Functional Support Associated with Belonging to the Red Hat Society®, a Leisure-Based Social Network

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Abstract

Researchers have addressed the structure of leisure-based social networks but have given little attention to their functional outcomes, especially among older women. A leisure-based social network popular among older women but little studied is the Red Hat Society®. Thus, we chose to address how older women describe the functional support they receive from one leisure-based social network, the Red Hat Society®. Data were gathered from more than 4,000 members. The findings indicated that functional support is multidimensional (e.g., spending time with friends, attention from others) and with few exceptions, positive. In addition, the functional support is primarily emotional and social in nature rather than informational and financial, as has previously been reported in social networks research.

KEYWORDS: *social network, functional support, older women*

Introduction

We are linked to each other through a web of social ties that provide us with a sense of who we are, who we are to become and to whom we belong. These "ties" also influence how we are comforted and the meaning we find in life (Litwin, 1996). The metaphoric web that links these ties is referred to as a "social network." Social networks provide members with emotional (e.g., caring, affection, understanding) and instrumental (e.g., information, help with daily living tasks) support (Berkman, 1984; Curtis, Bucquet, & Colvez, 1992), both of which have important ramifications for individuals across the life cycle (Vaillant, Meyer, Mukumai, & Soldz, 1998).

A great deal of research has been devoted to the study of structural (e.g., size and density) aspects of social networks. Less attention has been given to the functional (e.g., emotional and instrumental) support that exists within specific network configurations such as leisure-based social networks. This is problematic because leisure-based social networks can consist of friends whose friendship and support may be critical to the well-being of individuals, especially older adults (Rawlins, 1992). Friends, as opposed to kin or other acquaintances, provide very different functional support (Pilisuk & Parks, 1986). Does this argument hold, however, for older women?

Understanding the types of support older women receive from a leisure-based social network takes on special significance in view of the fact that older women outnumber older men and by the time they reach the age of 75, one-half will be living alone (Administration on Aging, 2005). Further, women's lives have become more complex and diverse; their social roles have changed; they have encountered new rights, duties, and resources; and, as they have aged, experienced flux in their social identity (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1997; National Center on Women and Aging, 2002; Poortman & Tilburg, 2005). Women may respond to this new complexity and change through increased social interaction (Klein & Corwin, 2002). Taylor et al. (2000) refer to this response as "tending and befriending," which is exhibited through the creation and maintenance of social networks.

In the face of age-based opportunities and constraints older women are seeking experiences that provide meaning to their lives (Henderson et al., 1997) and relationships "that maximize gains and minimize risks in social and emotional domains" (Lansford, Sherman, & Antonucci, 1998, p. 545). One social domain that has received minimal attention is leisure. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand the type(s) of functional support older women access through their membership in one leisure-based social network—The Red Hat Society®. Given the limited knowledge we have about older women in a leisure context we thought it prudent to hear *from* older women using an interpretivist rather than a positivist approach which, in the case of social network analysis, focuses on understanding "…how social structures facilitate and constrain opportunities, behaviors, and cognitions (Tindell & Wellman, 1992, p. 266).

Social Networks

A social network is defined as, "…a set of linkages among an identified group of people, the characteristics of which have some explanatory power over the social behavior of the people involved. It is the set of people with whom one maintains contact and has some form of social bond" (Bowling, Farquhar, & Browne, 1991, p. 549). A

social network is believed to function as a support network, at times positively and at other times negatively (Lein, 1983).

Social networks provide a variety of benefits. First, they help individuals to maintain a social identity. Second, social networks provide members with emotional support. Third, they supply a wide variety of resources, including money. Fourth, social networks distribute information, generally resulting in knowledge. And, fifth, social networks provide individuals with social support and an effective means for establishing personal and communal relations (see Fine, 1989; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). The amount and type of benefit received from the social networks may differ based on their size, composition, and density, impacting whether network members are "happy, healthy, lonely, involved, or isolated, both in their leisure time activities or in their lives more generally" (Stokowski, 1992, p. 219).

As members of the social network die, relocate, or move out of the network for some other reason, substitution may occur (Antonucci, 1990). According to Zettle and Rook (2004), there are various forms of social network substitution: the formation of a new social relationship, a rekindling of social ties that have been dormant or inactive, and turning to the current members of the social network for relationship functions previously performed by the lost member (Cicirelli, 1995; Connidis & Davies, 1992). Morgan, Neal and Carder (1997) suggest that substitution occurs consistently as individuals need to fill the gaps created by a relationship loss or disruption. The social support and companionship derived from the substitute relationship, however, may differ in important ways and may or may not provide the same psychological benefits derived from the original relationship (Rook & Schuster, 1996). Whether the support provided by the substitute relationship provides measurable benefit is a question that has received limited attention in the literature. With age individuals "compensate" for decline in the various facets of their life (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Lang and Carstensen (1994, p. 316) refer to this issue as compensation, i.e. an "adjustment mechanism by which the functional impact of a loss is minimized by relying on other resources."

Researchers have distinguished between the structure and function of the social network. Structure refers to objective measures such as the number of people in the social network and all of the ties that exist between individuals in the network (Scott, 2000). Leisure researchers have examined how the structure of the social network is related, for example, to: the consumption of leisure products (Stokowski & Lee, 1991; Warde & Tampubolon, 2002); the development of social capital (Glover, 2004; Warde, Tampubolon, & Savage, 2005); choice of leisure partners (Stokowski, 1990); and, how individuals' deal with social problems (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002).

Functional support includes the exchange of support in the relationships between members of the social network (Akiyama, Elliott, & Antonnuci, 1996). Support may be represented through multiple spheres: emotional (e.g., sharing feelings); informational (e.g., provision of guidance or advice); tangible (e.g., provision of material aid); and belonging or social (e.g., doing things with other people, having a sense of belonging) (Barrera, 2000; Uchino, 2004).

Social Networks at the Later Stages of the Life Course

Individuals' social roles and activities are tied to their age or life period related to work (i.e., education and training for work, continuous work activity, leisure and retire-

ment) (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). Calasanti (1993) and Hanson and Wapner (1994) suggest that this is especially true for women as they experience various work patterns over their lifetime, generally due to family responsibilities.

"Given that loss or disruption of social network relationships is a common occurrence in later life, it is important to understand how adults seek to maintain important social and emotional needs through [their social ties]…" (Zettle & Rook, 2004, p. 440). According to Akiyama, Antonucci, Takahashi, and Langfahl (2003), there is a general tendency for exchanges of support to be increasingly positive in affect as people age. Plausible explanations for this trend include: maturity, familiarity, and contact frequency (Akiyama et al., 2003). As individuals mature they tend to be able to better understand and control their emotions (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001). They are also more likely to have known the members of their social network for an extended period of time and, as a result, know them better and can anticipate and successfully cope with potential sources of conflict (Baldwin, 1992). Or, because people change their life goals as they age, they may reduce the frequency of contact with individuals who do not share their goals (Akiyama et al., 2003), thus minimizing the potential for negative interaction.

Social network studies with older adults generally have focused on structural components of the network (e.g., size, composition, density, and homogeneity) (e.g., Adams & Torr, 1998; Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999). Few researchers have attempted to address their functional benefits (e.g., emotional, instrumental) (Faber & Wasserman, 2002).

Older Women and Leisure-Based Social Networks

There are clear gendered cohort differences across the life course (Moen, 2001). These differences emerge through expectations regarding the later life course, the way in which individual life paths are played out, key turning points that shape womens' lives, and the intersecting nature of work and family roles (see Antonucci, 1994; Ryff & Seltzer, 1996). For example, today there exist cohort differences in fertility and longevity among women. Women are marrying later or not at all. If they choose to have children many will wait until after they have established a career. And because they and their parents are living longer, their expectations for and actual experience with later life are much different than those of previous cohorts of women (Gibson, Ashton-Shaeffer, Green, & Corbin, 2002; Price, 2000). Further, cultural models have affected the way older adults define themselves as well as the way in which they believe people their age should look and behave (Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994; Rosenthal, 1990).

Women at the later stages of their life view leisure with a strong sense of entitlement (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Wilhite, Sheldon & Jekubovich-Fenton, 1994). They may also view leisure as freedom to do what they have chosen to do without the pressure that characterizes other aspects of their lives (Gibson et al., 2002). Leisure may also provide an environment through which older women can deal with the transitions associated with aging (Freysinger, 1995; Kelly, Steinkamp, & Kelly, 1986) and find relaxation and rejuvenation (Bialeschki & Michener, 1994) as well as strength, vitality, and the possibility of a new self (Henderson et al., 1997).

Freysinger and Flannery (1992) suggested that women may create a leisure environment (e.g., Red Hat Society®) or space in which they are physically as well as

metaphorically free from external pressures. Wearing (1990) argued that women create a space over which they "…have control, both in respect of what to do and where to go, as well as who should be included or excluded from such space" (p. 44). Piercy and Cheek (2004), for example, showed how women used quilting as time and space to strengthen friendships and to forge bonds with grandchildren and the broader community. Similarly, Heuser (2005) found that playing bowls was a "vehicle through which… women built community" (p. 45). Given the importance of leisure to older women, one would expect them to be members of and receive multiple types of functional support from leisure-based social networks.

Women are thought to be more social than men and to have broader social networks (Wethington & Kavey, 2000), which is a key factor in shaping their life course (Moen, 2001). In fact, Moen, Dempster-McClain, and Williams (1992) argue that the mental and physical benefits of engaging in social interaction may increase for women in their later years. Women expect to develop and maintain friendships through their social networks (Jerrome, 1992) and depend on members to help them manage stressful conditions (Taylor et al., 2000). Women's social networks, especially those consisting of close kin, may not always provide positive outcomes, however (La Gaipa, 1990). Antonucci, Akiyama, and Lansford (1998) found, for instance, that "…women's social relations are not always more positive than those of men nor do their social relations [including kin] always result in higher levels of well-being" (p. 382).

Successful leisure-based social networks provide opportunities for interaction, "providing staging areas for friendship" (Fine, 1989, p. 323). Regular meetings are important, as is public commitment to the network by members. Additional celebratory events are important to the maintenance of the leisure network as they engender a sense of "community." Hebdige (1979) suggested that leisure networks have markers of identity or expressive symbols that reflect how members wish to be known.

Leisure-based social networks may have a negative side as well (Jacobson & Samdahl, 1998; Rojek, 1999). For example, social network relationships may constrain social behaviors (e.g., what one may say or do) in a leisure setting (Stokowski & Lee, 1991). And, because social networks are constructed through economic and cultural investments (Portes, 1998), they may engender feelings of "obligation" (Stebbins, 2000). These obligations may be "unspecified," "uncertain," and may not be reciprocated (Bordieu, 1985). They may also lead to deviant behavior and an undermining of group cohesion. Further, social networks enforce norms (i.e., social control) and may have expectations for reciprocity, which may or may not be acceptable to all members (Coleman, 1988). Social networks may also be discriminatory, barring "outsiders" from access or membership (Waldinger, 1995).

In sum, the primary focus of social networks research in leisure has been the reciprocal ties among kin and friends and the leisure-based social networks of individuals (Stokowski, 1994; Stokowski & Lee, 1991). Little attention has been given to the functional aspects of leisure-based social networks, especially those comprised solely of older women. Thus, the research question that will guide our study is: How do older women describe the functional support they receive from one leisure-based social network, the Red Hat Society®? Documenting the functional support they receive is important for a number of reasons. First, social network researchers have focused primarily on the structural (e.g., size and density) and less so on the functional (e.g.,

emotional and instrumental) aspects of social networks. Second, limited attention has been given to the functional support older women receive from social networks in general and leisure-based social networks in particular. Third, leisure involvement has been shown to provide multiple benefits, but do these same benefits (e.g., functional supports) extend to leisure-based social networks comprised of older women? Fourth, the vast majority of researchers have failed to give attention to older women, particularly in a leisure context. Thus, providing older women with an opportunity to tell us what functional support they accrue from their involvement in the Red Hat Society® will allow us to obtain a better understanding of the membership benefits of a leisure-based social network for older women.

Method

Context: The Red Hat Society

The Red Hat Society® is an international organization of women, most over the age of 50. The Exalted Queen Mother, Sue Ellen Cooper, founded the Society in 1998 after reading the poem "Warning" by Jenny Joseph. The poem begins, "When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple with a red hat that doesn't go." It continues, "[I shall] run my stick along the railings…make up for the sobriety of my youth…learn to spit." With a mission to use age as a license to play, be "silly," and build relationships with other women, membership has climbed rapidly to over 1,000,000 members in 41,000 chapters in 30 countries (refer to www.redhatsociety.com for more information). Individuals or groups of women form membership chapters that range in size from twenty to the hundreds. Each chapter registers with the Red Hat Society® after self selecting a "fun" chapter name, like "Crones and Cronies," "Varicose Vixens," or the "Purple COWS (Creative, Outgoing, Wise and Sexy)." Chapters either select a "Queen" who is the titular head of the group, or an individual starts a chapter and assumes the role of "Queen." The Exalted Queen Mother "rules" over the "Queens" of the various chapters who, in turn, "rule" over their members. Although there are no rules about where and when to meet or who can be members— other than members must be female—there is an important dress code. Members over 50 are encouraged to attend events wearing "full regalia," which generally includes, at minimum, red hats and purple outfits. Members under 50 wear pink hats and lavender outfits. Events and activities span the spectrum from conservative to adventurous. Some groups meet monthly at the same restaurant, while others plan outings that span the globe.

We recognize that the Red Hat Society® is not representative of all leisure-based social networks comprised of older women, those who join the Society do so voluntarily, and members are likely to be quite positive about their involvement.

Data Collection

With the permission of the Red Hat Society®, we posted a survey on the Society® website and distributed it to members through the weekly e-mail newsletter. We selected this approach for three reasons. First, studies show that increasing numbers of older adults have access to and are knowledgeable about computers (Fox, 2004). Second, with a limited budget, the cost was expected to be far below that of a mail survey (Dillman & Bowker, 2001; Salant & Dillman, 1994). Third, if carefully designed, online surveys can minimize the four major sources of sampling error for web-based

surveys—coverage, sampling, measurement, and non-response (Dillman & Bowker, 2001). In this study *Survey Monkey*, a commercial online software data-gathering tool, was used to format and manage the survey.

Members were provided with a brief description of the study on the Red Hat Society® homepage. Those interested in participating clicked a URL link that took them directly to an expanded description of the study and the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was designed to document: (a) chapter membership and organizational structure; (b) reasons for joining the Red Hat Society®; (c) why individuals remained members and what might make them leave; and (d) individuals' demographic characteristics (e.g., marital status, living arrangements, age, education, income, etc).

To address the purpose of this study our focus was on responses to the following open-ended question: **"**We are interested in any stories you might like to share about meaningful experiences you have had through your Red Hat Society® membership." We purposely asked this question because structured questions capture the researchers' viewpoint rather than other relevant, emergent meanings (Samdahl, 1999). In addition, Chase (2003) and Henderson (1991) have argued that individuals are the expert interpreters of personal meanings and when asked to provide their stories can make sense of their life experiences by narrating them. Thus, given the exploratory nature of this study we thought it prudent to ask a broad, open-ended question that would allow women to share their thoughts/stories about membership in the Society.

Given the purpose of our study we did not address the structural aspects (e.g., content of ties, strength of ties, density of networks) of the social networks of Red Hat Society® members.

Data Analysis

To manage responses to our open-ended question we used Huberman and Miles's (1994) interactive model of data analysis (i.e., data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification). Data reduction was achieved through coding and categorizing using both deductive and inductive approaches. The coding process began with categories derived from *a priori* research questions but additional, emergent categories were developed from reading through three random sub-samples of data (approximately 25% of the data), which providing verification of existing categories and the elucidation of additional categories.

Data reduction and data display entailed several successive steps. First, each member of the research group independently read through the sub-samples of quotes, documented codes, and then met and discussed the codes and their relative representation in the data. Second, the resulting list of codes was refined by having two members of the research group (i.e., the original coder pair) independently read through the sub-sample of data, undergo several rounds of independent and verification coding, and consult with the research team. Third, the two remaining coder pairs from the research group independently coded the remaining data. They reached at least 80% agreement on randomly drawn subsets (i.e., 10%) of the data. Fourth, the three coder pairs met to reach final agreement on the codes.

In addition, to attain further verification of the coding results, one coder in the team cross-validated two other pairs' codes on a randomly drawn 10% subset of data, resulting in 90% agreement. This step also provided verification via the triangulation

of the coders (Creswell, 1998). Conclusions and additional verification procedures included identifying the most prominent patterns of data, analyzing clusters of categories, and looking for negative, disconfirming cases.

Results

The response rate far exceeded expectations. Our original goal was to obtain a sample of 1,000 members. Based on response rates to previous on-line surveys, we expected it would take a month to reach our goal (Dillman, 2000). We reached our goal within two days of releasing the questionnaire. Due to the high rate of response the survey was made available to members for 10 days, only. In total, we obtained 4,090 responses. Two members had technical difficulties with accessing the survey. In both cases they utilized the phone number provided on the recruitment page to request that a hard copy be mailed.

A total of 1,693 women responded to the open-ended question: **"**We are interested in any stories you might like to share about meaningful experiences you have had through your Red Hat Society® membership." Their responses resulted in over 750 single-spaced pages of text, again suggesting that members are motivated to share their Red Hat Society® experiences.

Most respondents were white (96%), aged 51-70 (80%), married (70%), and educated (74% had attended or graduated from college). Nearly one-half (47%) were working outside the home. Unfortunately we do not know whether the respondents are representative of the membership of the Red Hat Society® because the Society does not maintain socio-demographic data on its membership.

Types of Functional Support Provided Through The Red Hat Society®

"No matter how old you are you can continue to make new friends and meet new and wonderful people." (Respondent)

Five types of functional support were articulated by respondents: "Spending time with new friends"; "Connecting/Re-connecting with friends, acquaintances and the community"; "Connecting/Re-connecting with family"; "Meeting people one would not otherwise meet"; and "Attention from others" (see Table 1).

Spending Time With New Friends

Most meaningful for many women was the time they spent with their new friends. Women highlighted not only the importance of their new friendships, but the value they attach to talking, sharing, socializing, laughing and simply having "fun" together. For some women doing this with women their own age or who had similar life experiences was especially important. In addition, many women noted that their "list of friends has really grown" and, as a result, led to a "much more interesting" and "meaningful" life.

Friends. Some women consider their new friends to be "sisters." They suggested, "I love the friendship that develops from my 'sisters in red'" and "…I find that you have an instant kinship with all of your sisters in purple and red." Other women simply recognize the overall value of having friends: Women "have become good friends because of this group" and "total strangers have become good friends in a few

TABLE 1
Types of functional support

Type of support	Sub-themes representing type of support
Spending time with new friends (n=102)	Having fun with friends "…Marvelous way to meet new friends… and just get together and meet new people and just have fun." An interesting and enriched life (through new friends) "Different personalities. ,,,ideas, …friends, [makes] life… much more interesting."
Connecting/re-connecting with friends, acquaintances and the community (n=74)	Staying connected "…We have been through sickness and health and have always maintained a close friendship." Reconnection "I've rediscovered quite a few 'older' gals that I'd known in previous contexts and have learned that they have much different personalities from those I assumed… They are fun!"
Connecting/re-connecting with family (n=37)	"…Gives [my mother and me] something to do together that spans the age difference…"
Meeting people one would otherwise not meet (n=85)	Diversity at home "I have met many new friends who I normally would not have crossed paths with if it wasn't for the Red Hats." A global connection "The Red Hat Society is such a neat organization because it is all over the globe…"
Attention from others (n=75)	Affirmation through attention with others "I love the way people look at me when I am all dressed up in purple and red…" No longer invisible "It is nice not to be invisible." A reverse benefit "…With us being there it allows them to let their hair down… and make their job more enjoyable…" The downside "…I love the concept but am a bit surprised how some of the women go so overboard…"

months." The overall sentiment, however, is that "…the friendships made [through the RHS®]… are ones to treasure."

One byproduct of these friendships is the opportunity to socialize outside Society events. Some women engage in local activities: "We enjoy being together so much that we now get together to work on crafts every other Sunday afternoon…" While others do much, much more: "The three of us have become terrific friends and now we travel a lot together, go to movies, shop, just whatever."

Friends like me. The following quote exemplifies the sentiment expressed by numerous women who not only welcomed the opportunity to meet new women, but more specifically women of similar generational backgrounds—women with common interests and experiences: "The most meaningful result of my membership has been connecting with women who are my age and have experienced the world in a similar way… ." Women appreciated opportunities to "…exchange ideas with such a diverse and interesting group of women [their] own age." As one woman noted, "…The RHS has [provided]… a stress free gathering of women my age from all different backgrounds to get together, chat, [and] get to know each other…"

In addition, many women were drawn to the RHS® precisely because they wanted to engage in activities "with other women who share the same common interests" or life experiences. For example, one woman said that the RHS is a "great way to get together and have fun," but also provides an environment in which she and her sister, who are widows, "…don't feel 'funny' being in a group without their husbands." For women who are still working outside the home, organized events provide them with an opportunity to meet and make friends in a fun environment, which is often difficult "in the small amount of time [they] have each month."

On the other hand, some women liked that they were able to meet women "…who have or had… interesting jobs and careers." Thus, the diversity of life experiences was appealing and for some an eye-opening "adventure."

Having fun with friends. The Society® provides women with a "…marvelous way to meet new friends… and just to get together and meet new people and just have fun." Fun for many women encompasses laughing , eating, and simply having a good time: "We always wind up laughing and eating and just having a wonderful time with strangers that are now friends." Having fun is also important because it removes women from their other obligations. As a few women noted, "…It has expanded my circle of friends and given me an outlet to just have fun without responsibilities attached" and "It is a great opportunity to increase your friendships and have fun with no agenda!"

An interesting and enriched life. While fun is clearly an important byproduct of friendship, many women also recognized that there is a meaningful depth and richness to their friendships: "the different personalities, …ideas, …friends, [makes] life… much more interesting." Another woman suggested, "Meeting these women has been extremely pleasurable" because they can "…sit and talk and share [their] life experiences." More importantly, for some women the new friendships have given them "…a second chance at having the girlfriends and companionship that [they] missed out on during [their] younger years."

Connecting/Re-connecting with Friends, Acquaintances and the Community

The Red Hat Society® also provides women with the opportunity to connect or reconnect with friends, acquaintances and members of the community.

Staying connected. The Red Hat Society® has provided a forum for many women to maintain their relationships with others who've they've known for much of their life. As one woman said, "We are a bunch of girls that have been friends since 1976. We had our babies, married our babies, have grandchildren and are now marrying them. We have been through sickness and health and have always maintained a close friendship." Her perspective is not so different from her cohorts who recognize that without the Society they would not see each other: "We are 12 ladies who have known each other for many years, but because of our busy lives, find we don't see each other often. The Red Hat Society® gives us the opportunity to get together and really enjoy each other."

For some women the "connection" they've forged is in response to the loss of someone they cared about. "My chapter is named for a good friend who recently died from breast cancer. It has been a way for us to stay connected with her sisters." For other women the RHS® allows them to stay connected through honoring a loved one: "My chapter is… made up of my friends and the friends of my late mother. It is a way for my sisters and friends to remain as connected as my mother did with her friends and to honor the importance of true friendship that my mother instilled in my sisters and me."

The RHS® also provides a mechanism for co-workers to maintain their friendships: "My chapter is made up of mostly 50 somethings who work together or are recently retired… [The RHS®] has allowed us to get to know each other better, in a fun light hearted way." The need to maintain friendships among co-workers was recognized by teachers, nurses, flight attendants, librarians, and more.

A chance to become acquainted with women in the community is also important. The RHS® offers women "…a chance to connect with other women in the community…" and "[Become] acquainted with [their] neighbors with whom they were not acquainted before."

Reconnection. Women have become "much closer" to their friends and acquaintances as a result of their membership in the Society: "We have not traveled in the same groups, socialized together particularly over the years, but this has brought us together." The RHS® has also helped women to see what they've lost by being out of touch with friends and acquaintances. For example, one woman said, "It has helped me connect with old friends that I had lost touch with and made me realize how much my friendships mean to me." Still others have recognized the blessings they've accrued through reconnecting with friends: "I have reconnected with eight childhood friends and we feel like kids again when we are together" and "It's great to have both of my former college roommates and I FINALLY be in the same sorority!" They've also found that re-connecting with women at this later stage of life provides a new perspective on old friendships: "I've re-discovered quite a few 'older' gals that I'd known in previous contexts and have learned that they have much different personalities from those I assumed… They are fun!"

Connecting/Re-connecting With Family

Through Red Hat Society® events women share time with and become closer to multiple generations of female family members. They have fun together, learn from each other, and become closer as "friends" who respect each other.

There is no doubt that for some women forging a stronger bond or connection with a family member is their primary reason for joining the Society. For example, a number of women joined the Society to share more time with their mothers: "I joined Red Hat Societ® primarily as a way to structure outings with my 79 year-old mother." Others simply seek the benefit of sharing time together in another context. The Red Hat Society® "…gives [my mother and me] something to do together that spans the age difference—we are free to be Red Hatters, not just mother and daughter." Or, the Society gives "[my daughter and me] time together, away from other family members."

Familial relationships have blossomed as a result of membership in the Red Hat Society. Daughters have enhanced their relationship with their mothers: "What a great joy for me to share this with my mother. It's added another layer to our relationship!" Daughters-in-law have become closer to their mothers-in-law. And mothers have embraced their new relationships with daughters: "I began our chapter shortly after Mothers Day as a gift to my daughter. She was my inspiration to have more fun and savor every moment of my life."

The benefits are endless—multiple generations of family members have come together as a result of their involvement in the Society. Mothers, daughters and grand-daughters have joined the same chapter: "My mother, age 85 is involved as well as my daughter, age 34." One woman even involved her god-mother: "My mother, god mother and I do this together. We're crazy when were together anyway and this just makes it more fun."

Meeting People One Would Not Otherwise Meet

> "Red Hatters are not strangers to anyone. All it takes to strike up a conversation with another woman unknown to you is to see her shopping for something, anything remotely connected to Red Hatting." (Respondent)

Being a "Red Hatter" has literally and figuratively opened doors for many women. They've been able to meet women from many walks of life through Red Hat Society® events, traveled to destinations alone and been befriended by other Red Hatters, and learned through their exposure to women different from themselves that they have friends all over the world.

Diversity at home. Numerous women indicated that the Red Hat Soceity® provides opportunities to meet other women who they might not normally meet: "… There are many women in my surrounding community that I have come in contact with that have a different walk in life than I have and who might not otherwise have anything in common and I am getting to know them all better." Further, many women are astonished at their pre-conceived notions about members of their community:

> What has amazed me more than anything is the fact that I have met women that before the Red Hats I would have not made friends with—I would have made an assumption about them and not pursued it. Now I have to take the time to meet these people as they are joining the group, and there are quite a few I would have cast off previously that I just adore at this point!

By being more open and accepting of others new friendships have developed. For example, one woman suggested, "I have met many new friends who I normally would not have crossed paths with if it wasn't for the Red Hats." Another woman stated, "…I have met and made friends with ladies from all around this region with whom I most certainly would not have otherwise even come in contact with, let alone befriended."

A global connection. "The Red Hat Society is such a neat organization because it is all over the globe. As "Red Hatters," women feel that they have something in common with other Red Hatters, regardless of geographic location or chapter membership: "Red Hats are everywhere. It gives people a common ground of something to talk about." In fact, being a Red Hatter is, as one woman suggested, " a real conversation starter." Red Hat Society® members feel they are instantly friends and as such maintain their friendships through local chapter meetings, regional events or via "…e-mails, IMS, a private board, phone calls, and occasional face to face meetings."

Attention From Others

> "…Wearing a red hat says, 'Hi there, I love life[. …] If you'd like to share a moment or two with me, we can laugh together and enjoy a sparkle moment'." (Respondent)

The attention Red Hatters obtain from the public in general and men in particular is quite appealing. Women love that dressing up in red and purple attracts the attention of young and old, male and female. "[They] are treated like celebrities wherever [they] go… ." They also recognize the benefits received from such attention, ranging from opening doors for other women who may want to join the Red Hat Society® to feeling good about themselves to providing a bit of fun for those who join in their activities.

Affirmation through attention from others. Red Hatters have been invited to participate in local, regional and state events (e.g., rodeos, parades, lunches with political representatives). They have been interviewed by and received publicity from the media. Wherever they go, people want their pictures taken with them: "It [is] great when people [stop] us on the street and [ask] about our clothes and hats… ." and, "I love the way people look at me when I am all dressed up in purple and red… they all 'smile'… this lifts me up!"

Important to many, however, has been the attention they have received from men of all ages: "…It is especially morale boosting to be complimented by men, young and old alike… ." Men have told the Red Hatters that they look "beautiful," "lovely," "good," "classy," "nice," and "elegant." They have bought them drinks, paid their bills, sung to them in public places, and praised them for their ability to have fun. They have even been "… mooned by a bunch of old farts!," which led to their feeling like celebrities. Younger males have recognized them as "happy grandmas" and "cool ladies." The attention from younger males, as noted by one Red Hatter, is unexpected:

> …A young man (about 16-17) came up to us. He said, 'you are the coolest looking ladies in those hats, can I give you a hug?' ...How often would a young person, especially a boy, do that to a complete stranger? It left… us with tears in our eyes but smiles on our faces…

Younger women also love to see Red Hatters having fun: "Most women of all ages love us. Younger women say, 'you go girl'." Having affirmation from women of

all ages is very important because, as one woman suggested, "…Aging is difficult in a youth-oriented society and the Red Hat Society allows [women] to be proud of [their] mature status… ." In fact, another woman wrote, "…It is refreshing when a young woman says 'I can't wait to be a Red Hatter… you people are role models for how I want to age.' FINALLY, positive role models for aging women… ."

No longer "invisible." Having positive role models is important. Numerous women recognized, "…It is nice not to be invisible" and "…It feels great to be noticed…" This appears to be important from a collective and individual standpoint: "When you reach our age it seems we become invisible, but with our red hat regalia, everyone notices and wants to visit with [us.] It's a very upbeat experience, it makes people, including us… smile…" Women also spoke about the importance of removing stereotypes associated with aging. For example, one woman suggested that it is refreshing to be perceived as "…fun-loving (not old or picky)," while another indicated, "…[In] my generation it was un-cool to be so connected to other women and this has changed that concept completely."

A reverse benefit

> "…[I've] noticed that we brighten other peoples' days just be 'being.' This ability is not something to be taken lightly in our world—to effortlessly improve the quality/tone of someone else's day… is a precious gift bestowed on members of the RHS." (Respondent)

Women have found that they have had an unexpected, but profound effect on local businesses, their staff and consumers. As one woman noted, "[I have] found the local [businesses] love to cater to the Red Hats. They always treat us like gold. With us being there it allows them to let their hair down also and make their job more enjoyable for that [period of] time." Others simply become playful as a result of socializing with members of the Red Hat Society®. For example, a golfer asked to exchange hats with one of the members and, "in the spirit of the day, did so. The next time [the women] saw him he was riding in a golf cart with three other gents with her beautiful red hat on his head." In another instance a waiter at a middle-eastern restaurant took a red Fez off the wall and donned it as he served the Red Hatters.

The downside. All is not perfect in the land of red hats. Five women indicated that the attention they receive is negative. Their comments focused on other women's reactions to them: "I have mixed experiences with the Red Hat Society®… There are some crabby ladies that look at us like we are stupid…" They also noted their discomfort with other members' behavior: "…I love the concept but am a bit surprised how some of the women go so 'overboard' but figure that is their personality coming out in front… ."

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand the type(s) of functional support older women access through membership in one leisure-based social network, The Red Hat Society®. The types of functional support older women reported were primarily emotional and social in nature rather than informational or tangible; they focused on the *emotional* support associated with *belonging* to a social network that included family, friends, acquaintances and members of the community. This was consistent across most all of the responses.

Five types of functional support were documented. The first four themes (i.e., spending time with new friends, and connecting/re-connecting with friends, acquaintances, the community, and family; meeting people one would otherwise not meet) provide support for the notion that many older women substitute and compensate through their social networks. Our results suggest that the social network of Red Hatters helps members fill the gaps created by a relationship loss or disruption (i.e., an emotional outcome). Numerous women stated that they would not be able to spend time with new and old friends or family without Red Hat Society® events. Others indicated that they got involved with the Red Hat Society® precisely because they wanted to maintain their commitment to a friend or family member who had died. And still others suggested that the Red Hat Society® helped them reconnect with individuals with whom they had lost touch. These examples correlate with those provided by Cicirelli (1995) and Zettel and Rook (2004) who suggest that there are various forms of social network substitution: the formation of a new social relationship, a rekindling of social ties that have been dormant or inactive, and turning to the current members of the social network to perform the relationship functions previously performed by the lost member. The examples also provide evidence of leisure's contribution to the health and well-being of older adults, which is sparse (see Caldwell, 2005; Driver, Brown & Peterson, 1991 for research on adults in general). Indeed, Dupuis (2006, p. 98) noted that, "our understanding of the role that leisure may play in the enhancement of social well-being in later life is extremely limited." The results of our study contribute to the leisure literature by helping to fill that conceptual gap.

An additional theme uncovered is the importance of receiving attention from others. Many women enjoyed the attention they received from men. Whether the attention was in the form of a compliment, a song created on their behalf, or a request for a picture, women were quite pleased with the attention they received from men of all ages. Why is this attention so important? According to self-verification theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) individuals seek external validation of their conception of self. If there is a discrepancy between self conception and the views that others have of them individuals feel uncomfortable and seek change. For example, women in this instance see themselves as vibrant and sexual yet, in general, cultural stereotypes, often reinforced through the media, impose a less positive stereotype (Huyck, 1994; Riley et al., 1994). Hence, through membership in the Red Hat Society® women may (a) engage in interactions that "verify the view of themselves that they hold" (McFarland & Pals, 2005, p. 291) or want to hold; and (b) obtain feedback (e.g., attention from men) that influences their motive to embrace the various identities that constitute their "self" (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Undoubtedly, the attention women in this study received from others was related in part to their dress. By playfully dressing up in red and purple outfits and boldly appearing as a group, women enhanced their self-esteem and fostered a strong sense of belonging. This finding stands in sharp contrast to the literature that finds dress an impediment to women's leisure experiences (e.g., James, 2000; Kiewa, 2002; Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006). Perhaps a benefit associated with "dress up" is that it contributes to personal and social identity development.

Women felt positively about enjoying activities without obligation or responsibilities attached. This finding directly supports Wilhite et al.'s (1994) and Deem's (1986)

contention that women create experiences where they can be free from external pressure. In fact, many women in this study said that much of their pleasure came from the public visibility of their actions and attire. In essence, tired of being invisible, they were happy to celebrate this stage in their lives.

In addition, many women said the Society provided a positive place to laugh *with* others and *about* themselves. Social networks "…serve as channels for the diffusion of a wide range of customs, values, attitudes, standards, and the like" (Gartell, 1987, p. 55). Hence, the Red Hat Society® may provide a context in which older women can compare themselves with others (i.e., social comparison) and recognize that they are much like other women their own age. As Harshaw and Tindall (2005) suggest, "the emotional significance of association with like-minded individuals… reinforces a person's social identity… and also affects their concept of self…" (p. 434).

The majority of research on the benefits of leisure has focused on positive psychological outcomes such as self-determination, self-mastery and identity affirmation (e.g., Iso-Ahola, 1997; Mannell, 1993). Fredrickson (1998, 2003), however, contended that we neglect the long-term and short-term personal benefits that accrue from positive emotions. Fredrickson proposed that these benefits occur because positive emotions "broaden an individual's momentary mindset" which leads to improvement of "enduring personal resources" (2003, p. 332). Resources may range from social and psychological to physical and intellectual resources. While her "broaden and build" theory has been supported by an extensive array of experimental, laboratory research (e.g., Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), it has yet to be studied in leisure contexts or with specific populations such as older women. Our study begins to fill that conceptual gap by demonstrating that leisure-based social networks which foster positive emotions may have multiple beneficial outcomes for older women.

The results provided support for what Bellah et al. (1985) refer to as a "leisure enclave." They want to have fun; socialize with friends, family and members of their community; and, due to the "rules" of the Society, create markers of identity (i.e., red and purple outfits) that present an expressive symbol of their membership (see Fine, 1989; Hebdige, 1979). While Bellah et al. (1995) referred to these leisure enclaves in a pejorative sense, our results suggest that older women access multiple types of functional support through membership in a leisure-based social network. They develop friendships, receive support, are embraced regardless of difference, and more. Further, no group is the same. Women from all walks of life are encouraged to join or start a group. If they start a group they must create a name that reflects who they are (e.g., Bodacious Broads, Imperial Flutterbys, Razzy Ramblin' Rosebuds). Thus, the notion that leisure enclaves encourage the narcissism of similarity does not seem to hold in this context.

On the other hand, the results were inconsistent with more recent work by Hibbler and Shinew (2002) who contended that there are four types of positive benefits associated with social networks: emotional, informational, social and financial. We documented positive outcomes but they were emotional and social in nature rather than informational and financial. In addition, when respondents mentioned emotional and social outcomes, many did not fit neatly into either category. For example, numerous women mentioned the importance of establishing friendships with "caring" and "understanding" women, two characteristics often cited as emotional outcomes of so-

cial networks, but they also recognized the "opportunities for enrichment" (i.e., social outcome) that evolved from these friendships. The differences in our findings may be due to a number of factors. First, we addressed the types of functional outcomes for women, only. Jordon and Revenson (1999) as well as Glover and Parry (2008) found that women draw emotional support through their social networks. Men tend toward less intimate, more content focused relationships, which leads towards instrumental support (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Second, the fact that Red Hat Society® members were asked a broad, open-ended question focused on their thoughts/stories about meaningful experiences they have had with the Society. Asking about "meaningful" experiences may have connoted positive experiences only, leading to some women feeling that they could not document negative experiences. And, asking women a broad, open-ended question rather than asking them directly about the "emotional" and "social" support they receive from membership in the Society, may have influenced the types of thoughts/stories they chose to share.

The fact that respondents highlighted the benefits of reciprocal relationships between members of their group as an example of functional support is noteworthy. Rook (1987) found that reciprocity in social relationships is an important predictor of social satisfaction. And, Ranzijn, Harford, and Andrews (2002) argued that reciprocity is the "social glue" that keeps women together, sharing, and caring. Further, Iso-Ahola and Park (1996) argued that the social support received through family and friends in a social network has a buffering effect on stress. While the outcomes of having a reciprocal relationship with members of a leisure-based social network was not the focus of this study, having such a focus in future studies would be worthwhile.

We acknowledge that not all older women are white, educated, capable of responding to an on-line questionnaire, and interested in the activities supported by the Red Hat Society®. Nor are they all responding from the same socio-cultural contexts. Allison (1988), Maynard 1994), and Tirone and Shaw (1997) found that differences exist in the way women from various ethnic backgrounds think about the concept of "leisure." We must also note that the homophilous principle may be in effect here—women who have chosen to become members of the Red Hat Society® may hold similar social positions within a given social structure (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). They may also have similar values, attitudes and beliefs (i.e., value homophily), and strong socio-emotional ties (Ibarra, 1997), all of which may shape their attraction to and types of functional support they associate with the Society (Houston & Levinger, 1978; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Thus, further research with older women from different socio-cultural backgrounds is necessary if we are to truly understand the types of functional support received from membership in leisure-based social networks.

In addition, the underlying philosophy of the Red Hat Society® may have influenced our results. Women may join the Society precisely because it provides positive benefits such as socialization, fun, and more. Thus, we recognize that the findings are transferable to a limited segment of the older adult female population. However, we strongly believe that despite these weaknesses we have given attention to older women as well as the functional supports they receive from involvement in a leisure-based social network.

While we have learned a great deal from the results of this study, further research is necessary. For example, much of the work that has been done to date has focused

primarily on the structural and less so on the functional support of social networks (Faber & Waserman, 2002). Our study provided clear evidence that there are multiple, yet intertwined types of functional support derived through membership in a leisure-based social network. Are these types of functional support typical across different types of older women's leisure-based networks? Clearly women are imbedded in multiple social networks. Some may be close-knit involving individuals who know each other well while others may be loosely knit (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, would type(s) of functional support vary by structural aspects (e.g., strength of ties, density of networks) of different types of leisure-based social networks?

Investigating the health outcomes of leisure-based social networks is also an appropriate area for future research. Cohen and Wills (1985) found that functional measures of support (i.e., the exchange of support in the relationships between members of the social network, see Akiyama et al., 1996) were more likely to "buffer" the potential effects of stressful life events. Researchers might begin to investigate the health benefits of leisure-based social networks by building on the results of this study (Iwasaki, 2005; Payne, 2005). For example, researchers should create a more complete list of types of functional support inherent in leisure-based social networks. Then, as Uchino (2004) suggests, researchers should distinguish between the functional support that is *perceived to be available* and the functional support that is *actually received or provided* by others. This distinction is important because the two measures are, for example: (a) not highly related, (b) associated with different health outcomes, (c) related to individuals' cognitive representation of social support, and (d) related to the makeup of individuals in a given social network (Antonucci & Israel, 1986; Dunkel-Schetter & Bennett, 1990; Uchino, 2004). In addition, in this study we examined the functional supports of leisure-based social networks for *individual* older women. Functional support can also be examined from the network as a whole, which might also prove interesting and helpful in further refining social network theory from a leisure perspective.

By highlighting that the majority of members were positive about their Red Hat Society® experiences this study shows that playful, vibrant, public celebration can not only promote a counter cultural message about older women, Red Hat Society® "Regalia" also *visibly* spreads that message in a non-threatening manner. Is the Society in essence acting as a "…social glue that binds together individuals who might otherwise fragment" (Warde et al., 2005, p. 403)? Is the shared interest in "having fun" and friendship with individuals from all walks of life (e.g., socially and potentially politically different) creating social capital (Putnam, 2000)? Glover and Parry (2008), in a recent study of friendships amongst women, found that friendships, especially those developed within the sphere of sociability, lead to social capital. We suspect that the same may be true of the friendships created through the Red Hat Society®.

Because the study was conducted on-line and we did not ask for identifying information, we could not conduct follow-up interviews. Being able to conduct member checks and probe for additional information would have provided us with greater insight to the functional supports leisure-based social networks provide to older women.

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