important influences on the development of the women’s occupational potential. Patriarchy is defined as ‘the system whereby men have more power and economic privilege than women for no reason other than their maleness’ (Alston 1995, p. 18). In a patriarchal society, men, who are associated with culture, enjoy greater advantages in relation to wages, workplace conditions and access to education and training. Women, on the other hand, who are associated with nature, are allocated the non-paid domestic and child-rearing tasks (Alston 1995). Such a system often places women in positions of financial dependency and disadvantage. In the study, it was Fran who was the most dependent on her husband. After she was married, she did not undertake any paid employment and was totally reliant on her husband for money. On reflection, Fran realised how much she would have loved to work and earn money in her own right, to meet some of her personal occupational needs. Alice also never undertook paid employment outside the home. However, she was allocated the task of managing the books for the family farm business. In some respects, this task enabled her to regain some power, as she was able to keep tabs on everything that went on. Sylvia, who recounted how she had witnessed the debilitating effects of patriarchy on her mother, vowed that she would always work, at least part time, because she realised that money was power. While each woman adapted to the patriarchal society in her own way, it nevertheless affected the development of her occupational potential. Each woman had to create ways of acquiring income or compensating for lack of income so that she was able to do the things she needed and wanted to do.
The explicit and tacit social expectations about women’s occupations also reduced the occupational opportunities and choices of the women. The women endured occupational deprivations at the macro and meso levels of the social structure, as well as at the micro-level of daily interaction and negotiation (Hess 1992; Alston 1995). The policy existing in Australia up to the 1970s, that only unmarried women were able to be nurses, is a cogent illustration that married women at that time in history were not expected to work outside the home. In addition to such explicit policy, which deprived women of occupational opportunities, some families actively limited career choices of women. There were two examples in the study where fathers voiced dominant social beliefs of the time, by denying their daughters opportunity to participate in occupations of their choice. Maureen and Sylvia, for example, were prevented from participating in teaching and journalism, respectively. It appears that certain occupations were deemed inappropriate for women or, rather, women were considered unsuitable for particular occupations. Such findings reflect Connell’s (1987) belief that the constraints at the regime level are shaped very much by the gender order of societal expectations of women.

In addition to the social expectations, which often reduced the women’s opportunities to participate in occupations of their own choosing, the study findings revealed that occupations based on gender divisions also determined, to a large extent, the women’s occupational experiences. For example, the stories illustrated that childcare, cleaning and general family co-ordination were commonly regarded as women’s work, regardless of whether the women also held positions of paid employment outside the home. Primeau’s (2000, p. 119) research and her associated literature review support these findings. In fact, ‘international survey figures suggest gender-based divisions of household work transcend national and cultural boundaries’. Even though the women in the study recognised the inequality of such gendered divisions of occupations, most of them were resigned to that social reality. Indeed, the women reported that it was easier to accept the status quo than experience the tensions and deal with the criticisms that resulted from opposing the expectations of husbands, family members and the community at large.
Obligations associated with being a woman also influenced the development of the women’s occupational potential. In this context, ‘obligations’ refers to what the women felt they should do. Some of the obligations that the women in the study reported were shaped by innate needs to nurture and protect, as well as by the social expectation that women are primary carers in the family system. As evidenced in the study, women often placed the needs of others ahead of their own needs to be occupationally satisfied, suggesting a tension between personal values, familial and parenting obligations, social expectations and the politics of gender. Sylvia’s compelling extract about her decision to remain at home to care for her family, rather than pursue her own occupational interests in the film industry, is an excellent illustration of the complexity of the tensions associated with such obligations and social expectations. So entrenched were some social expectations about appropriate roles and occupations for women, sometimes it was difficult for the women to differentiate between intrinsic needs and values, and an acquired belief system, shaped by the sociocultural, historical and political contexts in which they lived.

The study reflected the fact that the fusion of innate occupational needs and socially derived obligations began in childhood, and influenced the development of women’s occupational potential at each stage of the life course. For example, when just a young girl, Doris felt obligated to care for her mother and brother. As a young woman, Alice felt an obligation to look after her mother when her father died. Maureen was in her late fifties when she believed she was obligated, as the eldest daughter in the family, to care for her mother. In her mid seventies, Sylvia is still trying desperately hard to relieve herself of some of the obligations bestowed up on her in relation to her children, who are now adults themselves. Clearly, such obligations affected the development of the women’s occupational potential throughout the life course.

Whereas traditional explorations of social dynamics have tended to emphasise either the constraints of social structure or the power of individual agency (ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989), this study has highlighted the dynamic relationship between the two. In fact, the stories suggest that at different stages of their lives, the women worked creatively with, and within, the socially determined
constraints on their occupational participation, to actually enhance their occupational potential. For example, as a way of managing the interruptions, the discontinuities, and the tensions created by the conflict between their needs and the needs and expectations of others, the women redefined or refocused their needs, improvised and reshaped their patterns of daily occupations. Indeed, some of the women in the study were prepared to travel somewhat convoluted occupational pathways, rather than a path leading to the achievement of a single goal. As a result, they acquired additional, unexpected occupational experiences along the journey, which further enriched their occupational lives. Such a finding is consistent with Bateson’s (1990) view that women can become adept in composing their own satisfying lives, and that exigencies, interruptions and conflicted priorities can, and at times should, be seen as resources. This perspective notwithstanding, the bald fact remains that social exclusions, explicit and tacit, had a net negative impact on the women’s occupational potential.

In this study, each woman’s life story has provided a window for understanding how a woman’s personal causation, that is, her sense of competence and effectiveness (De Charms 1968; Kielhofner 2002), interacts with the socially determined constraints associated with being a woman. The occupational strategies, adopted by each woman to enable her ‘becoming’, to some extent, have mirrored her sense of personal efficacy and competence.

**Women’s strategies for developing occupational potential: Women’s ways of doing**

The study revealed that most of the women developed unique occupational strategies as responses to the explicit and tacit exclusions they experienced in relation to occupational participation within familial and social contexts. This finding is reinforced in other studies and feminist literature which suggest women have unique ways of navigating the weave of relationships and structures which constitute their worlds (Belenky *et al.* 1986; ed. Personal Narratives Group 1989; Bateson 1990; Hen Co-Op 1995; Wells 1996; Frank 2000; De Vries 2001, 2002). The women’s strategies reflected their personal values and belief systems. Although each woman developed unique strategies in response to her own occupational needs, there are some features of their occupational strategies that were common. Some of these common features are similar to those described by
Frank (1996a) in her discussion of adaptive strategies, which was grounded in the concept of adaptation (King 1978).

Features of the women’s occupational strategies

• The primary purpose was to create opportunities for meaningful occupational participation

When the occupational strategies adopted by the women were collectively analysed, four significant features were revealed. First, the primary purpose of the women’s occupational strategies was to create opportunities for meaningful occupational participation. Such a purpose is understandable given the many constraints that reduced their occupational options at different stages of the life course, subsequently affecting the development and realisation of their occupational potential. There were numerous examples throughout the women’s stories where lack of opportunities provoked occupational tensions, and the women consequently developed occupational strategies to overcome these tensions and enhance their occupational opportunities. Maureen’s strategy of entering a convent so that she could become a teacher is an example of creating opportunities by means of an occupational strategy.

• The strategies were developed and refined over time

Second, the occupational strategies were developed by the women in the early stage of the life course and gradually refined over time. Sylvia’s strategy for learning about political thought and world events, in spite of being prohibited from pursuing school and tertiary education, is an excellent example of refinement of occupational strategies over time. As a young girl, Sylvia used to sit very still, not saying a word, so she could stay up and listen to the discussions among her father’s friends. For the four years she worked for an academic at the Australian National University, she attended evening classes in political science and international relations as a non-examinable student. Today, Sylvia continues her self-education in political affairs by being an active member of a political party.
There was a relationship between quantity and quality of strategies and the level of participation

Third, there was a relationship between the quantity and quality of effective strategies and the level of participation in meaningful occupations. The study showed that the women who developed a range of effective strategies used them to participate in additional personally meaningful occupations, which further enhanced the realisation of their occupational potential. The difference in the level of occupational participation reported by Fran and Alice, both of whom did not work outside the home, illustrates the relationship between number of occupational strategies and level of participation. Alice was very adept at creating various strategies to enable her to fulfil her numerous occupational needs. By comparison, Fran’s drive to participate in meaningful occupation was comparatively weaker and, consequently, her level of occupational participation was considerably lower than Alice’s. This meant that she had less reason and fewer opportunities to devise and implement effective occupational strategies. Throughout her interview, Fran repeated, I didn’t do anything, whereas Alice’s main concern was that she did not have sufficient time to do all the things she wanted to do.

The strategies were sometimes used subconsciously

It also became apparent that some of the women used their most effective occupational strategies subconsciously. King’s (1978) thesis that adaptive strategies become subcortical and self-reinforcing parallels this finding. If a particular occupational strategy was effective, that is, it secured the desired outcome and gave the woman some feeling of control, it was continually re-used, often automatically. However, if a strategy was unsuccessful, the woman felt defeated and generally abandoned the use of that strategy. In other words, successful employment of occupational strategies enhanced the women’s sense of personal efficacy, whereas the employment of non-successful strategies reduced it. This had a cumulative effect, shaping the development of each woman’s occupational persona over time.
• **There was a relationship between level of satisfaction and effectiveness of strategies**

The fourth and final feature of the women’s occupational strategies was the relationship between perceived satisfaction with their occupational life courses and the effectiveness and refinement of their occupational strategies. The women’s reflections revealed that those who had implemented effective and refined occupational strategies were most satisfied with their occupational life courses. The women who harboured regrets and frustrations had the least number of effective occupational strategies. Doris, who has used an extensive range of occupational strategies throughout her life course, reflected that she felt occupationally satiated and unable to think of things she wanted to do but had not done. Maureen, who is still feeling rather bitter and resentful that she could not become a teacher, reflected that she could have done more to become who she wanted to be. This finding about the consequences of effective occupational strategies is reflected in other studies, which have revealed a relationship between happiness and ‘becoming’ (Hasselkus & Dickie 1994; Christiansen et al. 1999; Christiansen 2000). In some respects, this finding is consistent with Wilcock’s (1998a, p. 123.) thesis on the occupational perspective of health. In her thesis, Wilcock maintains that health and wellbeing result ‘from being in tune with our “occupational” species nature’. In other words, if people respond to their occupational needs and use their occupational capacities meaningfully, they will experience health and wellbeing.

Basically, the women developed and implemented occupational strategies as a way of coping with, and adapting to, the interruptions to their patterns of occupational participation and overcoming some of the occupational deprivations they experienced. The women’s occupational strategies were their tools of improvisation that instilled within them a sense of control over the direction of their occupational life courses. In some instances, their occupational strategies have played a crucial role in their personal survival. Maureen, for example, felt she would crack up if she did not get out of the house at least once a day, a clear signal that her mental health status was dependent on getting out and doing.
Summary of findings

In summary, the in-depth analysis, from an occupational perspective, of the life stories of the six older women in this study has enhanced understanding of the concept of occupational potential. Essentially, occupational potential has been illuminated by this study as a highly complex phenomenon and one that evolves throughout the life course. Rather than following a predetermined course, the developmental course of a person’s occupational potential is largely unpredictable, due to a host of environmental and personal influences that affect its trajectory. Occupational potential per se and its realisation over time emerges from the dynamic interaction between the environment and the individual, and the specific features of each that are brought to this interaction are what render it unique.

When the life stories were also analysed from a feminist perspective, the effect of gender on the development of occupational potential emerged as significant. Being a woman shapes the development of occupational potential at each stage of the life course as biological and social determinants of gender interact. Gendered power relationships, explicit and tacit social expectations, gender-based occupations, and women’s familial obligations combine in such a way as to be constraining influences on the development of women’s occupational potential. Despite constraints on their ‘becoming’, women use occupational strategies, which are gradually refined over time, to create their opportunities for meaningful occupational participation so that they may continue to reinvent themselves occupationally and realise their potential. Those women in this study who perceived that they had become who they wanted to be, through doing what they wanted to do, reported satisfaction with their life to date and had continuing plans for occupational enrichment.

Implications of the study findings

As a means of addressing the third research question that guided this study, the second section of this chapter discusses the implications of the study findings. The implications relate to a variety of issues across a range of sectors: policy issues in the social, education and health sectors; theoretical and research issues in
Implications for policy

Implications in respect to social policy

The findings of this study have significant implications for social policy. The study illuminated significant relationships between social policy, occupational participation, occupational deprivation and occupational potential. Analysis of the data revealed that if people have opportunities to participate in meaningful occupation, then they are able to exercise their capacities and develop their occupational potential. At the same time, the study revealed that if deprived of meaningful occupational participation as a result of social policy, people are not able to use their capacities, and the development of their occupational potential is subsequently constrained.

Social policy is about ‘the social arrangements of everyday life’ (Dalton et al. 1996, p. 3). As such, social policy directly influences, to a large extent, what people do on a daily basis. The stories shared by the study participants of the ordinary, everyday things that they did, did not do, or could not do, at the different stages of the life course highlighted the impact of social policy on occupational participation and the development and realisation of occupational potential. Indeed, in many ways the study can be seen as a beginning point for the development of the concept of occupational potential with respect to social policy. A particular concept that may inform such development with respect to social policy, and one which is underscored in the findings of this study, is occupational justice.

Occupational justice is a relatively new concept evolving from occupational science that pertains to the recognition and provision of the occupational needs of individuals and communities as part of a fair and empowering society (Wilcock & Townsend 2000). Clearly, occupational justice is linked to social justice in that it is concerned with ‘economic, political and social forces that create equitable opportunity and the means to choose, organise and perform occupations that people find useful or meaningful in their environment’ (Townsend 1999, p. 154). An occupationally just society is one that provides opportunity for all people to
realise their occupational potential, and recognises and respects the uniqueness of individuals’ occupational potential, and the different meanings individuals derive from occupations, due to personal and cultural influences. Creating an occupationally just society requires building and sustaining environments in which individuals and their communities can ‘become’. Although a somewhat idealistic social objective, it is believed occupational justice can be achieved by focusing on people’s patterns of occupational participation within their micro and meso environments as well as the macro environment (Wilcock & Townsend 2000). It could be considered that, viewed historically, the women in this study lived through a period of time in which society for them was not occupationally just. And, even though there has been subsequent development of equity in the past fifty years, there is evidence that social policy should be constantly revised in respect to equitable levels of occupational participation.

Implications for social policy in respect to women

While the study has implications for general social policy, it also has specific implications for social policy in respect to women. Social policy reflects the values and the power relationships of the society in which it is constructed. Consequently, national patterns and forms of occupational participation are shaped by social values and constructs. Occupational participation is rarely a problem for dominant social groups, because policy makers are invariably members of the dominant group. Accordingly, social policy usually reflects the values of the dominant groups and, in so doing, reinforces their positions. Conversely, the values of social subgroups, for example, gay and lesbian, and religious minority groups, are usually not recognised in social policy and, as a result, such groups can be marginalised with respect to occupational participation (Whiteford 2002). In patriarchal societies, women remain in a subgroup. The stories shared by the Australian women in this study have revealed how they were deprived of meaningful occupational participation, which in turn impacted negatively upon the development of their occupational potential. This may be seen as an example of Smith’s (1988, 1990) concept of ruling in which society, gender, power and participation interact. Smith (1988, p. 3) describes ruling as ‘the complex of organised practices, including government, law, business and financial
management, professional organisations and educational institutions, as well as the discourses in texts, that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power’.

The findings revealed that the development of the occupational potential of each woman in the study was influenced, albeit in different ways, both explicitly and tacitly by Australian social constructions of gender. This occurred at both the regime and order (Connell 1987) levels. In their stories, the women recounted how they were excluded from certain occupations, within family, education, work and social contexts, at each stage of the life course. In some instances, the exclusions constrained the realisation of a woman’s occupational potential by denying her the possibility of becoming who she wanted to be. Such examples highlight the significant nexus between occupational potential, the capacity to do; occupational deprivation, exclusion from doing; and occupational justice, the right to do (Wicks, Whiteford & Wilcock 2002).

Although conducted within an Australian context, the study findings are equally as significant for women in other developed western countries, such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, where the social policies reflect values and power relationships similar to those in Australia. But perhaps the findings are even more significant for women in some developing, middle eastern countries, for example, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, where religious dogma, in addition to gendered social policies, dictate the occupational rights of women. Certainly, the interaction of religious, historical and social issues and the impact this has on gendered participation in such countries are extremely complex and, consequently, in-depth examination of them is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, viewed even simplistically, it follows that as a consequence of the values and policies within these countries, the women living there are denied opportunity to participate in a broad range of occupations on account of their gender. As a corollary, the development of their occupational potential is possibly constrained. The importance of, and the necessity for, supporting existing international policies, such as the International Labour Organisation Convention 111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) 1958 (United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights 1997) and the United Nations Convention on the
Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations n.d.), are highlighted by this study.

In spite of occupational constraints and exclusions, women do live purposeful and meaningful lives. The stories in this study revealed how the women employed their unique ways of doing to satisfy their occupational needs and expedite the realisation of their occupational potential, despite the exclusions they faced. Their occupational strategies were creative strategies, incorporating networking and interdependence, and involved reinvention over time, and adaptations to interruptions.

Given the fluidity and discontinuity that is central to the reality of today’s world, and which will be even more evident in the future, it seems paramount that social policy makers recognise and utilise women’s ways of doing (Bateson 1990) to enable women to realise their occupational potential. In Australia, past and current social policies have attempted to create equality for women. The *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act*, introduced in 1999 to replace the 1986 *Affirmative Action Act* (Gray 2001), is one such policy. However, the criteria for equality have been determined by a patriarchal society, and the policies have not reflected basic gender differences in terms of occupational needs and occupational strategies. For that reason, current statistics show that Australian women are not participating equally to men in regard to workplace participation, work-life balance and their progression into leadership and key decision making roles, all of which impact on their ability to realise their occupational potential. For example: employed mothers with dependent children are much more likely to work part-time than employed fathers with dependent children; women’s lifetime earnings are significantly affected by having children; and only one per cent of Australia’s top 500 companies have a chief executive officer who is female (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency 2001).

In summary, this study has highlighted the significance of developing and implementing social policies that will create and sustain occupationally just societies in which all people have opportunities and resources to participate in meaningful occupation, so that they can realise their occupational potential. It is not possible, of course, for people to do what they want to do, just because it is
personally meaningful. This would represent anarchy. Accordingly, this viewpoint needs to be tempered with a communitarian perspective, that is, one that places collective needs and challenges, as opposed to an individual’s need for meaningful occupation, in the foreground. Therefore, understandings as to how personally meaningful occupations intersect with collective responsibilities need to be developed. This is particularly important in the context of an uncertain future. Handy’s (1997, pp. 8–9) concept of ‘proper selfishness’, which he describes as a state whereby individual and community meet in a compromise between freedom and commitment, is a beginning point for such understandings.

**Implications in respect to education policy**

A second political implication of this study is related to education. Education emerged from the study as being a significant influence on the development of occupational potential, especially during the early stages of the life course. The study findings emphasise the importance of educational policies and practices that cater to the needs of individuals, rather than the needs of the system. Empowering people to utilise all their capabilities and enabling them to realise all their capacities, be they linguistic, musical, mathematical or occupational, requires identification of, and attention to, individuals’ needs and propensities, and then drawing upon such knowledge to enhance their opportunities and options for learning (Gardner 1993).

In order to expedite the realisation of individuals’ learning capabilities and capacities, it has become apparent that teaching styles and learning methods and processes need to be as flexible as possible, incorporating different learning styles and value systems. From the study, certain basic criteria required for the implementation of such an educational approach have emerged. First, it is paramount to respect and value individual differences. Second, collaboration between the teacher and the learner is essential for the development of an appropriate program, one that is devised for, and not imposed upon, a student. Third, the study has highlighted the importance of providing opportunity for encouraging critical reflection to ensure students are learning what they want and need to learn. Fourth, educators should be aware that realising learning potential, just as in realising occupational potential, involves a process of transformation as
students learn about who they are on the way to becoming who they want to be. Essentially, this study has reinforced the significance of such particular educational principles which have been illuminated in other qualitative studies exploring how people learn to learn (Pamphilon 1997; Whiteford 1998).

**Implications in respect to health policy**

In addition to social and education policy implications, this study raises some important issues that are relevant to health policy. Having revealed a positive relationship between realising occupational potential and satisfaction with life, it could be implied that the study thereby supports an occupational perspective of health (Wilcock 1998a, 1998b, 2001a). Based on the occupational theory of human nature that has been developed from a study of human occupational behaviour throughout history (Wilcock 1993), an occupational perspective of health recognises the importance of occupation in human life, and the positive influence of occupation on health. Essentially, when health is defined from an occupational perspective it embraces the following notions: the absence of illness; a balance of physical, mental and social of wellbeing attained through socially valued and meaningful occupation; opportunity for the exercise of capacities and realisation of potential; community cohesion and opportunity; and social integration, support and justice, within and as part of a sustainable ecology (Wilcock 1998a, p. 110).

The findings that emerged from the women’s stories support the belief that opportunity to participate in personally meaningful occupation throughout the life course, and the subsequent realisation of occupational potential, are significant factors in the development of health and wellbeing. Accordingly, the findings of this study confirm the value of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization 1986) as a primary resource document for contemporary health policy makers and for those planning health promotion program. The Ottawa Charter resonates with an occupational perspective of health in many ways. For example, the Charter recognises the inextricable links between people and their environments; advocates a socio-ecological approach to health in that it urges consideration of factors that are detrimental to the natural and social environments; and encourages communities to enable individuals to actively
participate within familial, social and workplace settings so that they may satisfy their needs and realise their aspirations.

**Implications for theory development**

The theoretical aim of a qualitative study such as this is to reveal the complexity of the phenomenon being studied, and to develop and expand existing theory (DePoy & Gitlin 1998b). This study has certainly illuminated the complexity of the concept of occupational potential. Complexity, in fact, is its hallmark feature. The study has revealed that a series of interactions contribute to the complexity of occupational potential. Such interactions include those between the essential nature of occupational potential, the influences that affect its development, and the processes involved in exercising personal capacities and making occupational adaptations to facilitate the realisation of occupational potential. Such new understandings about a previously unexplored concept can subsequently expand theory. Although there are many theories as to what a theory is, primarily because it is neither tangible nor observable, a theory can be simply referred to as a way of thinking about something (Miller et al. 1988).

**Theory development in respect to occupational science and occupational therapy**

When theory is viewed in such a way, this study may be seen as having expanded thinking about the human as an occupational being, a concept central to occupational science, in which this study was theoretically located. In so doing, the findings of this study represent a potentially significant contribution to the body of knowledge and theoretical base of occupational science, an academic discipline whose purpose is ‘to generate knowledge about the form, function and meaning of human occupation’ (eds Zemke & Clark 1996, p. vii).

While occupational science is multidisciplinary in orientation, it has a particular relationship with occupational therapy, as evidenced by its early evolution from and by occupational therapists (Yerxa et al. 1990). Occupational therapy theories vary in the extent to which they centralise occupation and range along a continuum. At one end of the continuum there are theories that are narrow in focus, dealing with specific phenomena, such as Ayres’ (1972) theory of sensory integration and learning disorders, while at the other end are theories that are very
broad and complex, presenting overarching frameworks that provide a perspective for use in various therapeutic situations. The findings of this study, which explored the concept of occupational potential, a universal human phenomenon, will have relevance to the full spectrum of occupational therapy theories. Indeed, occupational potential has emerged as fundamental to occupational humans, who represent the focus of occupational therapy. In particular, the study findings have the potential to contribute to and strengthen the current theoretical models that provide the foundations for the contemporary practice of occupational therapy. For example, the findings support the complex interactivity between the person, the environment and occupation; the centrality of meaning in everyday occupation; and human adaptation. Such theory development is valuable to the profession of occupational therapy because it validates and guides practice; helps describe and define the profession’s domain of concern; facilitates communication within the profession between practitioners; Justifies reimbursement; and, most importantly, enhances the growth of the profession and the professionalism of its members (Miller et al. 1988; Reed 1993).

**Theory development in respect to feminism**

In addition to relevance to occupational theories, the findings of this study will contribute to feminist theory, which also guided and informed the study. In exploring the influences that facilitate and constrain the realisation of women’s capacities, and how such influences affect the development of their occupational potential, a great deal was understood and appreciated about the social constructions that seem to marginalise women within the Australian context. Gaining emic perspectives about being a woman and analysing the women’s perceptions of their occupational potential at different life stages have expanded understandings of the pervasive nature of relations of ruling (Smith 1990) and the potency of the gender order and gender regime (Connell 1987).

The majority of recent feminist research has focused on a single aspect, or a specific stage of a woman’s life, which tends to detract from the patterns and textures woven into her life course (Bateson 1990). Adopting an alternative approach, such as the comprehensive, over time view that was used in this study, reveals all the colours, complexities and richness of a woman’s entire life tapestry.
(Meltzer 2001). This study has also attended to the issues that are significant to women in the latter stages of their lives. Generally, feminist studies have failed to explore the significant features of a woman’s late adulthood, or investigate the ageist construction of the nature of women beyond midlife (Rosenthal 1990). The findings of this study have illuminated, among other things, the significance of being a grandmother, being a widow, being a retiree and being a carer for older Australian women. The findings have also revealed how such specific aspects associated with women’s late adulthood influence the continued development of their occupational potential.

Implications for future research
As well as theoretical implications, the findings of this study have implications for research. Actually, theoretical and research implications are linked because theory development involves translating ideas into concepts so that they can be systematically studied (Reed 1993). This study, like most research studies, has generated more questions than answers, and the findings discussed in this chapter possibly represent just ‘the tip of the iceberg’ in relation to the occupational potential per se, the gendered nature of occupational potential, and the influences that affect the development and realisation of women’s occupational potential. Further areas for research by occupational scientists, occupational therapists and feminists have been illuminated by this study. For example, having identified gender as an influence on women’s occupational potential, it would be fascinating to uncover if, and how, gender influences men’s occupational potential. Further research into the occupational experiences of other sub-groups of the population will clarify the generic features of occupational potential, and identify whether there are additional features specific to particular groups within society. Additionally, as a result of this study it seems imperative that occupational therapists, within different countries, explore further the concept of occupational potential, so that they may become aware of the idiosyncratic environmental and personal influences that facilitate and constrain its development and realisation.

Not only have some research topic areas been identified, but this study has also raised awareness of some significant research issues. In relation to feminist research, this study, which had women as subjects rather than objects of research,
supports Smith’s (1990) proposal for research from the standpoint of women, incorporating women’s interests and perspectives. Additionally, the focus on the ‘dailiness’ (Aptheker 1989, p. 39) of the everyday lives of ordinary Australian women has proven to be particularly valuable in this instance, because ordinary women represent the majority of women. To date, many life history studies on women have focused on women who have been high achievers, or exceptional in a particular domain. Although interesting and informative, such studies do not contribute to an understanding of women as a collective.

For researchers adopting an occupational perspective, this study has highlighted the value of adopting an over time approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the human as an occupational being. As a result of this study, the value of life stories for gathering a person’s occupational experiences over time and their effectiveness for understanding aspects of the occupational human have been highlighted. Although the founders of occupational science have always advocated that narrative approaches will enhance understanding of occupation (Yerxa et al. 1990), to date, relatively few occupational science studies, at least in Australia (Wicks & Whiteford, in press), have used life stories. This study, however, is testament to the appropriateness of life stories as research data in occupation-based research. The life stories used in this study provided subjective accounts of the women’s occupational life courses, that is, their occupational experiences over time. Individually, each life story revealed rich information about a life lived. When considered collectively, they provided an appreciation of the broad sociocultural, political, economic and historical issues that shape the occupational life course. Upon reflection, the use of life stories as the data for this study satisfied the majority of criteria for occupational science research: they preserved the integrity of the women; acknowledged the women’s experiences as credible; viewed the women as interacting with the environment; included the past, present and future; and enabled study of their occupational behaviour over the life span (Yerxa et al. 1990, pp. 11–12).

**Implications for practice**

The challenge of research is to transform research findings into useful knowledge and skills so that they can be incorporated into practice (Ottenbacher 1998).
However, as the findings of this interpretive study are tentative and remain grounded in the stories of the six women, it is not possible, nor appropriate, to identify specific implications in relation to occupational potential for applied disciplines. In spite of this limitation, some general, rather than specific, implications for practice have been elucidated by this study. Given the theoretical framework of reference to this study, its background and purpose and the researcher’s professional interests, the practice implications to be discussed relate primarily to occupational therapy practice.

**Practice implications in respect to occupational therapy**

Regardless of context and culture, occupational potential is a basic human phenomenon and, as such, its realisation should be a fundamental objective in occupational therapy practice within any context or setting. Based on this study, it would appear consistent with occupational therapy philosophy and assumptions for occupational therapists to focus on enabling people to develop and realise their occupational potential. That is, the goal of occupational therapy practice should be to enable people, regardless of their backgrounds and the physical, cognitive and emotional challenges that may constrain them, to become who they want to be. Maintaining such a focus will enable occupational therapy to realise its potential as one of the great ideas of the twenty-first century, by enabling people in all walks of life, across the globe, to achieve health and wellbeing through occupation (Yerxa 1991; Wilcock 1999c).

The following chapter presents a synthesis of all the implications that have been discussed in the form of recommendations.
Chapter 8
Recommendations and Reflections

This final chapter encapsulates the study described in this thesis by presenting the recommendations developed from a synthesis of the study findings and their implications. Some reflections by the researcher on the research journey as a whole conclude the chapter and, in so doing, bring this thesis to an end point.

Recommendations

Although the findings of this study have broad political, theoretical, research and practical implications, the recommendations presented herein relate primarily to occupational science and occupational therapy. These recommendations are not intended as an ultimate blueprint for action, nor are they prescriptive. Rather, they are presented as a basis for consideration and reflection. The recommendations fall into three categories: recommendations for employment policy in respect to women; recommendations for occupational science; and recommendations for occupational therapy.

Recommendations for policy in respect to women

The following recommendations relate specifically to women in the workplace environment.

1. It is recommended that women employees have the opportunity to access flexible maternity leave.

2. It is recommended that annual leave arrangements be flexible, in order to accommodate the needs of employees who are parents during school holiday periods.

The purpose of these two recommendations is to enable women to participate in meaningful employment, as well to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by childbirth and parenting responsibilities. Rather than striving to create gender equality based on patriarchal criteria, these recommendations, which could be
considered women-friendly and family-friendly, recognise gender differences and individual needs. They also acknowledge that even in today’s society, women remain the primary carers. These recommendations were modelled on an agreement struck between management and employees represented by the Australian Community and Public Sector Union at the end of 2002 (Nixon 2003).

**Recommendations for occupational science**

The following three recommendations relate to occupational science.

1. **The term ‘occupational potential’ should be named in the lexicon and assimilated into the discourse of occupational science.**

   This study has revealed that the concept of occupational potential is, indeed, a fundamental component in the theoretical construction of the human as an occupational being. Additionally, understanding more about occupational potential can significantly contribute to the knowledge base of occupational science. For these reasons it is recommended that the term ‘occupational potential’ be assimilated into the lexicon of occupational science. As language is strongly influenced by dominant ideas in society (Townsend 1998b), incorporating occupational potential in the occupational science discourse will reflect the growing awareness of the significance of such a complex and significant concept.

2. **Occupational science needs to develop a broader focus.**

   As this study has illuminated the significance of the environment on the development and realisation of occupational potential, it is recommended that occupational science become broader in its focus. Acknowledging and endeavouring to understand more about sociocultural, political, historical and economic influences that affect the occupational life course will contribute to the depth and breadth of occupational science. To date, it seems that occupational science has focused predominantly on the human as an occupational being. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the founders of occupational science were occupational therapists, who have traditionally been person-centred. As occupational science becomes more multidisciplinary and spreads its influence globally, it is hoped that disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and social
psychology, which are concerned with the living human in an environmental context (Yerxa et al. 1990), will contribute to a broader focus, a focus that incorporates social, political and economic issues.

3. **Occupational science research needs to explore the occupational life course and the influence of gender.**

As significant influences at different stages of the life course have been highlighted by this study, it is recommended that occupational scientists undertake further research to explore influences on the development of the occupational human across the life course. Strategies to identify occupational motifs that are woven throughout a person’s life course need to be further developed and utilised in occupational science research studies. Additionally, it is recommended that research exploring gendered occupational divisions be conducted. To date, few occupational science studies, other than Primeau’s (2000) research, have elucidated the influence of gender on humans as occupational beings.

**Recommendations for occupational therapy**

There are eight recommendations arising from this study that relate to occupational therapists, their profession, their practice and education. These are listed in order of priority below.

1. **Occupational therapists need to become more politically aware and socially responsive.**

In view of the study findings about the social and political influences on the development of occupational potential, it is recommended that occupational therapists become more politically aware and socially responsive. By adopting a broader view of the individual, a view that recognises individuals are embedded and embodied (Fay 1987) within their societies and that the social organisation is the locus through which individuals find expression (Mumford 1967), occupational therapists can more effectively enable individuals to realise their occupational potential. This study has particularly highlighted the need for occupational therapists to be aware of the influence of gender constructions on occupational participation, and to acknowledge the influence of being a woman on the development and realisation of occupational potential. Some ways in which
occupational therapists can become politically and socially active include moving beyond traditional roles of occupational therapists and becoming part of health promotion, public health and community development teams. Within such teams occupational therapists will have opportunities to develop working relationships with politicians, social planners, research bodies and the media. The development of these relationships will broaden the dissemination of understanding and ideas about occupation, health (Wilcock & Whiteford, in press) and gender.

Once occupational therapists become entrenched within the public health domain, they can use available opportunities to focus debate on the underlying factors that prevent people from realising their occupational potential. Two factors elucidated by this study are having limited occupational choices and having lack of opportunity for occupational satisfaction, balance and meaning. Some fundamental social and political responsibilities of occupational therapists have also emerged from this study. For example, it is important for occupational therapists to become vocal about short and long-term ramifications of occupational deprivation for individuals and their communities, and to promote community development programs that focus on people’s occupational needs and rights. These types of social activism and political debate are particularly relevant in these current times of economic rationalism, where interest in growing profits and the generation of wealth for a few overshadows the needs of communities.

2. Occupational therapists should promote an occupational perspective.

In addition to becoming socially responsive, it is recommended that individual occupational therapists and the occupational therapy profession as a whole use all available opportunities to promote an occupational perspective to members of the wider community. It is not just the political leaders and policy makers that need to be informed about occupational justice and the relationships between occupation and wellbeing. Individuals and other professional bodies should be informed about the role of meaningful occupations in everyday life. Such information could be shared by means of presentations at interdisciplinary conferences, or publishing research findings in international, peer-reviewed journals.
In addition to promoting an occupational perspective to the community at large, there could be smaller education programs, custom-made to the needs of the audience. There could be programs, similar to the Lifestyle Redesign program for the well elderly (Mandel et al. 1999) to educate people about satisfying their occupational needs once they retire from paid employment. Promoting occupation-based programs for the long-term unemployed, in lieu of, or in addition to, government schemes whereby unemployed people receive social security payments due to their unemployed status, would be particularly beneficial. In fact, the Cape Crusade, a radically different approach to assisting Australian indigenous groups (Australian story: The Cape Crusade 2002), is testament to the advantages of implementing programs that enable people, especially those marginalised due to limited occupational opportunities and education, to realise their occupational potential.

3. **Occupational therapy practice should be occupation-based.**

Regardless of focus or primary role, it is recommended that occupational therapists develop and implement occupation-based practice, a practice that reflects the complex relationships between individuals, the environments in which they live and the occupations with which they become involved. For some occupational therapists, this may require transitions from a focus on impairments and components, to a focus on occupation and social participation (Law, Baum & Baptiste 2002).

4. **Occupational therapy practice should be contextually relevant.**

Given that the influence of the environment has emerged from this study as having a significant influence on the development and realisation of a person’s occupational potential, it is essential that the sociocultural, historical, economic and political contexts within which people live, work and recreate are considered in practice (Wilcock & Whiteford, in press). Accordingly, it is recommended that occupational therapists recognise the difference between ‘community’ practice, that is, practice that acknowledges Hillery’s view that community involves ‘moral commitment, social cohesion and continuity of time’ (Fazio 2001, p. 4), and practice within ‘the community’, that is, within the locale. This recommendation
is consistent with the current trend in health care, which, in many countries, involves a shift away from an institutional to a community focus.

5. **Occupational therapy practice should be client-centred, and conducted within an enablement framework.**

In view of the influence of personal factors on the development of occupational potential, occupational therapy practice should be client-centred. Client-centred practice involves: respecting clients’ values, belief systems and choices; giving clients ultimate responsibility for decisions about daily occupations and occupational therapy services; facilitating client participation in all aspects of occupational therapy services; fostering collaborative and partnership relationships; and enabling clients to solve occupational issues (Townsend 1999; Law, Baum & Baptiste 2002). In this recommendation, the term ‘client’ refers to an individual, a group or a community. Client-centred, enabling occupational therapy practice strives for clients to become their authentic selves (Palmer 2000), and realise their occupational potential. 

6. **Language that is focused on occupation should be used in occupational therapy practice.**

Associated with such a shift to an occupational perspective is the recommendation that occupational therapy practice incorporates language that articulates a focus on occupation. The use of language such as occupational determinants of health and occupational outcomes will give occupational therapy a strong, collective voice, which will assist in advancing an occupational perspective of health (Townsend 1998b).

7. **Occupational therapy education programs should adopt an occupational philosophy of education and enable realisation of students’ potential.**

If the occupational therapy profession adopts the distinctive view of people as occupational beings, then it is recommended that occupational therapy educators develop an occupational philosophy of education. This means re-embracing occupational constructs so that educators develop occupation-based curricula and teach occupation-based practice. Such a philosophy would also guide how the
profession plans and implements educational programs for the growth and development of its members (Wilcock 2000).

In addition, it is recommended that occupational therapy education programs incorporate educational practices and include content which, based on the study findings, positively influence the development of individuals’ occupational potential. Hence, recommendations for education programs for undergraduate and postgraduate occupational therapists include: respecting and catering for individual learning styles and needs; developing programs by collaborating with educators and students; encouraging critical self-reflection; and acknowledging that realising learning potential is a transformative process (Whiteford 1998).

Given the significant proportion of female occupational therapy students (Allen, R. 2003, pers. comm., 7 March), occupational therapy educational programs need to acknowledge the sociocultural, political and economic influences that seem to constrain the development and realisation of women’s occupational potential at different stages of the life course. Accordingly, educational programs need to recognise, celebrate and utilise gender differences to enable all students to become who they want to be.

In summary, the recommendations presented herein are suggestions for addressing some of the key questions that arose from a synthesis of the study’s findings and their implications. The dominant theme underpinning each recommendation is the dynamic interaction between the person, environment and occupation. Acknowledging and employing this dynamic interaction in everyday practices has the potential to emancipate marginalised groups and enhance occupational participation in society at large.

**On reflection**

The thesis concludes with the researcher’s comments on the particular processes, findings and implications of this study that have had personal significance. Such reflections, which acknowledge the role and subjectivity of the researcher in interpretive studies, are presented from the researcher’s perspective, as a person and a female occupational scientist and occupational therapist.
It became apparent that reciprocity is an essential component in qualitative studies that adopt an interpretivist paradigm. In this study, the reciprocity between the researcher and the women participants enabled a level of intimacy that facilitated a depth of understanding which was not anticipated at the outset of the study. As a result of the sharing that was involved in the data collection, all the women have become part of the life story of the researcher. Similarly, the researcher is now a part of the life story of each woman.

The potency of life stories in qualitative research was also illuminated by this study. It appeared that all the women personally benefited from telling their life stories. Not only did they acquire a copy of their transcripts as a legacy of their participation in the study, but they also reported having valuable new perspectives on their personal experiences and feelings. The effect on the researcher was equally important.

As an occupational scientist, the life stories were particularly valuable for elucidating the extremely complex nature of the occupational human and the numerous, interrelated influences on the development and realisation of occupational potential. In particular, the stories afforded compelling emic perspectives of the meanings associated with the women’s everyday, ordinary occupations, highlighting the influence of gender-based occupations throughout the life course. With such an enhanced appreciation of the human as an occupational being and a growing awareness of the significance of the critical social factors that influence everyday doing, engaging in occupational therapy practice now holds rejuvenated interest for the researcher.

As a person, the women’s stories evoked powerful emotions that ranged from deep sadness and remorse, to joy and happiness. On at least one occasion with each woman, tears were shed as feelings were shared. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as a woman, the stories were windows of understandings that prompted self-reflection and provided appreciation and acknowledgement of personal issues.

The processes involved in this research study were equally enlightening and reinforced the validity of the oft repeated, yet very appropriate maxim, one learns
through doing. In 2001, when participating in a workshop at the Qualitative Health Research Conference in Seoul, it seemed easy to dismiss as pure rhetoric, Max van Manen’s statement that ‘writing is the very act of making contact with the things of our world’. However, at the end of this research journey, which in many respects seems like the beginning of a new journey, it is now very apparent that the process of writing facilitates understanding. Admittedly, it seems an enormous number of drafts need to be written before clarity and quality of understanding is reached.

In conclusion, the findings of this study resonate loudly and clearly for all women who have struggled against, felt defeated by, and overcome the explicit and tacit social expectations with regard to women. The apparent capacity of women to negotiate the occupational tensions that they seem to face at each stage of the life course, to implement and refine occupational strategies for creating occupational opportunities, and to reinvent themselves occupationally throughout the life course is, indeed, inspirational.
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Appendix A
Information for participants

PO Box 1314
Nowra NSW 2541
27 February, 2001

Dear ……………

I wish to confirm that the research group for older women will be held on:

22 March, 2001

at the
CWA Rooms
Berry Street, Nowra

From 1.00pm–4.00pm

I have enclosed an information sheet to explain just what the research is about.

Before commencing our discussion, I will be asking you to sign a Consent Form.

Refreshments will be provided.

Please ring me if you have any queries at all, or if you are unable to attend.

Looking forward to talking with you.

Yours sincerely

Alison Wicks
Phone: 02 4421 8093
CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY
School of Community Health
INFORMATION SHEET

NAME OF PROJECT
Older rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential: A qualitative study

INVESTIGATOR
Alison Wicks
BAppSc(OT), MHSc(OT)
PO Box 1314
Nowra NSW 2541
Phone: 02 44218093

NOTE: Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:
The Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
The Grange
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst NSW 2795
Tel: (02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Dear ………………

You are invited to participate in the study ‘Older rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential: A qualitative study’.

The aim of this study is to explore what older women would like to do, and could do, to satisfy their occupational needs and goals.

You will take part in a 60–90 minute discussion with about seven other older women. We shall be talking about the things that you want to do and what would help you to do these things. The discussion will be tape recorded. The information collected will be analysed to identify the main issues raised in the discussion.

There are no anticipated risks or side-effects from participating in this study. Every effort will be made to ensure you are comfortable and relaxed at all times.

You can be assured that all information will be treated confidentially and there will be no ways you could ever be identified in a publication or report. It is important to emphasise that your participation would be voluntary and that you could withdraw at any time. You will not be paid for taking part.

You are also invited to consider participating in the individual interviews associated with this study. Each participant would have three interviews, which would last for about 90 minutes. You will be asked to talk about the things you have enjoyed doing in the past and what you would enjoy doing in the future. These interviews will be conducted in your own home. They will be tape recorded and then analysed.

I shall contact you personally in a few days to discuss the study and answer any queries you may have.

I hope you will consider this invitation. I believe this study will be very useful for planning for the needs of older women in your local community.

Yours sincerely

Alison Wicks
Purpose of my research
The purpose of my research is to explore older, rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential. (I wish to emphasise that, in this study, I refer to ‘occupation’ as all the things that people do — not just paid employment.)

Background
About occupational potential
The concept of occupational potential is relatively new, though there are references to similar concepts in the literature. For example:

- Plato, in about 450BC, talked about each person performing his own proper function
- in the Bible we read about individual talents
- social activists in the 16th–18th centuries developed communities where people could be involved in occupations according to their individual bent
- in the 20th century, people started making links between occupation — doing things — and health
- and recently, there is debate about occupational justice — people’s right to be able to engage in meaningful and satisfying occupation.

In this study, I am defining ‘occupational potential’ as people’s intrinsic capacity to engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations throughout their life courses. More simply, I believe that occupational potential is about doing what you want to do — becoming whom you want to become.
I am assuming that everyone has occupational potential and that each person’s occupational potential is unique. I also believe that everyone has a need, and indeed a right, to strive to fulfil their occupational potential.

**About the participants in the study**
I have selected women, aged over 65 years and living in the Shoalhaven, a rural area of New South Wales, as the project participants because I am interested in:

1. **Women’s perceptions**
   In the past, women’s voices have not been heard. Their opinions have not been sought, and so previous research has reflected a predominately male viewpoint.

2. **Older women’s experiences**
   As a result of improved living conditions, resulting from technological advances, there is an increasing proportion of older people in our communities. In fact, never before has there been such a large percentage of older people. And it is women who comprise the majority of these older people, as women are living longer than men. Thus, research on older women today, of which there is little, will be beneficial in the long term. Also, as I believe that occupational potential extends throughout the life course, I am interested in how occupational potential is influenced by lifetime experiences. The women in this study, all aged over 65, have a wealth of experience on which to draw, for example, world war, the Depression, changing societal attitudes, and technological advances.

3. **Older women living in a rural environment**
   I believe that in the past, women living in rural areas may have been disadvantaged occupationally. I feel that this particular group of women have been, or could be marginalised on three counts — their gender, age and rurality. However, the occupational expectations of, and occupational opportunities for, women in Australian rural communities have been changing significantly over the past years, due to sociocultural, political and economic factors. I am particularly interested in the influence of rurality on women’s past occupational potential as well as its influence on current and future occupational potential.
The individual interviews

The aim of the interviews with individual women is to explore personal perceptions of their occupational potential. I shall be interviewing 6–8 older women in the Shoalhaven, and I anticipate that each woman’s perceptions will be different.

In the interviews, I shall be asking you reflect on your past occupational experiences, for example:

- What did you enjoy doing when you were young?
- What did you want to do, but couldn’t?
- Why couldn’t you do what you wanted to do?

I shall also ask you to describe what you are currently doing and why, as well as asking you to consider what you envisage you will be doing in the future. And I am very interested in what you still dream about doing.

Every interview will be different, and basically directed by you. You may choose to begin your story when you were young, and progress in a chronological fashion. Alternatively, you may discuss situations as they occur to you. My role will be to maintain an occupational focus to our discussions.

The length of each actual interview will vary, though I expect 60 minutes will be an average time. Each interview will be tape-recorded so it may be transcribed for analysis. However, as it is important and necessary to have a ‘warm up’ time before the interview starts, and a ‘warm down’ session afterwards, the entire session might take between two and three hours. There may be 2–3 interviews with each woman.

Because you will be reminiscing, you will undoubtedly recall some fond memories, and things you haven’t thought of for a long time. You may well recall some unpleasant memories or unhappy experiences. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you are free to stop the interview. A psychologist has agreed to consult with any participant should some emotional problems arise as a result of the interviews.
According to the ethical principles of Charles Sturt University, you will be requested to read and sign a Consent Form.

In any account or report about the interview, you will not be able to be identified.

You will be provided with a paper copy of the transcripts to read, and you may request any changes — either deletions or additions. You will be given a paper and disk copy of each interview.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions or queries, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Alison Wicks
PO Box 1314
Nowra NSW 2541
Phone: 02 4421 8093
Email: wicks@shoal.net.au
Appendix B

Consent Form

Name of Research Project
Older rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential: A qualitative study

Principal Investigator
Alison Wicks

570 Longreach Rd, Nowra NSW 2541
PO Box 1314 Nowra 2541
Ph. 02 44218093.

I, ..........................................................

consent to my participation in the research project titled, Older rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential: A qualitative study.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time.

- The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I permit the investigator to tape record the group discussions and/or the individual interviews.

I understand that extracts of the group discussions and/or the individual interviews may be used in publication or presentations. I also understand that I will not be able to be identified by any published extracts or information presented, as my name and other identifying personal details will be excluded or altered, ensuring anonymity.

I am aware that Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this study.

I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
The Grange
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst NSW 2795

Phone: (02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194

Research participant’s signature: _________________________________

Date: / /
Appendix C

Focus Group Script

PhD Research Study

‘Older rural women’s perceptions of their occupational potential: A qualitative study’

Pilot Study — 23 November 2000

Introduction

Aim of the study
- any questions?

Consent forms
- to be signed and returned

Demographic data
- age
- number of years living in the Shoalhaven

Process
- first names only to be used ?? pseudonyms
- Alison to ask some leading questions and to guide the discussion, but, basically, it is self-directed

Protocols
- speak clearly, slowly and loudly
- limit background noise — e.g. rustling plastic, coughing, etc.
- respect everyone’s comments
- one at a time to speak
- all comments are valuable, anything you say is worthwhile
- no one person to monopolise
- you do not have to say anything at all

NB:
Because this is a group process — we will create group energy — it is likely that each of you in some way will be affected/touched by what other people say — perhaps you will relate to what someone says, because you understand it as a result of your own experiences — perhaps someone else’s
story will prompt you to reassess some of your own experiences. This is not therapy. No one is doing anything to you or changing your situation, but the experience may well enable you to gain insight about yourself. You may or may not like that insight. You have to choose how you deal with that situation.

At no time, should anyone feel uncomfortable. If some unpleasant memories do arise, you are free to leave the group at any time.

Outline
1. Alison’s story — an ice breaker to show that I am prepared to be open with you — to give as well as to take
2. your stories of your life as young adults
3. your stories of your life as middle aged women
4. what’s happening in your life now
5. summary — reflections — conclusion
6. thank you
7. refreshments

Alison’s story
- 47 years old — one generation younger than you
- have a 75 year old mother
- father died 12 months ago — from cancer
- I have been married 26 years
- four children — two still at home at school — two away at university
- lived in the Shoalhaven 18 years
- grew up in Sydney — went to College in Sydney when left school
- supported by family until married — in third year of college
- married at 20 — 1974
- travelled and worked overseas and interstate
- first child at 24 — 1978
- basically a full time mother — have always done some part-time work, to maintain my professional identity
- established family business in Nowra in 1982
- undertaken distance education to keep current with my profession
- on reflection — it’s not the story that I envisaged when I was younger —
yet I have done many of the things I dreamed of, but at different stages
- certainly have sacrificed career opportunities for family commitments —
  but no regrets
- at the present stage of my life — doing things more for me — it is now
time for me

**Now let’s hear your stories**

In three stages — as a young adult, middle aged and now as an older women
What did you dream of doing?
Were your dreams fulfilled?
What hindered your dreams?
What would have enabled your dreams to be fulfilled?
Appendix D

Extracts from Researcher’s Reflexive Journal
8 April, 2002

Re: What is/are my question/s? And why am I asking it?

These are some of the questions that are behind my big question. Why do some older women, living in the Shoalhaven, a rural community where I have been working, have more ‘occupational energy’ — why are some of them more involved in their communities and the families?

- What causes the difference between ‘occupationally energetic’ (occupationally fulfilled, satisfied, content) and ‘occupationally de-energised’ (depressed, frustrated) older women?
- Has it always been the case, throughout their occupational life course?
- How do women become occupationally fulfilled when they are older?
- How do women ‘flourish’?
- What generates occupational capacities?
- What transforms women into occupationally satisfied/satiated beings?
- How is occupational potential transformed into occupational actuality/performance?

9 April, 2002

RE: Ahhha!!

I think I have got it.

I have just re-read Joy Goodfellow’s article, and I think it has given me the key that will enable me to present my data.

My ideas are thus:

I reconstruct each woman’s story or part thereof. Reconstruction involves the organisation of my interpretation of the incidents and descriptions told to me by each woman.

Admittedly, interpretation can never be claimed to truly represent experience itself.

I will represent the women’s ‘voices’ through my interpretative comments but also by direct quotes taken from the transcripts. These direct quotes will flow into my own narrative, appearing in italics so as to be identified.

The themes and sub texts which have been illuminated in the women’s stories, will shine through in my reconstructed narratives/stories. By doing this, readers of the thesis will be drawn into each woman’s life story, be involved with their own interpretations and will make personal associations.
17 January, 2003

**Occupational potential**

A capacity is a capability, faculty, ability.

- people possess capacities
- a capacity is exercised when it is stimulated by a need
- when a capacity is exercised to its fullest extent, it is realised
- there are various influences that affect the realisation of capacities
- occupational potential is the capacity to participate in (meaningful) occupation
- occupational potential is stimulated by the human need for occupation
- there are personal and environmental influences that affect the realisation of occupational potential
- when occupational potential is realised, a person becomes (who he or she wants to be)

The data, ie the women’s life stories, were viewed from an occupational perspective, because all humans are occupational beings.

The data were also viewed from a feminist perspective, because the study participants were women.

The findings of this study, which are tentative, non universal, reveal:

- the general/gender-neutral features/qualities/attributes/ nature of occupational potential
- the influences that affect the realisation of occupational potential
- the process of realising occupational potential, ie becoming
- the gender-specific influences that affect the realisation of women’s occupational potential
- the occupational strategies women use to realise their occupational potential.
Prior to this study – occupational potential was defined as a person’s capability.

This study has revealed that occupational potential embodies capability as well as capacity.

The implication is that the study reinforces the need for OT to aim at empowering, as well as enabling.

Therefore, OT needs to focus both on the person as well as the barriers/constraints that impede capacities to ensure that a person can realise his/her occupational potential — become who he/she wants to be.

Occupational potential is the term used to describe a concept.

A concept, a symbolic representation, of an observable/experienced referent, enables the communication of ideas and experience to each other (DePoy & Gitlin 1994, p. 31).

Occupational potential as a concept phenomenon, symbolically develops.

Capacities and capabilities, which are elements within the concepts are realised.
AW: We are set and ready to go. I have the timer set and the tape going. This is our first session, and I really appreciate you offering your time to be a participant in my study. What I would like to do today is start talking about the things you have done in your life. I think we agreed in to start at the beginning. If you can tell me about the things you remember doing, when you were a young child, and the things that you enjoyed doing. Even things that you wished you had done, but didn’t. And some of the people and the places that were significant for you. So, whenever you are ready.

DB: Well, I feel that I have to start before the beginning, because my mother had had a very serious illness as a girl, aged 13 and it left her with a rheumatic heart. And she was just never very robust. When she married, she had a number of miscarriages in five years before I was born, and from what I have heard since, she should never have had any children really. It was a great strain. Now, I think my father was no help. If anything, he was the opposite. He lived a lot longer than she did. He died in ’92 and I had had contact with him, up until he died. My mother had a son 2 years after me, and that was all, but it was probably really too much, though today she’d had a mitral valve replacement, something relatively simple. But anyway, that had a great affect on [her] and probably on the marriage as well. Dad was a, well, at times, short tempered, and he would blow off the handle. But my mother was a bit the opposite, and I don’t think she ever understood ever how one