“I don’t want to flower; I just don’t want to fade.”

Although play has long been espoused as beneficial for children, the idea of play as a leisure activity for older adults, and more specifically older women, is somehow seen as incongruous and contradictory. Play is not one of the “behaviors deemed to be appropriate for elderly people” (Wearing, 1995, p. 263). Nor is it compatible with how western socio-cultural mores dictate older women are “supposed to” live their later years (Fine, 1991; Sutton-Smith, 1996; Wearing, 1995). However, demographics point to a dramatic rise in the over 50 segment of the population. By the year 2030 one in four American women will be over the age of sixty-five (US Census Bureau, 2000). Many older women are faced with the challenge of “finding meaningful activities and experiences to fill this time” (Dupuis, 2003, p.1). The roles that leisure, and more specifically, play, have in life transitions and successful aging have received relatively scant attention by leisure researchers (Freysinger, 1999; Sutton-Smith, 1996; Wearing, 1995). The purpose of this study is to use the Red Hat Society as a context for exploring conceptual linkages between play and older women’s health. We have two research questions: 1) what does participation in the Red Hat Society look like in the context of older women’s lives and; 2) what does it mean to participate in the Red Hat Society?

Context and Setting

The Red Hat Society is an international organization of women, most over the age of 50. The Queen Mother, Sue Ellen Cooper, founded the society in 1999 after reading the poem “Warning.” 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 be “silly” and build relationships with other women over 50, the society has over 800,000 members in 35,000 local chapters in 22 countries. The group’s central tenets include, no rules, no jobs, no responsibilities, and no penalties. Individuals or groups of women form chapters. Although suggested chapter size is 20, many groups have membership in the hundreds. Each chapter registers with the Red Hat Society after self selecting a “fun” chapter name, like “Crones and Cronies,” “The Grapeful Red,” “Varicose Vixens” and “Purple Playmates.” Although there are no rules about where and when to meet, or who can be members, other than you must be female, there is a dress code. Members over 50 are encouraged to attend events wearing “full regalia” which includes red hats and purple outfits. Members under 50 wear pink hats and lavender outfits.

Methods

Data collection involved focus group interviews, participant observation, and informal individual interviews. Six focus groups were conducted with members from
several different chapters. In total, twenty-three women aged between 50 and 85 participated in discussions that lasted approximately one and one-half hours. The interviews were audio-taped. Female authors attended a “Birthday Bash” in New York City, where over 400 women participated in a two-day event that included a parade down Constitution Avenue, a formal dinner, a “pajama” breakfast, cocktail party, and “hanging out.” We made observation notes and talked informally with participants throughout the event and conducted informal individual interviews with women who wanted to “share their story.” Data from the two contexts was transcribed. Coding proceeded both deductively, generated from our research questions and theoretical/conceptual framework and inductively, labeling interesting words/sentences that might not “fit” with the way we originally intended to look at the data.

Results

It was clear that statements like “Being a member of the Red Hat Society is a lot of fun” did not represent the nuances of this play experience. Thus, a selection of data is presented as a series of narratives.

Narrative 1. What does participation on the Red Hat Society look like? Consistent with the theory that play creates time and space separate from everyday life (Huizinga, 1950), many women indicated Red Hat Society membership was an entrée into a temporary, communal world with it’s own meaning. “You have to let yourself create a space where you can have fun.” From the opportunity for camaraderie, fellowship and bonding that fostered a sense of “sisterhood,” a sense of being united in the common cause of “having fun” and “laughing” with “no rules,” “no obligations,” a feeling that by being with others they can and will do things they wouldn’t otherwise do “you can be silly as a group,” to perceptions of emotional support, “it just makes you feel that you are not alone,” to feeling a sense of belonging, closeness, friendship, mutual enjoyment of each other’s company, Red Hat Society members clearly articulated that “being apart together” (Hendricks, 2002) was a central social element of the play experience that differentiated it from other group activities. “There is camaraderie in this. Somehow it is different.” Contexts for social interaction ranged from local events organized by individual chapters like tea parties and trips to restaurants, to nationally organized events like the “New York Birthday Bash.” Interaction within the contexts ranged from superficial, to others who expressed a palpable sense of relief that came from having contexts to socialize with women. “Men just don’t get it.”

Other women expressed that Red Hat Society membership, and its freedom from role obligations, provided an opportunity for self-expression and loss of inhibitions. Masking, through wearing red hats, purple outfits and for some purple shoes and gloves, and red and purple jewelry, parasols and feather boas, plays a central role in being able to “let your hair down.” One member said that the Red Hat Society was an “equalizer. It’s got all shapes and sizes and it doesn’t matter.” Another woman remarked, “With Red Hat I just have to be there.” More importantly, however, masking enabled women to be silly in public spaces, to visibly display themselves in ways that purposely brought attention, and enabled them to be playful in ways that brought pleasure. “You put on that [red hat] and you are different,” “you kind of take on a persona when you are wearing [a red hat].” At the pajama party during the Birthday Bash in New York, for example, “silly” dress ranged from elegant, demure two piece pajama sets with matching bathrobes to
outrageous, provocative negligees complete with feather boas, fish net stockings, spiked purple high heels, red and purple hair curlers, and teddy bears in matching attire.

**Narrative 2. What do members get from participating?** Many women spoke of how they had been constrained during the course of their lives “[since I became a mom 18 years ago] I have never just partied.” “You had so many demands on your time that you couldn’t allocate enough time to meet that need [for fun]. At a point where, “now it’s my turn. I am going to let my husband know who I am,” one member captured the liberating nature of Red Hat Society play context by remarking, “it’s a nice way to rebel that won’t get you in jail.” Others remarked that by being Red Hat Society members they defied or resisted social expectations of being an older woman. “Just because you are 50 years old doesn’t mean you have lost the need to play in your life,” “I think it is telling something to our adult children, that, hey, we are still interested in having fun and being young.” Individuals also expressed that one of the benefits of the Red Hat Society was that it provided an opportunity for self care. “A lot of other parts of their lives, women feel very obligated and have so much responsibility. It is important to just be able to focus on yourself.” “To go out to lunch wearing our hats and being silly and enjoying people with no strings attached, no responsibilities. It meets a real need for me.” Several women spoke of how they needed the Red Hat Society because they were going through life transitions like divorce, illness, death of a spouse, deaths of long time friends, and caring for aged parents. For these women the need for connection and communication was paramount. “I love it too [dressing up in purple and going out]. I think it helps us go through changes” and “all of a sudden you are plunged into another whole world and here you are by yourself [after a divorce] and this couple world is over here and here you are by yourself and you have to reach that depth and that is what a lot of us are looking for and I think [the Red Hat Society] helps that.” Many women mentioned a growing awareness of getting older, of having limited time that led them to the realization “If not now, when?” “I think we all realize at this point life is very short. Why not enjoy it.” Others referred to changes in self-perception stemming from Red Hat Society membership. “The Red Hat Society makes me feel younger,” “it makes me feel important.” Finally, many mentioned “feeling better,” and “having fun” after participating in a Red Hat Society meeting. “I just feel kind of elated when I come back from a group thing,” and “It’s a tonic. A stimulant.”

**Discussion**

Within 5 years the Red Hat Society has mushroomed from an unknown to an international phenomenon. What does this say about this segment of older women? First, it suggests a profound need for play in older women’s lives. The types of behaviors observed and described by the women in the Red Hat Society are consistent with definitions of play as time and space “apart from ordinary life” (Huizinga, 1950). Contrary to the belief that women should “age gracefully,” this exploratory study suggests that many older women have no intention of aging the way society dictates. Or, at least they are comfortable enough within this context to allow “silly,” unconventional, frivolous behaviors. Second, the lack of rules was central to the meaning of the experience for many women. Hampered by obligations through their lives, this cohort clearly articulated that the lack of duties, pressures and expectations enhanced their enjoyment of the play experience. In essence, for many it was liberating. Third, dressing
up, or masking, was also central. The theme of disguise is especially important, for
masking facilitates the departure from the old world and the creation of an alternative
identity that is necessary in the new one” (Hendricks, 2002, p. 33). For many red hats and
purple outfits gave them the courage to be silly, something they had not done since
childhood, if at all. The “silliness” of the garb lent a playful, fun, non-serious air to the
Red Hat Society context. For others, the dress code allowed self-expression in a harmless,
yet publicly visible manner. Masking also had a more serious side, however. By
distinguishing themselves from others, masking created space for resistance to aging
including, resistance to bodily decline, and resistance to previous and current social roles
and norms (Wearing, 1998). Finally, opportunities to dress up and build relationships
with other women were central to their experiences of play. Play promotes the formation
of social groups through social interaction and a protected feeling of being “apart
together” (Hendricks, 2002, p. 39). Future work should explore differences between
women based on where they grew up, age, and reasons for involvement. Consideration
should also be given to interviewing women who chose not to join, or who joined but do
not participate. Finally, it might be fruitful to continue this line of research. Preliminary
analysis suggests that the benefits of the Red Hat Society experience extend beyond the
play context itself in ways that may be beneficial to older women’s health.

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