

Promoting Older Women's Health and Well-Being Through Social Leisure Environments: What We Have Learned from the Red Hat Society®

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to describe the ways that participation in a leisure organization contributed to the health and well-being of middle-aged and older women. We analyzed 1,693 members' responses to a query about meaningful experiences garnered through participation in the Red Hat Society®. Results suggested that older women's lives have been enriched and changed by their experiences, with the women in this study citing multiple psychosocial health benefits from their participation in the Red Hat Society®. Main themes encapsulating these health benefits were creating happy moments, responding to transitions and negative events, and enhancing the self. These findings are related to research on positive psychology, social support and coping, transformative leisure processes, and social identity formation. We conclude by providing suggestions for applying these findings to leisure

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There has been little lifespan developmental research examining older women's unique lived experiences (see Antonucci, 1994 and Lippert, 1997, as exceptions), particularly in the context of health and well-being (Arnold, 2005). Hence, our aim is to elucidate meaningful experiences for older women in a distinct leisure environment just for women—The Red Hat Society®—and to describe the way these experiences contribute to older women's psychosocial health and well-being.

PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF LEISURE

Kleiber's research on the benefits of leisure (1999, 2001), which has relied upon both lifespan developmental (Brandtstädter, 1998; Erikson, 1963, 1982; Havighurst, 1972; Levinson et al., 1978) and life course (e.g., Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) perspectives, has provided a foundation for understanding leisure, health and well-being in later life. For instance, Kleiber charted the role of leisure in several developmental challenges of aging, including self-renewal and generativity in middle age (1999), which in turn has implications for health and well-being. He suggested that activity, disengagement, and continuity—three distinct models of aging—play important roles in the development of the self and engendering a sense of self-worth through leisure. Further, he argued that both continuity and change in leisure may help following difficult life events, including disengagement in unfulfilling activities, continued engagement in meaningful activities, and engagement in new activity opportunities. In the latter case, new leisure activities may provide unique opportunities to enhance the health and well-being of older adults. Such health promotion may occur through the construction of new social identities (Kleiber, 2001), as well as self-protection, self-restoration, and personal transformation (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002).

In particular, transformative leisure experiences appear to have several hallmarks, including the “restructuring of life goals and commitments, new activity interests, and greater attention to the present” (Kleiber et al., 2002, p. 229). Tinsley, Colbs, Teaff, and Kaufman’s (1987) findings support several of Kleiber’s assertions. For example, their finding that companionship and recognition were important benefits of leisure for middle-aged and older adults supports Kleiber’s (1999, 2001) assertion that companionship and self-worth are important developmental tasks in later life. In addition, their finding that recognition and power were leisure benefits suggests that generativity may continue as a developmental challenge even beyond midlife.

Although they have advanced our understanding about the benefits of leisure in later life, Tinsley et al. (1987) and Kleiber and colleagues (1999, 2001, 2002) have not examined women’s unique lived experiences of leisure for self-development, social identity formation, social support and coping. It seems likely, for instance, that as a result of their distinct life course patterns—which differ in type, timing, and duration of roles (Altergott & McCreedy, 1993; Moen, 2001)—older women may cope with life transitions differently than do older men. In fact, leisure may provide not only an important avenue for older women to deal with life transitions, but also an opportunity to enhance their development of the self, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Along these lines, Freysinger (1995) found that women attached different values to leisure than did men and that women’s leisure was characterized by more emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Kelly, Steinkamp, and Kelly (1986) found that leisure participation was pivotal in providing opportunities for self-development and social integration, with complex differences between men’s and women’s leisure values depending on age. For instance, the young-old (65-74) men ranked companionship higher than did young old women but the oldest women (85+) ranked companionship higher than the oldest men. The complex nature of the reasons for leisure engagement according to gender and age highlights the importance of recognizing the unique health and wellness benefits of older women’s leisure experiences.

Population-based, prospective studies of older adults support the largely qualitative research studies on leisure, pointing to a diverse array of everyday leisure activities that contribute to positive health outcomes. For example, there is evidence that visits to the cinema/restaurants/sporting events and playing cards and games lower mortality as much as fitness activities do (Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman, 1999) and social networks are associated with reduced risk of

limitations in ADL (activities of daily living) functioning (Mendes de Leon et al., 1999) and dementia (Wang, Karp, Winblad, & Fratiglioni, 2002). What we still do not know is how older women experience later life leisure, health and well-being.

Taken together, the research on the relationship between leisure and health supports the importance of leisure as an opportunity for mood enhancement as well as the development of self identity, social identity, social support, coping, and self-worth. Leisure environments seem particularly salient as a medium for transformative opportunities that enhance health and well-being. The literature, however, is sparse in addressing the importance of leisure for the health and well-being of women, with little research on older women's leisure and health. Aitchison (2003) and Shaw (1999) have invited researchers to explore women's leisure in diverse social contexts while Moen (2001) entreats researchers to study the life course principle of interdependence and to consider multiple aspects of people's lives—such as gender and age—in the context of the life course. Here, we look at evidence that the Red Hat Society® is a unique social leisure environment for older women that provides health benefits to its members and, arguably, to others as well.

***THE RED HAT SOCIETY®:
A SOCIAL LEISURE ENVIRONMENT
FOR OLDER WOMEN***

The context of interest in this study is a social leisure organization, the Red Hat Society® (RHS). It is an international organization predominantly for middle-aged and older women, although younger women may also join. Sue Ellen Cooper founded the Society in 1998, with a mission to use age as a license to play, be “silly,” and to build relationships with other women. There are now over 1,000,000 members in 41,000 chapters in 30 countries (see www.redhatsociety.com). The group's central tenets include no rules, no jobs, no responsibilities and no penalties. There are no restrictions on where and when to meet or who can be members, other than members must be female. There is, however, an important dress code. Members over 50 are encouraged to attend events wearing red hats and purple outfits. Other adornments may include red and purple shoes, jewelry, hatpins, scarves and feather boas. Members under 50 wear pink hats and lavender outfits. Events and activities span the spectrum from the everyday to the adventurous. Some groups meet monthly at the same restaurant, while others plan travel trips across the globe.

METHODS

Data Collection

To address the purpose of this study we used an online survey that was developed using *Survey Monkey*, an online data design and data collection software program. We chose an online survey to minimize measurement error, to reduce administrative costs, and to reach a large number of potential respondents (Dillman & Bowker, 2001). The survey was posted on the RHS Website and distributed to members through the weekly e-mail newsletter. Members were provided with a brief description of the study on the RHS homepage. Interested participants clicked a URL link to an expanded description of the study and the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was designed to document chapter membership, reasons for joining, what might make them leave, and individuals' demographic characteristics. Although increasing numbers of older adults have access to computers (Fox, 2004), African American and Hispanic households and rural residents are less likely to have Internet access than White households and urban residents (Dillman & Bowker, 2001). Therefore, a limitation of the data collection method employed is that not all RHS members may have access to the Internet and, in particular, rural and racially/ethnically diverse RHS members may not be adequately represented in this study.

For this article, we are focusing on responses to the following open-ended request: "We are interested in any stories you might like to share about meaningful experiences you have had through your Red Hat Society® membership." We intentionally wrote this appeal using an open-ended format for two reasons. First, individuals are the expert interpreters of personal meanings (Chase, 2003; Henderson, 1991). Second, structured questions capture the researchers' viewpoint but omit relevant, emergent meanings (Samdahl, 1999). Our aim was to capture members' viewpoints, recognizing that they might have meaningful experiences we did not anticipate.

Data Analysis

Responses to the open-ended request for information on meaningful experiences created over 750 single-spaced pages of text. To utilize and make sense of this rich information, we used Huberman and Miles's (1998) interactive model of data analysis, with its three iterative components of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Data reduction and data display were achieved through categorizing the data using both deductive and inductive approaches. The coding process began with categories derived from *a priori* research questions. Next, members of the research team independently read through different quotes to identify theoretical and emergent categories and then met as a group to discuss results and to develop a list of categories (i.e., an initial codebook). The categories were expanded further by having two members of the research team independently code and then subsequently reach agreement on three random subsamples of data (approximately 25% of the data); the result was the final codebook. This iterative process provided verification of existing categories, elucidation of additional categories, and an indication of the saturation of categories (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Then, three coder pairs used the final codebook to code the data (including recoding the three subsamples of data used in codebook development) and to verify categories by reaching agreement on all codes.

In addition, to further confirm the coding results, one team member cross validated two coder pairs' codes on a randomly drawn 10% subset of data, resulting in more than 90% agreement. This step provided further verification of the results via the triangulation of the coders (Creswell, 1998). Conclusion drawing and additional verification procedures included identifying the most prominent patterns of data, analyzing clusters of categories, and looking for negative, disconfirming cases (Creswell, 1998).

RESULTS

A total of 1,693 women (41% of the 4,090 respondents) completed the open-ended request. 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. Almost one-half (49.4%) reported chapter memberships of 20 or less, nearly 40% said their chapter had a membership of 21-50 women.

The women in this study cited multiple socioemotional and psychological health benefits stemming from their involvement in the RHS. The following are the overall themes representing these health benefits: "Creating happy moments," "Responding to transitions and negative events," and "Enhancing the self."

Creating Happy Moments

Whether it is an in-home dinner theatre, a poolside luau, a parade, or a costume party (just to name a few), dreams become realities!

The RHS has provided women with an outlet to do things they have never done before—activities they “probably wouldn’t do otherwise.” Through these activities they’ve met many new people and made new friends: “[Our entire chapter is] going on a cruise to the eastern Caribbean. We are all very close even though two years ago we were all strangers. What a bond of love & friendship!” They have attended cultural events together, held slumber parties, joined online forums, helped with the design of rehabilitative equipment, and even put their faces on a “girly calendar.”

While it is fun to participate in myriad activities throughout one’s life, doing so later in life may hold particular meaning, thereby enhancing the experience. Older women have raised families, worked various jobs, and been homemakers; it is their time to “have fun and reap [the] pleasures [of their] maturity.” It is time to “let [their] hair down” and “do something for [themselves].” As one woman noted, “I grew up quick, a mom at 17, so I didn’t have time to be a kid and enjoy being silly. This gives me a little of that back! It’s time for *me!* Not time for taking care of everyone else. The time I spend with my group is *my* time, just for *fun!*” Another woman said, “The Red Hat Society has gotten me out into the world, and I have made so many new friends, and am having so much *fun* with them—doing lots of fun things, and going to fun places—something I did not do for many, many years. I just have a whole new outlook on life at age 72—and feel like this is just the beginning.” Through participation in the RHS, many women discovered that their desire to enjoy life, regardless of age, was “normal.”

Responding to Transitions and Negative Events

The caring concern of my chapter members was a welcome moral support during . . . difficult times. In some ways, nobody knows the way a woman feels better than another woman.

At this stage of their lives most women were experiencing a great deal of change; many had endured loss—parents, siblings, spouses, friends and/or children had died; undergone a divorce or moved to a new area; taken on caretaking responsibilities; and begun to face health problems,

many of which were irreversible. Participation in the RHS was important for many of these women as they experienced transitions and challenges in their lives. RHS activities provided diversions that allowed them respite from focusing on the stressors in their lives and afforded opportunities to build and strengthen friendships that provided social and sometimes instrumental support. Involvement in the RHS “brings a new sense of joy and friendship into their lives. It is a great stress reliever and [members] do feel a sense of sisterhood. . . .”

The loss of a loved one can lead to depression, loneliness, and isolation. RHS involvement helped women to “[keep] going . . . [and] cope with the loss.” It also allowed them to feel “alive again” and to “fill in the lonely hours with fun and getting together with other women.” As one woman suggested, “It sure has helped me. I don’t feel so alone anymore.” Another realized that she was in a deep depression and through her involvement with the Society “made close and lasting relationships with women [she] never knew before.” These women identified the “real support network” they have through the RHS.

Women who were caretakers for a family member indicated that participating in Society events helped ease the stress of everyday living: “Helping to organize our chapter and meeting with other women who had experienced the same life problems really helped [my sister and I] to relax and enjoy ourselves without feeling guilty about the time we were spending away from our mom who was [diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease],” and, “Joining the Red Hat Society® chapter gave me a chance to have a few hours a month for just me, which helped me to keep doing the things that I had to do to care for my mother and keep my spirits and hers up. . . .” Providing support was also a benefit of membership in the Society. After recovering from a serious illness which had her bedridden for a year and left her permanently disabled, one woman focused on “[having] fun and [inspiring] others to keep going despite hardships.” Another woman who had undergone hip surgery found that she could be a “support” for women undergoing similar experiences. Both women found that their own experiences could be used to benefit others; they could do something as simple, but also as profoundly meaningful, as caring. For some, being kind and paying attention to the needs of others was “a healing experience.”

Enhancing the Self

When I put on a red hat, I feel like a new person. Sort of like an actress playing the part of a confident, lovely, fun woman.

The RHS is a “melting pot of womanhood and diversity.” Many members are leaders of their community and are very comfortable with who they are. This is not, however, true of the entire membership. The Society provided many women with an opportunity to develop self-confidence and self-worth in a nonjudgmental “accepting” setting.

Affirmation of their beauty was significant to many women: “The red hats are truly magic. They have given me confidence and made me feel prettier than I ever have before.” In addition, receiving accolades from passersby, especially men, held special meaning: “Every time we go out at least one man always compliments us on our beauty,” and “I love the way people look at me when I am all dressed in purple and red . . . They all ‘smile’ . . . This lifts me up!” While attention from others was central to confidence building for some women, seeing members within the group blossom was also heartwarming for many women: “Seeing women in our group, who otherwise would be yearning to participate in fun and friendship and suddenly becoming beautifully youthful again has been quite a rewarding experience.”

The recognition that one can become self-confident later in life was a common and positive theme among many women in this study. Many cited how involvement in the RHS had brought them out of their shell: “This experience in the Red Hat Society® has made me a more outgoing person,” and, “Before I became a member of the Red Hat Society®, I was a bit shy and had one good friend. Now, over three years later, I have a Red Hat reputation for being the life of the party!” Other women documented activities they’ve undertaken which have led to feeling “useful and part of something big.” Still others have surprised themselves by contacting mayors, writing poems, and speaking at public events—things they did not think they had the courage to do. As one woman said, “Wearing the purple clothes and red hat makes me feel bold.”

DISCUSSION

Older Women Having Fun and Being Playful Together

The women in this study articulated that being a member of the RHS provided them with opportunities to do things they might not have done, have fun, and play. We found support for Wilhite, Sheldon, and Jekubovich-Fenton’s (1994) contention that women need spaces and

experiences where they feel free to have fun. In this study, the RHS provided women with an outlet to have fun and to be playful with other women who accepted and embraced them, flaws and all.

Fredrickson (2001) has argued that positive emotions “create the urge to play, push the limits, and be creative” (p. 1369) (i.e., broaden and build theory), with playfulness building many resources including social attachments. These resources are cumulative, leading to an upward spiral in positive thinking and offsetting the downward spiral of negative emotions that can lead to sadness, stress, and depression. This study suggests that the RHS provided older women with social leisure opportunities to broaden and build a positive repertoire of fun and playfulness. Missing from Frederickson’s work, however, has been attention to the possible links between playful leisure, positive emotions in later life, and health. An examination of the role of older women’s playful leisure in engendering positive emotions and, in turn, the significance of these emotions for older women’s health and well-being is needed.

Utilizing Social Support to Cope with Transitions and Negative Events

Researchers have documented the negative impact of responding ineffectively to stressors on both physical and mental health (Thoits, 1995) and have indicated that the ability to cope with stressors may become increasingly important as one ages (Hamarat et al., 2002). Many of the older women in this study discussed the role that fellow members of the RHS played in enabling them to manage a variety of stressors, supporting past research on the role of leisure activities in fostering social relationships that facilitate coping through emotional support, instrumental aid, and information provision (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000) as well as protection against illness (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996). Taylor et al. (2000) contend that women’s repertoire for dealing with stress includes “tending and befriending” (p. 411). Tending characterizes caring for offspring while befriending involves seeking the support of social groups, especially other women. The results of our study support Taylor et al.’s research—respondents indicated the significance of RHS for providing opportunities to support women dealing with negative life events, seeing women blossom as a result of their involvement in the RHS, and bringing female family members together.

The ability to recover from the loss of a partner (i.e., a stressor) may also be a beneficial outcome of a supportive social network

(Connidis & Davis, 1992). Rook, Sorkin and Zettel (2004) have suggested that psychological well-being may be tied to the extent to which the substitute relationship in a social network compensates for the loss of a loved one. In this study women clearly articulated how their friends in the Society helped them cope with the loss of a loved one. However, more research is needed to validate the compensatory benefits of social support networks for women's health, especially because they may take time to solidify and may be distinct from men's networks (Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Zettel & Rook, 2004).

Self-Enhancement Through Personal Transformation

The findings of this study also provide support for Kleiber's (1999) contention that self-renewal and generativity are of central importance in middle age. However, these developmental goals appeared to hold sway for many women in late life as well. Some of the women emphasized personal agency (Freysinger, 1995), such as doing things for themselves. Others emphasized generativity, such as introducing younger female family members to the RHS and sharing the RHS philosophy with young strangers. Many of the older women in this study showed an ethic of care for others, regardless of familial relationships or age; Red Hatters in this study helped older women in nursing homes establish chapters and did fundraisers for various causes, thereby emphasizing personal affiliations (Freysinger, 1995).

Whether focusing on their own wants and needs, or engaged in generative or helping behavior, the older women in this study were transformed from their everyday lives into characters with seemingly new attributes and new abilities. Most likely, they had some of these attributes and abilities all along, but the RHS gave them the opportunity to show and to use them. In fact, the positive emotive power (Tinsley et al., 1987) that these women generated in the public domain testifies to this transformation. Many of the women indicated great pride in their ability to make others smile and laugh while others stressed that they were themselves happy and relaxed—even free from anxiety and depression—during their participation in RHS events.

Resonant with Kleiber et al.'s (2002) findings, the RHS provided opportunities for personal transformation that included new interests and a restructuring of life goals. For instance, several women in this study indicated that their participation led them to discover personal interests that were previously unrecognized. Others indicated that they had a "new lease on life" and had changed their priorities. Although our

results suggest that both everyday and novel leisure activities provide opportunities for protection and transformation, more research is needed on the transformative role of leisure in enhancing older women's health and well-being.

Self-Enhancement Through Social Identity

Researchers have maintained that positive self and social identity formation play important roles in building self-confidence and self-esteem (see Stets & Burke, 2000 for a review). For example, one's self-confidence may improve if one performs a group role well (Burke & Stets, 1999), whereas one's self-esteem may improve through positive self-evaluations of oneself as a member in a desired social group (Turner et al., 1987). Many women in this study described how they were able to develop new roles successfully, thereby building confidence and adding to their leisure repertoire. In essence, the RHS provided these women with ample opportunities to develop and to reinforce a shared identity (McFarland & Pals, 2005) as "beautiful," "fun," and "playful" older women.

Social group membership may have particular meaning for the way older women view themselves. Many of the women in this study underscored participation in the RHS as central to the enhancement of their relationships with others, including their relationships with spouses, children, grandchildren, other women, and the general public. In regard to the public, many women indicated the importance of having outsiders, particularly men, give their RHS group positive recognition. This finding fits with Tinsley et al.'s (1987) contention that recognition is an important benefit of leisure for middle-aged and older adults. In regard to their relationships with other women, building close friendships, having a sense of "sisterhood" and being accepted and supported with "open arms" all were associated with positive self-referent feelings. Hence, there appears to be a three-way stream of enhanced self-worth flowing from these women's social group participation: one stream of self-worth results from their positive personal identification with the RHS as an organization while another stream heralds the group's acceptance of them as a member. A third stream of self-worth flows from positive outside recognition of the RHS group. One important implication of this enhanced self and social identity is its protective function for health in later life (Bailis & Chipperfield, 2002).

In summary, the older women in this study described outcomes of participation in the Red Hat Society® that have been linked to higher

levels of socioemotional, psychological, and physical health and also articulated explicit connections between participation in the Red Hat Society® and improved health. They associated involvement in the Red Hat Society® with a widened social network (both in number of friends and depth of relationships), improved self-esteem and self-confidence, expanded resources to cope with stressful life events, and increased positive affect. In addition, several respondents identified specific relationships between Red Hat Society® membership and a reduction or elimination of depressive symptoms.

Implications for Older Women's Leisure, Health and Well-Being

In terms of preventive health care, doctors and therapeutic recreation specialists could offer the RHS as an option for older female patients and clients who are experiencing social isolation, depression, or stress. They could also start RHS chapters in retirement and nursing homes as well as long term stay facilities in hospitals as a program activity for older women. These strategic initiatives are particularly attractive due to their low cost, flexibility, and program adaptability. Further, as evidenced by the results of this study, female family caregivers may benefit from participation in the Society, providing respite from care responsibilities and an opportunity to gain social support resources.

Leisure and health promotion professionals could utilize the Red Hat Society® model to provide programs for older women that are empowering. Providers might consider creating leadership programs for older women to engage in the process of developing, implementing, and leading leisure-based programs. Care must be taken, however, to limit the "obligation" placed on older women who, at this point in their lifecycle, are ready for fun and the opportunity to be "playful." Many women in this study are creative and embrace new, challenging activities. Traditional programs, which require an ongoing commitment and take place in a recreation center, may not appeal to this group. Thus, professionals might want to meet with local RHS chapters to brainstorm ways to revamp programs currently being offered through the local recreation and senior centers. They also might want to offer RHS chapters the opportunity to create programs and special events for older adults in the community. Further, having a social network of women who have experienced similar life events was critically important to the women in this study. Hence, professionals should consider generating activities that

expand older women's social opportunities and encourage interactions that are supportive and self-affirming.

In sum, encouraging older women to take on leadership roles to enhance ongoing programs and to develop new, exciting activities and providing nonjudgmental social settings might be useful strategies to improve leisure-based health promotion programs for older women.

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