



## “It's your badge of inclusion”: The Red Hat Society as a gendered subculture of aging

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### ABSTRACT

Although studies document the health-enhancing effects of social engagement, they reveal little about the underlying mechanisms operating within specific organizational contexts. Limited attention is given to the role of inequality – particularly age and gender – in shaping either the organizations to which we belong or their consequences for our well-being. We address this issue by examining the Red Hat Society, a social organization for middle-aged and older women. Interviews with members ( $n = 52$ ) illustrate how age and gender inequality interact to shape the organization, which can be viewed as a gendered subculture of aging. Drawing on this framework, we discuss four processes through which participation generates benefits for older women involved in age- and gender-segregated organizations: enhancing social networks, countering invisibility, creating positive frames for aging experiences, and promoting youthful identities.

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### Introduction

Consistent with activity theory of aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), numerous studies report that people who are more socially integrated in middle and later life – for example, who participate in clubs and other organizations or spend time volunteering – enjoy better health and higher quality of life (e.g., Baker, Cahalin, Gerst, & Burr, 2005; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Rozario, 2007; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Thomas, 2011). This pattern holds across measures of social engagement, such as number of activities and time commitment, and indicators of well-being, including depressive symptoms, self-rated health, functional limitations, cognitive decline, life satisfaction, and mortality. Research also has illuminated underlying processes, revealing that social and

psychological resources, such as social support and self-esteem, play important roles (e.g., Fiori, McIlvane, Brown, & Antonucci, 2006; Mellor et al., 2008; Wahrendorf, Ribet, Zins, & Siegrist, 2008). However, studies tend to focus on the individual more than the organization and treat involvement in one group as roughly equivalent to that of another, despite wide variation in goals, functions, and memberships – an assumption limiting scholars' understanding of how the mechanisms underlying this relationship operate in specific organizational contexts.

Prior work gives limited attention to the role of inequality, including age and gender, in shaping organizations' consequences for members' well-being. Organizations are shaped by not only the cultural celebration of youth and devaluation of later life but also the intersection of ageism with sexism that produces greater losses of symbolic and material resources for women than men (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Biggs, 2004; Sontag, 1979). Women's encounter of an increasingly “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963) as they move through middle and later life may spur involvement in groups consisting of their age-peers – those with whom they share the challenge of aging in an ageist and

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sexist society (Jerrome, 1988, 1992). Although under-explored in gerontological as well as organizational research, these groups can be seen as subcultures of aging (Rose, 1962, 1965) that arise in response to gendered ageism – that is, gendered subcultures of aging.

Employing this framework, we examine data from interviews with members of the Red Hat Society (RHS), a social organization aiming to create a supportive social network for middle-aged and older women and define aging positively. With over 40,000 chapters and a million members worldwide, RHS began in 1998 in the U.S., inspired by Jenny Joseph's poem, "Warning," describing a woman's decision to violate behavioral norms when she is old (e.g., wearing purple with a red hat that doesn't go). Our analysis explores processes through which involvement in this group, as a gendered subculture of aging, may shape middle-aged and older women's well-being, a term we use to refer broadly to mental and physical health and satisfaction with life. Our work contributes to the literature by considering how the imprint of age and gender inequality on an organization may influence processes linking social engagement and well-being.

### Gendered aging subcultures: theoretical background

Our study draws on Rose's (1962, 1965) subculture of aging theory which, in our view, has been underexploited by gerontologists but can provide insight on older adults' experiences within age-segregated groups, including how they might enhance well-being. His theory, which is consistent with broader subcultural theories (e.g., Cohen, 1955; Matza, 1969; Thrasher, 1927), is an application of the symbolic interactionist perspective to experiences of aging in a society marginalizing older adults (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). It posits that greater interaction with age peers occurs with advancing age, encouraging the development of subcultures that enhance older adults' self-regard. Aging subcultures are more likely to form under one of two conditions: shared affinity for each other (e.g., long-term friendships or common background or concerns) and exclusion from interaction with younger individuals. Rose's formulation shares with Goffman (1963) an emphasis on the role of marginalization or stigma of devalued groups in reducing interaction with "normals" while increasing interaction within subcultures.

Rose also outlined characteristics of aging subcultures negotiated within interactions of age peers. They include norms and values, with some mirroring dominant culture and others representing a "contraculture – in opposition to the rest of society" (1965: 9). As in broader culture, higher status is accorded to individuals with greater wealth, occupational prestige, and educational achievement, though these status bases are diminished from their earlier salience. High status also is enjoyed by the healthiest and most active older adults. Other subcultural values oppose those of dominant culture – with an overarching one being the more positive regard for elders as a group. This value emerges from interactional processes by which aging adults seek fellowship with age peers, perhaps joining an age-based organization where they discuss common problems. These interactions are facilitated, as social exchange theory argues, by reducing inequalities inherent in mixed-age settings (Dowd, 1980). Interaction with age peers leads to "aging group consciousness" or "aging group identification" promoting group

pride and enhancing members' self-regard. This argument resonates with social identity theory which examines the psychological motivations underpinning group identification and the processes through which groups differentiate themselves from others to create positive social identities (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, Rose goes further to argue that group consciousness or identification leads to collective action to redress elders' mistreatment, though empirical work finds little evidence of activism (Longino, McClelland, & Peterson, 1980).

While subculture of aging theory sees age as trumping other bases of identity, we contend that age and gender inequality interact to create unique challenges for aging women, contributing to the emergence of gendered aging subcultures and shaping their consequences for members. This view is informed by feminist perspectives highlighting how opportunities and constraints are influenced by intersections of gender with other dimensions of difference, including age (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006; Reinhartz, 1997). Older women's "doubly disadvantaged" status increases their marginalization relative to aging men, creating a stronger predisposing condition to the emergence of aging subcultures of women. Clubs, particularly those serving an expressive function, tend to be age- and gender-segregated – much like friendship networks (Glanville, 2004; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Rotolo & Wilson, 2007). However, women are more likely than men to belong to clubs or similar organizations based on either gender or age (Jerrome, 1992; Popielarz, 1999). Gender also shapes the characteristics of these organizations. For example, women's socialization since childhood to value interpersonal relationships contributes to the expressive focus of organizations they form in middle and later life (Jerrome, 1988, 1992; Johnson & Aries, 1983; Russell, 2007).

Because we see gendered subcultures of aging as an extension of Rose's theory, we use his term "subculture," but note concepts used to refer to similar phenomena, such as "social worlds" (Scott & Godbey, 1992; Snyder, 1986; Strauss, 1978; Unruh, 1979; Wood & Danylchuk, 2011) and "countercultures" (Lemke-Santangelo, 2009; Yinger, 1960). These terms share a focus on a social group's unique, recognizable characteristics, including norms, values, behaviors, argot, and rituals, that are created within social interactions and facilitate members' identification with the group. They differ in the degree to which opposition to dominant culture is emphasized, with "subculture" occupying a middle position between "social worlds" and "countercultures." We find "subculture" an appropriate term for RHS, a group reflecting elements of resistance but not primarily defined in oppositional terms.

### Linking gendered subcultures of aging to well-being

Although research on social engagement and health tends to neglect organizational contexts, particularly the way they are shaped by inequality, some processes through which participation may enhance well-being are suggested in much of the work on social groups for older adults. The processes include the development of a range of social and psychological resources.

Research points to the role of older adults' groups in providing opportunities for socializing, developing meaningful relationships, enhancing social support, and creating a sense of

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