The Magic of the Red Hat
A study in the sociology of play and identity performance

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De magie van de rode hoed
Een studie in de sociologie van spel en identiteit

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For my parents, with love

Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Inside the theatre

I had to leave early that morning on the 21st of April 2011, to get from Rotterdam to Zwolle because of a special *convention*. Both cities are located on opposite sides of the Netherlands[1] so travelling would take at least a few hours. Waiting for my train, I looked at three middle-aged women who were talking a little further up the station. They were almost completely dressed in purple and all three of them wore a red hat of different size and form. They stepped on the same train as I did, and, as it would quickly turn out, they were not alone. Each time the train stopped more and more of these 'Red Hatters' came on, so that, eventually, they completely occupied the first two coaches. At the central station of Zwolle about four-hundred of these women gathered, flaunting some of the most imaginative and spectacular purple and red outfits that I had ever seen. Together they turned into a sea of red and purple, flowing into a parade that took them to the city's historical *Odeon* theatre. Many people watched the Red Hatters walk by, waving at them and taking pictures with their mobile phones. The women posed for the pictures of spectators as well as for the cameras of seemingly more professional photographers and local television networks. It took some time but finally everyone arrived at the theatre, and I followed the Red Hatters inside (field notes, 21 April 2011).

This was one of my many encounters with the Red Hat Society, an international leisure organisation that, in its own words, offers "fun" and "friendship" for women over the age of fifty (Cooper, 2004). Its members are called 'Red Hatters' because they wear red hats together with clashing purple clothes, which the women often top off with other accessories,

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1 Rotterdam is the second city of the Netherlands and is located in the South-Western part of the country, whereas Zwolle is a medium sized city in the North-Eastern part of the country.

like red lace gloves, shawls, boas, and flashy jewellery. The origins of the Red Hat Society can be traced to an impulse buy of Sue Ellen Cooper, a fifty-three year old mother of two grown children from Fullerton California. While on holiday with her husband in the autumn of 1997, Cooper stumbled upon a vintage red hat in a thrift shop. For a while there she contemplated whether she should buy the hat: it was cheap, but she did not really need it (*Ibid.*). Cooper ultimately talked herself into purchasing the hat. A couple of months later her friend Linda Murphy was about to turn fifty-five and was joking about getting 'old'. This reminded Cooper of a famous English poem written by Jenny Joseph (1961) about a woman who comically 'warns' people that she will start to do 'inappropriate' things when she turns old, like wearing a red hat. The poem is fittingly called *Warning* and its first lines read:

> When I am an old woman I shall wear purple,
> With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me,
> And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves,
> And satin sandals, and say we have no money for butter.

Cooper gave the poem and a red hat as a birthday gift to her friend Linda. When she did the same for her other friends who turned fifty or older, this turned into something of a tradition. Each time she searched for an original red hat to give. "I had decided that reaching the age of fifty should be treated as a positive, momentous milestone, instead of the beginning of the end," is how Cooper (2004: 4) explains the idea behind the gift that would form the inspiration for the Red Hat Society.

The organisation was officially established in 1998 after Cooper's friends had tea, wearing their red hats in combination with the purple clothes from Jenny Joseph's poem. When they decided that they should do this more often, the idea quickly travelled by word of mouth. Some of the women told another friend, who then told others, so that gradually different 'chapters' were formed. According to the official US website, in 2010 the Red Hat Society consisted of more than 20,000 chapters in more than 25 different countries, inclu-

ding Australia, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.[2] In the Netherlands, where the first chapters emerged in 2005, it has become a sizeable phenomenon with more than 100 of these local sub-organisations spread over the country.[3] Some of these chapters are small with some ten members or less, others are very large and have over fifty Red Hatters. Women can join an existing chapter in their area or start their own. When they choose the second option, they become 'Queen' of the chapter. The Queen usually organises most of her chapter's outings. Sue Ellen Cooper is regarded the 'Queen Mother' of the overall organisation. The international conglomeration of chapters is held together by websites, online networks, newsletters and yearly international and national meetings. Hence, new Queens also need to officially register their chapter with the US organisation, called 'Hatquarters'.

The Red Hat Society chapters have names that often incorporate the colours red and/or purple, or reflect a playful attitude. Examples from the Netherlands are: the 'Red Diamonds', 'Red Winks', 'Simply Red', the 'Lively Ladybirds', 'Bold & Merry Red Hats', and 'The Rhine Town Roses'. Most of the time, Queens and other Red Hatters also adopt a special (fantasy-) name upon joining the Red Hat Society. These names typically incorporate a fantasy prefix like 'Lady' or 'princes' or 'duchess'. Some of the names are simple derivatives from Red Hatters' real names; others are more elaborate and again refer to the

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2 The total number of chapters has fluctuated during the four years in which this study was conducted. At one point the official US website reported approximately 40,000 registered chapters. However, today they keep the number at 20,000, which was also what they reported in 2010 (for more information see http://www.redhatsociety. com/press/fast-facts, last visited 22-08-2014).

3 The number of chapters in the Netherlands has equally fluctuated, with new chapters emerging and some 'older' chapters dissolving. That is why it is difficult to state the exact number of chapters at this very moment. However, the Red Hat Society in the Netherlands celebrated its 100th chapter during my fieldwork, on the 29th of October 2011.

colours or the name of the chapter. One of the chapters, for instance, is called 'Little Red Flames' (in Dutch 'Rode Vlammetjes') and its Queen 'Eternal Flame'.[4] Women who are not yet fifty are also allowed to join but are required to wear pink hats and lavender clothes, until their '*red*-uation' at fifty, in which they transition from being a Pink Hatter to a Red Hatter.

Other than fun and friendship, the Red Hat Society does not claim to have specific objectives. It is not a service or volunteer organisation aimed at providing help or care for people in need, nor does it adopt any other cause. The US mother organisation explicitly denounces political involvement of any kind and prefers to refer to itself as a '*dis*-organisation' that imposes no other rules than the dress-code, and the request to honour the motto of having a 'fun' time. To this end chapters organise all kinds of leisure activities, ranging from dinners, tea parties, historical walks and museum visits to golfing tournaments, belly dancing classes and even trips to foreign destinations. How often a chapter meets is left to its members. Most of them meet once a month, but some chapters come together more frequently. Their events often take place in public where the spectacular appearances of the Red Hatters tend to draw a crowd of spectators, like during the parade that started the Red Hat Society convention that I attended in Zwolle.

Play and theatre
In a clip on the US website Sue Ellen Cooper reacts to this public appeal by saying that "there's *magic* in the hat," a quote that was also featured on a t-shirt sold by the Red Hat Society.[5] In relation to this, she maintains that the Red Hat Society's

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4 This information is derived from one of my interviews, with a Red Hatter who is a member of this specific chapter.

5 The clip I am referring to is: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-HUAkGPfHD4 (last visited 22-08-2014). However, Cooper refers to 'magic' more often. For instance, in the Red Hat Society handbook in which she talks about how "the red and purple (...) seems to inject something *magical* into any get-together" (Cooper, 2004: 9, italics added).

chief contribution to midlife- and older women's lives is offering them the room to play (e.g. Cooper, 2006: 6): "to the members of the Red Hat Society, as well as the public at large, our colourful hats have come to symbolize playtime and recess for the women who wear them." She calls out to other women (*Ibid.*: 8): "Won't you please don your own red hat and come out to play?"

This idea of 'magic' in relation to play brings to mind a famous concept of one of the Netherlands' most celebrated social scientists and historians: Johan Huizinga. The concept I refer to is that of the "magic circle", which he introduced in his classical treatise *Homo Ludens* ('Man the Player') as a way to describe play as a special activity that in different ways separates itself from 'everyday' life (Huizinga, 1950[1938]). "[P]lay is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own," Huizinga argues (*Ibid.*: 8). Play is recognizable as 'different' from ordinary life, both for players and the audiences of play, through a series of limitations set in time and space. As Huizinga (*Ibid.*: 10) explains "[a]ll play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course." He gives as one example the theatre, in which there are several visual markers, such as the stage, the curtain, the lights, the music, the actors' costumes, that for the duration of the performance separate the act of playing from 'real' or everyday life (see also Beeman, 1993). In theatre, play meets 'real' life in the form of the audience, which is separated from the play through its location and appearance: its members sit off stage, in the dark and they wear (semi-)regular clothes.

However, this distinction between play and audience, and thus between 'play' and 'real' or everyday life, is not always this clear, as I learned during the Red Hat Society convention in Zwolle. That day I followed the Red Hatters into the theatre where they became the audience of a show that was especially created and performed for them. I sat in the back, in the upper most part of the theatre where I both could look down

on the show and the Red Hatters who watched it. From this perspective the boundary between play and non-play, or 'real' life, became difficult to draw. While the stage had women on it who were dressed in spectacular clothes giving a performance for the audience, the audience itself consisted of women who were similarly spectacularly dressed. The convergence of performers and audiences went further because some of the Red Hatters that had organised the convention performed a large part of the staged show. The opening act, for instance, consisted of a cello player who was a Red Hatter in Zwolle. As she played her fellow chapter members appeared behind her, where they posed behind a see-through black curtain (field notes, 21 April 2011). The act of playing was no longer confined to the stage as an isolated spot or hallowed ground, nor was it limited by the time set by the performance of the show. This meant that, looking down at the entire scene it was all but clear where play began and where it ended (see pictures 1 and 2) – the 'magic circle' seemed fluid.

The importance of play

As a concept, play is surprisingly absent from the social scientific literature that has appeared about the Red Hat Society (with the exception of Yarnal, 2006 and Yarnal et al., 2008). Up until today the Red Hat Society has primarily been studied as a coping resource that advances its members' wellbeing and quality of life (Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; Son et al., 2010). In these studies, it is argued that after fifty women are increasingly confronted with stressful and life changing events, such as illness, death, negative stereotyping and social isolation. The Red Hat Society offers these women different types of social support and positive experiences (Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; Son et al., 2010). With regard to social support, the studies report examples of Red Hatters providing food at husbands' funerals, and giving encouragement to members dealing with emotional or physical insecurities. Studies that

Picture 1 and 2. The Red Hat Society convention in Zwolle 2011.

understand the Red Hat Society as a coping resource also argue that it inspires positive emotions, which are deemed pivotal in overcoming hardship. These studies therefore conclude that the Red Hat Society can be "linked to higher levels of socio-emotional, psychological, and physical health" for midlife and older women in society (Son et al., 2007: 100-101), mainly because the Red Hat Society creates a space for pleasure which provides members the possibility to reassess life priorities and circumstances (Yarnal, 2006; Radina et al., 2008).

Only a couple of studies about the Red Hat Society have taken a different approach and looked at it from the context of identity construction (Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2013; White-Farnham, 2013; Yarnal et al., 2011). These studies primarily advance the idea that the Red Hat Society is a public negotiation of hegemonic discourses about femininity and age. They argue that Red Hatters undermine traditional ideas about midlife and older women through conspicuous consumption and a public exhibition of fun and camp. The Red Hatters, for example, command public attention by making noise and dressing in loud and expressive colours, with which they challenge the type of inconspicuous modesty that is commonly expected from older women in public spaces (Stalp et al., 2008; 2009). Studies that approach the Red Hat Society as a negotiation of femininity and age argue that it is an escape from women's traditional responsibilities, as the leisure the Red Hat Society offers contradicts the general image of women as caretakers (Yarnal, 2006; Stalp et al., 2008). Moreover, these studies have shown that through their attires, the Red Hatters are successful in reclaiming the male gaze that commonly overlooks women over fifty (Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Yarnal, 2006; Yarnal et al., 2011).

Strikingly enough, both the literature about 'coping' and 'identity' pay almost no attention to play, while play clearly forms the essence of the Red Hat Society, with its costumed, 'fun' and temporary leisure activities (see also Yarnal, 2006 and Yarnal et al., 2008). The literature also lacks a description of the motivations of the Red Hatters and, even more so,

of the specific relations between them. Moreover, while it is recognised that the Red Hatters usually dress-up in front of a public, no study has been conducted on how this public looks at them. This study aims to fill these gaps by answering the following descriptive research questions: What is the Red Hat Society? Who are the Red Hatters and why do they enjoy the Red Hat Society? How do they relate to one another? And, what do audiences think of the Red Hat Society? Taken together, these questions allow me to arrive at a sociological 'thick description' of the Red Hat Society. To these questions I add one more explanatory question: How can we understand all this from the perspective of play? This last question coincides with this study's general aim to arrive at a theory about the Red Hat Society by looking at it in its relation with play. In the next chapter I suggest that we can look at this relation from two theoretical perspectives. It is worth noting that next to contributing to the literature about the Red Hat Society, this study thus also intends to provide new and relevant insights to the wider field of play-theory.

Outline
Chapter 1 thus describes the theoretical frame of this study, arguing that within the social scientific literature there exist two approaches to play that are useful in understanding the Red Hat Society. The first one is Huizinga's play as a 'magic circle' which sees play as a specific practice that is separated from 'real' or everyday life. This matches the Red Hat Society that through its costumed leisure activities offers women a temporary break from their 'ordinary' lives and responsibilities. The second approach to play is found within social constructivism, which is a leading theoretical paradigm within sociology as well as related disciplines that describes the whole of social reality as a type of play. Authors whose theories fall within this paradigm, like Erving Goffman and Judith Butler, often draw upon the 'theatre' as a metaphor for the way in which everyday life is brought into existence within social interaction. From this perspective we can see the Red Hat Society as a

type of identity performance, in which the Red Hatters act-out different ideas about who they are as women of middle-age and 'older'.

In chapter 2 I describe this study's methodology: which data were used for which purposes, how I gathered these data and how I conducted my analyses. Then follow four empirical chapters that each study one or more of the descriptive research questions in relation to the question how we can understand the Red Hat Society from the perspective of play. Each of these chapters starts by introducing its own research problem, so that they can also be read independently as different (mini-)studies about the Red Hat Society.

Chapter 3 then studies the first two research questions: What is the Red Hat Society? Who are the Red Hatters and why do they enjoy the Red Hat Society? I study these questions from the first theoretical approach to play, which has been developed by Huizinga and, among others, Roger Caillois and Victor Turner. These authors stress that 'separateness' is the central dimension of play, with play being a practice that somehow consciously sets itself apart from ordinary life. In the first half of chapter 3 I show that this idea coincides with the way in which the Red Hatters define the Red Hat Society as something 'fun' that temporarily liberates them from everyday drudgeries and constraints. However, I also illustrate that this is not the whole story, because most of the Hatters indicate that the Red Hat Society equally has 'serious' aspects or consequences, which are in their turn also considered part of the appeal of the Red Hat Society. As a result, the Red Hat Society continues to move between 'fun' and 'seriousness'. Huizinga claims that this 'ambiguity' is yet another major characteristic of play, about which he argues that "the contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid (…), play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play" (Huizinga, 1950: 8). This feature of play remains under-theorised and understudied within the literature about play in general, and the Red Hat Society in particular. In this chapter I open the discussion about the ambiguity of play by showing that it is not just applicable to the

contrast between play and seriousness, but to the 'magic circle' as a whole. In discussing the seriousness of the Red Hat Society, the boundary that is supposed to separate play from ordinary life becomes fluid as play leaks into everyday life and everyday life leaks into play. As such, I argue that it is ambiguity, and not separateness, that is the most fundamental dimension of play.

Chapter 4 also studies the first two research questions, but this time from the perspective of play as identity performance. The Red Hat Society is then seen as a specific expression of feminine leisure through which the Red Hatters perform a sense of self. I argue that by rejecting the supposed naturalness of gender, feminists have historically played an important role in the development and popularisation of such a constructivist perspective upon identity. Particularly, the second-wave of feminism that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, has been important in introducing feminist thought into academic life. However, popular second-wave feminists still tended to reify 'femininity', which they defined as the source of women's oppression. This is, for instance, evident in the writings of Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer who condemned women's magazines and romance novels for making women's suppression seem natural, logical and – most of all – pleasurable. I criticise the second-wave's one-sided portrayal of femininity and leisure. First I argue on a theoretical level that femininity is a multidimensional performance that is crosscut by other social categories such as class, race, marital status and age, with the latter being of particular importance to the Red Hat Society. Then I illustrate that the Red Hatters' performance of femininity at times confirms and at other times challenges and negotiates hegemonic ideas about women of middle-age and older. As a result, the Red Hatters' performance of identity is also rife with ambiguity. The Red Hat Society, it can be argued, offers them a third-way between 'feminism' and 'femininity'. I try to capture this third-way by introducing the term 'radical femininity' to refer to the way in which the Red Hatters push the (age specific) limits of hegemonic femininity by invoking

'excess' and by going overboard without really rejecting femininity.

   In chapter 5 I look in more detail at the relations between the Red Hatters (the third research question). Throughout my fieldwork I noticed how the Hatters demonstrate widely diverging 'styles' of dress. While a large group of Red Hatters wears elegant and expensive hats with fashionable looking purple clothes, other Hatters wear eccentric and wildly decorated hats and clothes that are often self-made. I trace the origins of these two styles and reason that they signify two opposite attempts at class distinction. This chapter thus shows, in addition to the previous one, that the performance of femininity within the Red Hat Society is not just crosscut by age, but also by class. I describe how during the formation of the 'middle class' in the nineteenth-century women were placed at the centre of moral judgement, as they were the ones who were scrutinized for the maintenance of the new standards. This resulted in the entanglement of femininity with 'respectability' as a signifier of middle-class taste and identity. I find that the Red Hatters who wear chic or elegant hats and clothes perform this respectability, thereby trying to differentiate themselves from the masses and achieve status. The other group of Red Hatters, I show, resists this type of distinction by claiming 'creativity' in making its own hats and garments, preferably against the lowest possible costs. I argue that this equally signifies a formation of an identity, which in this case represents a working-class femininity. With this finding, I criticise the well-known theories of femininity, class and fashion of Veblen and Simmel who see the working-class as mindlessly emulating a middle-class style.

   The last empirical chapter of this book (chapter 6) looks at the audiences' reception of the Red Hat Society. More specifically, it looks at husbands and newspapers and the ways in which they perceive of the Red Hat Society and the Hatters. I draw upon the literature about 'frames' and 'framing' to argue that interpretation necessarily involves selection and highlighting some aspects of a given reality above other aspects.

Whereas I argued in the previous chapters that ambiguity is a central component of the Red Hat Society as it is, among other things, both 'fun' and 'serious', this ambiguity disappears almost completely within the dominant frame with which newspapers and husbands describe the Red Hat Society. Within this frame the Red Hat Society is literally 'just fun', and 'not serious'. The Red Hatters are seen as women of middle-age and older who just want to do something 'frivolous' or 'mad' once in a while; they do not have any other meanings with it. Thus here we see that in the interpretation of the Red Hat Society by audiences, the 'seriousness' of play recedes from view.

In the conclusion of this book I revisit the research questions and look at the main outcomes of this study. I then particularly focus on the last question of how we can understand the Red Hat Society from the perspective of play. It turns out that the two perspectives of play that I started this study with cannot fully explain the Red Hat Society. The first perspective that I borrowed from Huizinga and Caillois makes too rigid a distinction between play and its social context, which produces problems when we look at the 'meaning' of the Red Hat Society. The second perspective that I found within social constructivist theory produces an opposite problem: it presents play and its social context too much as one and the same thing. This perspective produces problems particularly when we look at the 'function' of the Red Hat Society. From my evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of these two perspectives I try to develop a new approach to play, which can account for the outcomes of this study.

Chapter 1: The everyday logic of play

In the previous chapter, I described about four-hundred Red Hatters in a theatre and showed how their presence in the audience compromised the distinction – otherwise very obvious within theatre – between play and non-play, between performer and spectator. Why did this happen? It is my belief that this happened because the Red Hat Society is itself a type of play that falls, like the theatrical performance, under the category of 'mimicry'. While this term originally refers to forms of imitation, it has a more broad application within play-theory. French philosopher Roger Caillois (1979) calls mimicry a type of play in which people use costumes or masks to become someone different from the person they are in 'ordinary' life. In the Red Hat Society this is essentially what is achieved by the red hat, which founder Sue Ellen Cooper already refers to as "magical", conform Johan Huizinga's idea of play as a "magic circle". In addition, Red Hatters also commonly adopt a fantasy name and role while they are together.

Caillois derives the term 'mimicry' from the concept of 'mimesis', which means 'to imitate' within the insect and animal world. Think for instance of the stick insect or the chameleon that hides its presence by imitating its direct environment. Of course, the theatre is the ideal typical stage for mimicry, but mimicry also includes parades (e.g. Kates and Belk, 2001), carnivals (e.g. Cohen, 1980), Halloween (e.g. Belk, 1990), 'flash mobs' (e.g. Gore, 2010), Japanese 'cosplay' (e.g. Hjorth, 2009) and the Red Hat Society (e.g. Yarnal, 2006; Van Bohemen, 2013). To speak with Coleridge's (1817) famous words, to some extent all these activities involve a temporary "willing suspension of disbelief," where people play someone different from their usual selves and suspend questions about the realness of this played self. Caillois distinguishes mimicry from three other play types: from "*agôn*" competitive games, like chess and sports, "*alea*" games of chance, like dice games and

slot machines, and "*ilinx*" thrill seeking play, like mountain climbing and car racing. He argues that these types of play have in common with mimicry that they are practices that are secluded from 'ordinary' life. As he explains it: "play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life" (Caillois, 1979: 6). At this point Caillois thus follows Huizinga who is generally understood to be the founding father of play theory. Like Caillois, he situates play as something different, 'a break', from everyday life: "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration. (...) It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and space. It contains its own course and meaning" (Huizinga, 1950: 9).

In the next section I elaborate upon Huizinga's and Caillois' idea of play as a practice that somehow separates itself from 'real' or everyday life. However, I will show that this is only one perspective upon play. Although Huizinga can be credited with being the first to place play on the research agenda of social scientists, his work sometimes misses scientific rigour and is full of contradictions. Particularly, he conflates two different perspectives on play: the first one being that it is a 'separate' domain, and the second one that play is actually 'everywhere' in everyday life. I will show that this second idea is connected to contemporary social constructivist theories about identity, which often draw upon the 'theatre' as a metaphor for everyday life. In the last section of this chapter, I will propose that both perspectives on play – as separate practice, and as everyday life – are necessary for a further examination of the Red Hat Society.

Play as separate domain
Huizinga and Caillois both understand play as an elusive practice, but they nevertheless try to develop a list of its formal characteristics. The first characteristic that they both describe is that it is a 'free' or 'voluntary' activity that people engage in, not because they are obliged to, but because they want to: mainly because it gives them pleasure (Huizinga, 1950: 7; Caillois, 1979: 9). This characteristic is closely connected to

play being a break from 'ordinary' life: a break from work, family and other social relations, rules and responsibilities. In ordinary life people have to conform to a social structure that often forces them to do certain things or interact in certain ways. In play this ordinary social structure is temporarily shelved and replaced by a new order. The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1998) argues how this happens within carnival, which is one specific expression of mimicry play. As he explains it "carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out', 'the reverse side of the world' ('*monde à l'envers*')" (1998: 250-251, italics in original). He gives the example of the mock crowning of the carnival king, who is usually a peasant or other subordinate to the 'real' king. Hence, it is an example of how, for the duration of the carnival, ordinary social hierarchies and other cultural rules and conventions are suspended or rearranged.

The second characteristic of play is that it is itself also 'governed by rules' that "for the moment establish new legislation" (Caillois, 1979: 10). Some types of play have more of these rules than others and these rules are in some types of play more restrictive to the player. This is something we can see when we for instance compare a game of chess with carnival, where the rules of the first are more elaborate and fixed than in the other, which leaves more freedom to the player to decide how she wants to play. However, it seems that every type of play at least has some basic rules that define its limits: the moment a person enters the play and the moment she or he leaves it. These limits are most often marked by time – there is a beginning and an end – and space – there is a certain region in which it takes place. For Huizinga all play takes place within a play-ground "marked off beforehand (…) materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (Huizinga, 1950: 10). He continues to argue that play-grounds, like the chess board, the arena, the card-table, the tennis court, the screen and the stage, are "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an

act apart" (*Ibid.*). As we have seen, the idea that play is always limited by space is less evident looking at certain forms of mimicry, like the Red Hat Society or carnival. However, here there seem to be other rules that similarly mark the limits of play and separate the act of playing from 'real' or everyday life, like masking and group presence.

The first two formal characteristics of play are closely linked to the third characteristic of it being 'separate'. As Huizinga (1950: 8) explains "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own." Because play is a temporary and spatially bound activity, governed by its own specific rules and conventions, people understand play to be something 'different' from 'real' or everyday life. This is a fact even when a player temporarily suspends questions about the realness of his or her playful performance and completely goes up in the play. According to Caillois (1979: 10) play is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life." This is in line with Gregory Bateson's (2006[1955]) argument that play is a meta-communicative message or "frame" that entices people to distinguish between 'real' and 'faked' performances, by saying "this is play". Victor Turner, the anthropologist, also emphasises that play has certain qualities with which it sets itself apart from 'real' life. He describes this as "liminality" which refers to an ambiguous state of being, characteristic of many rituals performed both in tribal and modern societies (Turner, 1969; 1982).[1]

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1 In his later work Turner introduces a distinction between the 'liminal' and 'liminoid', whereby he reserves the first for the ambiguous space that is created in rituals performed in pre-modern societies. Characteristic of these rituals is that they are compulsory and intended to serve the social or physical prosperity of a given society. The term 'liminoid' is reserved for similar rituals performed in modern societies, which are characterised by voluntariness and intended for personal pleasure. Turner expresses this difference in the saying: "one *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid" (Turner, 1982: 55, italics in original).

This perspective on play as a bounded practice is useful in studying the Red Hat Society, which at first sight contains aspects of all three of the characteristics discussed here. The Red Hat Society is leisure that women are free to enjoy for their own personal pleasure, away from everyday responsibilities. The Red Hat Society has specific rules: it only allows women to join and it has a dress-code of a red hat and purple clothes for its members over fifty and a pink hat and lavender clothes for younger members. It also introduces a new social hierarchy with 'Queens', 'vice-Queens' and 'regular' Red Hatters, who also commonly adopt aristocratic titles not generally available to them in real life, like 'Lady' or 'duchess' or 'princess'. Its activities are limited by time, but not as clearly by space. Although most events take place within a certain bar or restaurant, these are not clearly defined play-grounds, and some events take the Red Hatters to various locations within a city or even within the country. Think for instance of the convention in Zwolle with the train ride and the parade. In this sense the Red Hat Society is very similar to carnival and Halloween, which are also clearly marked as play activities, not directly through space, but through costuming in combination with group presence.

Play as metaphor
Within Huizinga's and Caillois' idea of play, the 'magic circle' functions as an analogy for its separation from everyday life, but this is just one perspective on play. Interestingly enough, play itself is commonly used in everyday and academic analogies, which conflict with the idea of play as a bounded practice. The 'theatre metaphor' is one commonly known example of these play analogies, but comparisons between 'life' and 'competitive games' and between 'life' and 'games of chance' are also regularly made (De Lange, 2010). Such analogies describe play as the way in which everyday life is ordered or brought into existence, which would suggest that play is in fact everywhere. According to Clifford Geertz (1983), such play analogies have increasingly worked their way into sociological

theory, where they have largely replaced biological and technological analogies, like for example Durkheim's functionalist description of society as a quasi-organism. Geertz locates this popularization of play analogies in the genre mixing between the social sciences and the humanities, but also in the emergence of 'social constructivist' theories.

Social constructivism is a theoretical perspective upon social life that, at its core, contests the essentialist view that sees it as being the result of a more fundamental, pre-cultural, reality.[2] In the essentialist view, this reality or 'essence' is considered to shape knowledge, social actions, relations, identities and institutions, whose structure and existence can only be seen as 'logical' and 'necessary' as they are part of the nature of things. In sociology this idea was fiercely critiqued during the 1960s counterculture, when Berger and Luckmann published their treatise: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Since then, social constructivism has spread, most rapidly in the 1990s, and has become one of the social sciences' core paradigms (Burr, 1995; Hacking, 1999). Theories that follow this paradigm see 'reality' not as a pre-human or pre-cultural entity, but as an ongoing human production, as a giant web of meanings that people continuously create and maintain together (Burr, 1995; Geertz, 1973; Gergen and Gergen, 2003; Kukla, 2000; Searle, 1995). Reality is then the same as 'culture' and flows from people's acts: the things they do, the way they do it, how they speak, react, interact, etc. All these behaviours bring culture, and thus reality, into existence, but they are simultaneously also structured, and confined, by the culture that already exists: by the ways in which people have acted before,

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2 In this study I consistently talk about 'social constructivism' when I refer to theories that see social life as 'made' out of people's meaningful acts. However, this is a position that carries different names within sociology, philosophy, anthropology and cultural studies. Other paradigms that also profess this idea are: social constructionism, cultural sociology, phenomenology, poststructuralism, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, interpretive anthropology and postmodernism.

the things that they already deem real, important, by 'normal' ways to interact.

To explain the social construction of reality, sociologists and other social scientists often use the metaphor of the 'theatre'. They compare people to actors in a play performing a story for an interpreting audience. In this perspective, everyday life consists of people playing roles with which they 'act-out' and communicate all kinds of ideas about themselves and their surroundings. Within this analogy the story is synonymous to the reality that is being constructed by the acts of the actor, while the script is synonymous to the reality that already exists and confines the actor's ability to act freely (cf. Sennett, 1974; Wilshire, 1976). Reality is always made into existence in this circular movement of making meaning through acting upon meaning, which is exactly what acting within the theatre entails.

This idea of 'being as playing a role' is already reflected in the English language, where theatrical terms like 'role', 'performance', 'acting', 'drama' and 'play' carry a double meaning. They are used to refer to mimicry play, but they also function as synonyms for 'doing something', 'accomplishing something' or 'carrying something out'. The same is true in Dutch, where the word for 'playing' ('*spelen*') is used in the restricted sense of engaging in the activity of play, but also in the general sense to refer to 'something that is going on' or 'is being done'.

Within sociology these theatrical terms are increasingly part of the vocabulary that is used to describe the social. A cursory tour through the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), for instance, produces titles such as: "Elections as Drama", "Crime-control as Drama", "the Holocaust as Drama", "Terrorism as Drama", and "Science as Drama". Such works often draw upon Victor Turner's (1982) notion of "social drama" which he uses as a metaphor for the way in which social conflicts tend to unfold. Turner's work is also contradictory in this sense, as he too defines play as something 'out of the ordinary', a "liminal space", only to apply this concept to almost every aspect of everyday life. Crime, religion, politics, educa-
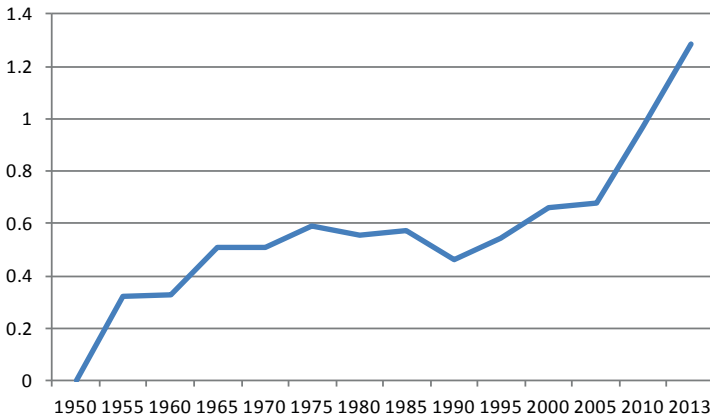
**Figure 1. Percentage of sociological titles citing 'performance'.
Source: Sociological Abstracts.**

tion and consumption, they all become featured 'as play' or 'as performance'. This last analogy yields the most titles in the SSCI, which include: "Gender as Performance", "Health Care as Performance", "Risk as Performance", "Ideology as Performance", "Gang Identity as Performance", even "Pregnancy as Performance". In figure 1 I plotted the percentage of sociological book-, article- and dissertation titles that include the term 'performance'.[3] As we can see there is a marked increase in its use.

While somewhat new to the social sciences, the 'theatre metaphor' has a long history in Western philosophy. According to Richard Sennett (1974: 34) it is in fact "one of the oldest Western ideas of human society (...) to see society itself to be a theatre." He calls this the tradition of the "theatrum

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3 The database I used to create this figure is *Sociological Abstracts*. The titles that were included are from books, conference papers, dissertations and journal articles. I looked at the number of these titles that included the term 'performance' on a yearly basis and calculated the percentage by comparing these with the total number of titles that were published each year from 1951 to 2014.

mundi", and argues that it dates back to the classical era with Plato's conception of life as a puppet show directed by the gods (*Ibid.*). The 17th century, Huizinga (1950: 5) explains, marked "the age of world theatre," in which "it was the fashion to liken the world to a stage on which every man plays his part."

Today the metaphor is most often used in social constructivist theories about identity and then especially in relation to gender. Two of the most renowned scholars within this field draw their fame, at least in part, from a convincing application of the imagery of the theatre to everyday life. The first scholar I refer to is Erving Goffman who approached social life from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. His work has inspired a host of empirical studies into the meaning making processes that take place on the micro-social level. The other scholar is feminist philosopher Judith Butler, whose theories are based upon a poststructuralist tradition, influenced by the works of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and Austin. Her work has had a profound influence upon gender studies broadly construed. Below I discuss Butler's and Goffman's work in more detail. After that I clarify why I believe their insights are also useful in thinking about the Red Hat Society.

Erving Goffman
In his approach to social life Goffman focuses on the dramaturgical aspects of the face-to-face interaction in which people are trying to give and get an impression of the self. His endeavour is captured well in the title of his most famous book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971[1959]). In it Goffman likens interactions to theatrical performances with an actor standing on a stage playing roles for an audience. According to him, the individual will often dramatize his or her demeanour in order to make apparent his or her inner thoughts and feelings: the definition of the situation he or she wants to make known to others. This happens, for instance, when a mother pulls an irritated face to communicate to her child that she does not appreciate its misbehaviour, or when a nurse starts to act frantically busy when the head of the floor

arrives. These are examples of what Goffman calls "dramatic realizations". For him it does not matter whether the individual actor really believes in what she or he is acting, as Goffman holds that common sense distinctions between 'real' and 'faked' performances are unsuitable for the analysis of those performances (1971: 77-78). That is because even when the individual genuinely believes in the scenes he puts before the audience, his performances still are not the immediate reflection of the reality of the subject inside.

Goffman also draws upon analogies of life as competitive play, as he posits social life as a strategic game in which people are continuously trying to keep face, in which they try to guide the appearance that others get from them to include as much positive and as little embarrassing information as possible. However, it is not the case that in the famous dramaturgical distinction that Goffman makes between a "front region" and a "backstage", people slip off the mask and become themselves in the latter. Rather what he argues is that within both regions subjects wear different kinds of masks (cf. Lawler, 2008). In the front stage region people perform roles that commit to the rules and expectations of the audience in this specific setting. They will accentuate aspects of their behaviour that are considered desirable and suppress other aspects that may endanger the performance. The backstage is not the opposite region of the front stage; it is simply a different setting with different rules and expectations and a different audience.

In Goffman's work it is like the individual is always wearing a mask, necessarily because "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing" (1971: 78). This mask may become his social identity, or who he really is in public, but it can never reveal who he really is at heart. The only way in which the individual can know her- or himself is through the roles she or he performs. Here Goffman cites his Chicago School colleague Robert Ezra Park:

> "It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather the recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less cons-

ciously, playing a role. (…) It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves." (Park, 1950: 249-250, quoted in Goffman, 1971:11-12)

Goffman (1976; 1977) also sees gender as a *role* that is performed and that does not reflect the individual subject inside. He argues against the essentialist idea that femininity and masculinity are 'natural': the postures and demeanours that people adopt by virtue of being female or male. According to him this idea is faulty; gender consists of culturally approved and sanctioned ways of conducting oneself, which people adopt "by virtue of being persons, not females or males" (1976: 8).

West and Zimmerman's famous concept "doing gender" (1987), which has been cited well over 6000 times, is an adaptation of Goffman's ideas. Like Goffman, West and Zimmerman argue against the idea that femininity and masculinity are naturally given, but instead are things that people 'do' together. They argue that 'doing gender' "means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological" (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 137). They also note that "to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour *at the risk of gender assessment*" (*Ibid.*: 136, italics in original). People are being judged on the basis of how well they perform their roles of 'woman' and 'man' just like the actor is judged on the credibility of his performance.

Judith Butler
In this sense West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" seems a lot like Butler's concept "gender performance", which she developed in her seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990), after she first introduced it in an essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988) that was published in *Theatre Journal*. Her main argument also is that gender is a cultural construct that people have come to believe to be natural and essential, while in fact it is not. Butler calls gender an "illusion" and a "regulatory fiction" that is "instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*"

(1988: 519, italics in original). Here she also draws upon the-atrical images arguing that both "the mundane social audience" and "the actors themselves" have come to understand this illusion to be reality (*Ibid.*: 520). Like Goffman, Butler calls attention to the fact that the acts – the bodily movements, gestures and utterances – that constitute gender are culturally sanctioned. Each society maintains certain historically situated ideas of what it is to do being woman or man 'right' and while it is possible to divert from such conventions, this is never without consequences. The act of challenging these conventions may be frowned upon or even lead to violence and legal sanctions.

Butler's work differs from that of Goffman, and West and Zimmerman, on the point of there being an authentic self that precedes the performance of gender identity. At this point Butler also diverts from Joan Riviere's ideas of *Womanliness as a Masquerade* (1986[1929]), which is also built upon the theatre metaphor. While Goffman still leaves room for an 'unknowable' pre-social self, Butler is more radical in her rejection of this "doer behind the deed" (Butler, 1990). According to her there is no pre-existing subject or pre-cultural sex behind the acts that constitute identity, there are only acts that create the idea that there is. For Butler people are not 'subjects', but they do 'subjectivity' (Jagger, 2008).

> "As a consequence, gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self', whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act', broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. [This is] opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman's which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within the complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life" (Butler, 1988: 528, italics in original).

So for Butler there is no actor behind the mask. There is *only* the mask; that hides that there is actually nothing underneath. This is what Butler means when she argues that gender

is a performance that is "performative". She draws this latter notion from 'speech act theory' and uses it to refer to the idea that the acts that constitute gender identity produce what they claim to represent: they claim to be the expression of something that already exists, but in reality bring into existence what they claim already exists; that is 'identity'.

It is not my intention to follow Butler and Goffman into a philosophical discussion about the existence of a pre-social subject. Suffice it to say that it is clear from both their works that even if such a subject would exist there is no way of knowing it. Hence, I avoid the question about the existence of a pre-cultural self and look at identity solely as something that is achieved in performance. One of the central implications of Butler's gender performance is that gender always needs to be done, and exactly because of that it is unstable: "because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler: 1990: 140). Gender can be challenged and negotiated by performing it in a 'different' or 'non-conventional' way. To make this point, Butler refers to the parody of gender and heterosexuality that can be found in drag performances, which show among other things that the relation between sex and gender is arbitrary, because men can do femininity and women masculinity: "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (*Ibid.*: 137). Drag performances and other performances that repetitively deviate from the 'norm', can reveal the constructionist and ideological basis of gender and show that it "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, 1988: 527).

Identity performance
This notion of identity performance developed by Goffman and Butler, among others, is not just applicable to gender, but also to race, class and age, as well as other identities. As Cheryl Laz (1998) argues, age is just as much accomplished by people acting and reacting to cultural norms and conventions as is gender. Age is not a chronological 'fact', but a category brought

into existence within social interaction and loaded with ex-
pectations and commitments as we incessantly command
each other to "act our age" (Laz, 1998). Identity performance
is part of everyday life, making it part of the lives of Red Hat-
ters: just like any other person, they engage in activities with
which they create and communicate a sense of self and reality.
However, there is an additional reason for looking at the Red
Hat Society from this perspective. The Red Hat Society offers
leisure explicitly for women over fifty, who add an extra lay-
er of performance by dressing-up in conspicuous clothes and
colours. This suggests that identity performance emphasising
gender and age is, at least, one of the key features that we need
to focus on if we want to understand the Red Hat Society (cf.
Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2013; 2014; Yarnal
et al., 2011).

Conclusion: Two conceptions of play
The social scientific literature thus contains two different ap-
proaches to play. In the first play is a bounded practice separa-
ted from everyday life. In the second the whole of this every-
day life, or 'reality', is seen as itself a type of play. To a very large
extent, these two perspectives are mutually unaware of each
other. The second perspective coincides with an 'etic' account
of social life and describes the way in which everyday life is
shaped, ordered and maintained. This is a researcher's per-
spective that is universally applicable, because in all societies
social life and the meanings we attribute to it are created from
people's performative acts. However, when we look at these
meanings from an 'emic' perspective, it is obvious that – at
least in Western societies – people make distinctions between
'play' and 'non-play', 'on stage' and 'off stage', 'real' and 'faked',
'serious' and 'unserious' performances. This means that Hui-
zinga's and Caillois' conception of play fits best with the way
people themselves accord meaning to play and everyday life.
The key to understanding the Red Hat Society lies within the
interaction of these two positions: emic and etic. For now we
may characterise the Red Hat Society as a 'play within play':

it is a 'play' within the (theatrical) 'performance' of everyday life. Yet, it is also a (theatrical) 'performance' of identity that is conducted within the symbolic boundaries of 'play'. How this works exactly, is something I will show in the chapters to come.

Chapter 2: Data and methods

As explained in the introduction, the general aim of this book is to arrive at a 'thick description' of the Red Hat Society. To this end I broadly formulated four descriptive research questions: What is the Red Hat Society? Who are the Red Hatters and why do they enjoy the Red Hat Society? How do they relate to one another? And, what do audiences think of the Red Hat Society? I also formulated one more explanatory question: How can we understand all this from the perspective of play? These questions compel me to look at the Red Hat Society on three connected levels. The first of these is the level of the social action that constitutes Red Hat Society 'play' and 'identity performance'. The second level is that of the Red Hatters and the meanings they accord to the Red Hat Society, and to each other. Lastly, I need to study the Red Hat Society at the level of relevant audiences that also have a reading of what the Red Hat Society is about. In this chapter I give details about the empirical work that went into this study. I shortly explain which data were collected for which purposes and which methods I used to analyse these data.

The data

To study the different research questions it was necessary to triangulate data from different sources, including participant observation, interviews and written documents. That is why I performed a multi-method qualitative study with a special focus on ethnographic observations. These observations were conducted between March 2011 and April 2012, during which time I participated in nine activities of the Red Hat Society. Five of these activities were chapter activities and four were national events, which brought together Red Hatters from multiple chapters from all over the Netherlands. Among the national events were two Red Hat Society conventions and a Queens lunch, but also a seven day cruise to Norway that I

took with nearly two hundred Red Hatters and their families. This cruise was very important because it allowed me to observe the Hatters for multiple days in a row, and also to speak with them at times outside the immediate context of the Red Hat Society. The chapter events that I attended included a preparation meeting for one of the conventions, one lecture, dinner and high tea, and a 'red-uation' party that celebrated Martine's (one of my respondents) fiftieth birthday.

I gained initial access to the field through an email that I sent to some chapter Queens in the Netherlands, in which I explained the purpose of this study and asked them for their assistance. Most of these Queens were very welcoming and enthusiastic about me studying the Red Hat Society. This ensured that I was asked by different Red Hatters to be a guest during one or more of their activities, and that I could join them in their conversations and other things they were doing. Often my attendance of one activity resulted in new invitations that allowed me to expand my fieldwork. I made notes directly after and further transcribed the observations from memory in the following days.

Because I conducted the most extensive fieldwork during the cruise to Norway, I would like to say a bit more about it. Every two years a chapter Queen in the Netherlands organises reduced rates for Red Hatters to go on a cruise, and in 2011 she had invited me to join. The cruise departed from the harbour of Rotterdam on the 3rd of July, not far from where I live. Most of the Red Hatters arrived there in 'full regalia' so that they could easily recognise each other. In the seven days at sea, there were several 'official' Red Hat Society activities: the first day the Hatters had a 'meet and greet' within the ship's theatre; the second day they had a 'royal Dutch high tea', a 'cocktail party' and 'gala dinner'; day five was a complete 'Red Hat Society day'; and day seven included a 'fancy red hat show' (see picture 3). In the remaining time the Red Hatters were enjoying a vacation as 'ordinary' people, together with their husbands and, sometimes, other family members. As such, the cruise gave me a unique opportunity to also observe a large group of

Picture 3. A grouppicture taken during the 'Red Hat Society day' of the cruise.

Red Hatters outside the setting of the Red Hat Society. I shared a room with a Red Hatter from a Belgian chapter and I spent numerous hours talking with other Hatters, not only at Red Hat events but also at breakfast, dinner and evening drinks. During the cruise, as well as the other events, I observed the conduct and interactions between the Red Hatters, what they were doing and wearing, how they talked 'to' and 'about' each other, as well as people outside the circle of Red Hatters. The cruise also gave me the opportunity to speak with some of the husbands of Red Hatters about the Red Hat Society: how they felt about it when they first heard of it, whether they ever talk about it at home, and what they think about their wives' costumes. In a later stage of the research, six short interviews were added to these observations performed by a research assistant, Krista Lardinois, within the context of an internship within the university's 'honour's program'.

Throughout my fieldwork I often struggled with questions about my role in the data I was gathering, as is common practice in doing participant observation (e.g. Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007; Coffey, 1999; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

How should I participate? Should I conform to the dress-code and wear a pink hat? How much should I tell the Red Hatters about myself and my ideas and the purposes of this research? In this context it is worth mentioning that my age was an important factor in conducting the fieldwork. For most of my fieldwork I was twenty-four years of age and thus much younger than the Red Hatters. Although this meant that I could still participate in the Red Hat Society as a Pink Hatter, actual Pink Hatters are usually in their forties (the youngest Pink Hatter I spoke with was thirty-eight) and thus also recognisably 'older'. In the times that I joined the Red Hatters I was thus a pretty conspicuous person walking among them, as I was recognisably 'young' and did not (completely) follow their dress-code. Overall I experienced this as something positive, because it made that I was very often approached by Red Hatters who wondered what it was that I was doing. Hence, it provided me with more access to the field. In the period of my fieldwork I got to know some of these Red Hatters more intimately. Very often, they also tried to get me to extend the nature of my participation into wearing a pink hat. For instance, on the first night of the cruise I found such a pink hat laying on my bed (see picture 4). It belonged to a Pink Hatter from Belgium, who had decided with some of the other Hatters that I should wear it the next day to the 'official' Red Hat Society activities that were planned. I also wore a pink hat or fascinator during other fieldwork, albeit (always) somewhat reluctantly: it never made me feel less conspicuous, as the Red Hatters would have it.

I triangulated the data from my observations with the information that can be found about the Red Hat Society on websites and in books. The Red Hat Society organises itself through websites, of which the most important is the American www.redhatsociety.com that belongs to the overall organisation 'Hatquarters'. This is where women, for instance, have to go to officially register a new chapter. The website contains a great deal of information about the Red Hat Society as it includes pages about its "passion", "how it all started", "who

Picture 4. Picture of me during the cruise I took with Red Hatters and husbands.

we are", "the story behind our legacy" and Red Hatters' "testimonials". It contains a large number of stories, pictures and video clips, and also a web store filled with hats, dresses, boas and other accessories. This makes it the most elaborate website of the Red Hat Society. However, there are also many websites of local chapters that they use in introducing themselves to the public and in communicating among their members. More specifically, these websites are commonly used to schedule activities and to post reports about the activities that have passed.

On top of this, the Red Hat Society also published multiple books, most of which are written or introduced by founder Sue Ellen Cooper who, for instance, wrote *The Red Hat Society: Fun and Friendship After Fifty* (2004), which is gene-

rally considered to be the handbook of the Red Hat Society. Other titles are: *Designer Scrapbooks: The Red Hat Society Way* (2005), *Red Hats & the Women Who Wear Them* (2006), *The Red Hat Society Cookbook* (2006), *The Red Hat Society Playful Paper Projects & Party Ideas* (2006), *The Red Hat Society Dessert Cookbook: Eat Dessert First!* (2007). As can be read from the titles, many of these books are about typically feminine crafting, but next to specific 'how to...' descriptions ('how to bake a cake', 'how to make a card', etc.), they also contain more general descriptions of the Red Hat Society. The websites and books can hence be regarded as 'mediated' performances of the Red Hat Society, whereas the leisure activities that I observed can be seen as 'unmediated' performances of the Red Hat Society.

Of course, the social action (play, performance) that constitutes the Red Hat Society is the outcome of the acts of the women who participate in it. These Red Hatters 'make' the Red Hat Society within a dynamic web of interactions in which more or less individual intentions and preferences also shape their interpersonal relations. To some extent, these relations and motivations could be explored through my observations. However, additional qualitative interviews were needed to get at a more in-depth account, which also enabled me to locate the Red Hatters' motivations and intentions within their personal and collective life histories (cf. Becker, 1970; Bertaux, 1981; Goodson, 2001). I conducted long in-depth interviews with eighteen Red Hatters of different chapters in the Netherlands.

Initially I had selected participants on the basis of their residence in urban and rural environments in different parts of the country, to ensure diversity. After I had done some analyses of these interviews and fleshed out themes and categories that I thought were relevant, I also strategically selected some respondents to further develop these themes and elucidate their properties. To be more precise, midway into my fieldwork it became clear to me that the Red Hatters tended to distinguish between a group that bought expensive hats and

a group of Hatters that made their own hats, which appeared to be relevant theoretically (see chapter 5). Given that I had already talked with many Hatters who bought their hats, I searched to do more interviews with women who made their hats as well as their clothes. The interviews that I conducted were semi-structured, and lasted between one and a half and four hours. Each of them consisted of two parts. The first part dealt with how Red Hatters view their involvement in the Red Hat Society; I asked them (amongst other things) about the pleasures they derived from being a Red Hatter and what meaningful experiences they have had through the Red Hat Society. I also asked questions on how Red Hatters view their relations with other group members and with their 'audiences'. The second part of the interview dealt with the life histories of Red Hatters, asking about significant life events, such as going to school, friendships, marriage, childbirth, illness, but also about the role of ageing in society. Furthermore, I asked respondents to reflect on their youth, the family and the environment they grew up in. I thus gathered 'life histories' consisting of narratives constructed around important life experiences, which is one of the main ways in which life histories are studied (Chase, 2005).

Lastly, I studied newspaper articles that have appeared about the Red Hat Society in the Netherlands. These articles were collected using the search engine *Lexis Nexis* that contains full-text articles from both regional and national Dutch newspapers. Initially I got 268 hits when searching for the 'Red Hat Society' as topic. After controlling for duplicates and 'other' results that were not actually news articles, 96 titles remained. These were written between February 2005 and the date of the search in April 2013.

The analysis
The technique I used to analyse these newspaper articles and the other data included in this study, such as interview transcriptions and field notes, is closely connected to 'discourse analysis' as an interpretative method that aims to uncover

the different cultural meanings that are conveyed by a given text. As many scholars have argued, discourse analysis is not a clearly defined set of methodological 'rules' that help to uncover reality, it is foremost a theoretical approach to language as something that performs 'reality' (Fairclough, 2003; Potter and Wetherell, 1994; Tonkiss, 2012[1998]; Wetherell, 2001). This means that discourse analysis is connected to the social constructivist perspective that I have outlined in the previous chapter; and it is this perspective that I take as my own in the way in which I regard the data and the outcomes of this study.

> "Discourse analysis involves a perspective on language that sees this not simply as reflecting reality in a transparent or straightforward way, but as constructing and organising the terms in which we understand that social reality. Discourse analysts are interested in language and texts as sites in which social meanings are formed and reproduced, social identities are shaped, and social facts are established." (Tonkiss, 2012: 406)

Language can in this case be written or uttered in conversation but it can also be communicated in non-verbal visual ways, as in pictures or 'body-language'. The term 'discourse' refers to a group of linguistic statements that claim to represent particular social categories, facts or objects, while in reality they bring into existence these same categories, facts or objects that they claim to represent (cf. Butler, 1988; 1990; Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1975). Although discourse analysis does not consist of a fixed set of methodological 'rules' or 'steps' to uncover the meanings of a text, there are some analytical tools that are generally considered useful in obtaining these meanings. The foremost of these tools is the "constant comparison" developed by Glaser and Strauss (2008[1967]) as the way to come to "grounded theory". It consists of comparing fragments, looking for recurring themes, concepts and categories, which can be coded into a data-matrix. This not only means looking at the dominant meanings that can be found within a text, or circulating within a certain research population, but also at variations and exceptions (*Ibid.*).

The coding process that I used consisted of three phases, employing both inductive and deductive strategies. In the first phase I established coding categories through a bottom-up and comparative method, comparable to the one advocated by Glaser and Strauss (see also Boyatzis, 1998; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In this phase I read through the interview and observation transcriptions several times paying particular attention to re-curring similarities and differences. This was done to establish the main themes and categories, which were coded into a data matrix. To give an example, in the interviews one of the things that practically all my respondents talked about was how their red hats ensured that they were noticed by people in public settings; I coded these stories as 'conspicuousness'. Other co-des that I used were 'personal pleasure' and 'ethic of care' for stories that emphasised the difference between the Red Hat Society and family responsibilities, and I used the code 'older women having fun' for narratives about Red Hatters showing people that, even though society considers them 'too old for it', they still get to enjoy life and 'have fun'.

In a second phase I connected these themes to establis-hed literature about the Red Hat Society, and about femini-nity, age and play more broadly. I re-read the data with new theoretical insights in mind, employing a top-down approach to establish new themes and reach saturation of discourse. In the third phase themes were further developed and elucidated by relevant quotes, which were placed together in theme-files. In these theme-files I further differentiated between the diffe-rent properties of the theme. For example the theme 'conspi-cuousness' included stories about different topics. There was a difference between Red Hatters who enjoyed looking conspi-cuous and Red Hatters who did not enjoy this or felt shy about wearing the red hat. However, some stories were about things other than personal enjoyments: they were more specifically about the reaction of the public, or they were about dressing 'appropriately' for the Red Hat Society, whereby Red Hatters made remarks about each other's conspicuousness. These dif-

ferent properties of the theme often led me to create more themes, codes and categories, which I developed in combination with reading more literature and in talking about my results with other scholars. I for instance took the remarks Red Hatters made about each other's dress and conspicuousness into a new theme called 'respectability' with new categories, like 'looking chic' and 'being creative' (about which I wrote chapter 5).

As a result, the coding-phases – especially the second and third one – were repeated several times in the four years that it took to write this book. At times the different themes and categories I found prompted me to gather more data. At other times they even led me to revise my theoretical frame and research question. For instance, I did not start this research with 'play' as the main concept. The idea that this, however, should be the central concept became clear to me only after I had done a significant amount of writing and analysing my data. Hence, this study followed a more common "zigzag approach" (Bruce, 2007), with aspects of theoretical sampling, when my analysis led me to do more fieldwork about a specific theme or category, and theoretical saturation, when I clarified the themes with relevant quotes and observations until all their properties were covered (Glaser and Strauss, 2008; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Quality
I checked the quality of the data, analysis and results of this study by triangulation, membership-review and peer-review. As explained in the above, I triangulated data from different sources looking for similarities and differences. This is also a valuable technique to ensure the validity of the data and results, which can be assumed when the same analysis of different data sources produces similar findings, and in this research this was certainly the case. Some of the results that I found also showed an overlap with results found by other scholars studying the Red Hat Society in the US. On top of this, I confirmed the quality of this study by sending my res-

pondents, the Red Hatters I interviewed, a copy of a research article that informed many of the ideas that can be found in this book. In general I received positive responses to this article that further confirmed the analysis that it contains. Lastly, I also had other scholars working in similar fields read many drafts of articles and chapters of this book, and I took their comments to strengthen my results and conclusions.

Chapter 3: Play and the Red Hat Society

In November 2005 an episode of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons* called 'The Last of the Red Hat Mamas' was dedicated to the Red Hat Society. The episode showed how Marge joins the 'Cheery Red Tomatoes', a group of rebellious 'older' women who wear pink hats and convince Marge to go skydiving and join them in a million dollar heist. Homer tries to convince his wife not to go through with the heist, but fails and in his attempt to stop her he himself becomes a prime heist suspect. According to the official US website, it was at this moment that the Red Hat Society reached "pop culture status".[1] By then the organisation had appeared in several popular television shows, and featured prominently in books and magazines. Two other sitcoms, *Still Standing* (November 2004) and *Rules of Engagement* (May 2001), also dedicated episodes to the concept. Already in September 2001 founder Sue Ellen Cooper had appeared on the *Today Show*. Three years later, her book *The Red Hat Society: Fun and Friendship after Fifty* was listed number one on the *New York Times Best Seller list*. Since then, the Red Hatters produced their own product line featuring hats and jewellery, they had their own musical, magazine, documentary and Platinum MasterCard. In 2008 they received an impact-award from the *Popular Culture Association* and *American Culture Association*.[2]

All this information can be read on the US website that thus accentuates the Red Hat Society's widespread and inter-

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1 See the website of the Red Hat Society: http://www.redhatsociety.com/about/timeline (last visited 22-10-2014).

2 See the website of the Red Hat Society: http://www.redhatsociety.com/about/timeline (last visited 22-10-2014). The Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) is an association of scholars working in the field of popular culture (see http://pcaaca.org/, last visited 22-10-2014).

national appeal. In line with this, it refers to itself as "a global society of women" and "one of the largest women's social groups in the world." Against this appeal, it is surprising that the Red Hat Society, so far, has been the subject of only a hand full of academic studies, which have focussed almost exclusively on chapters and members from the US. As noted in the introduction of this book, within this body of literature we can roughly differentiate two, sometimes overlapping, approaches to the Red Hat Society (cf. Van Bohemen et al., 2013). The first is mostly psychological and positions the Red Hat Society as a coping resource that advances its members' wellbeing and quality of life (e.g. Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; 2010; Yarnal, 2006; Yarnal et al., 2008). The second approach is more cultural and advances the idea that the Red Hat Society is a public negotiation of hegemonic discourses about femininity and age (e.g. Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2013; 2014; White-Farnham, 2013; Yarnal et al., 2011).

What the two approaches have in common is that they both attempt to move beyond the Red Hat Society's message of 'fun' and 'friendship'. Both argue, in fact, that there are 'serious' aspects to the leisure experiences of Red Hatters. This perspective, however, is somewhat at odds with claims of these same Hatters that they are in it 'just for the fun'. As Marijke, for instance, says: "It just are people who think well 'I like doing this, and that's why I like it, because I like it'. (...) And that's the only thing." The Dutch national website also emphasizes that the Red Hat Society is frivolous, in the sense that: "There is no goal, no politics, no religion or anything. It is about fun and friendship after fifty."[3] Marlène sees it similarly: "That day you go out donning your red hat, then you actually do very uncomplicated, fun [things], [then it's] not about serious topics." How can we understand the existence of this paradox between, on the one hand, the claims of scholars

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3 See the website: http://www.redhatnederland.nl/introductie.htm (last visited 22-10-2014).

that the Red Hat Society has 'serious' elements and claims of Red Hatters that there are no goals beyond 'fun'? This chapter aims to answer this question by introducing a third approach to the Red Hat Society, one that studies it, not as a coping mechanism, nor as cultural resistance, but as a type of 'play' (cf. Yarnal, 2006).

Play should then be approached from the 'emic' position discussed in chapter 1, which sees it as a distinct practice within everyday life. As I argued before, renowned play-theorists like Johan Huizinga (1950[1938]) and Roger Caillois (1979) see play as a practice that 'separates' itself from 'real' or everyday life. The first half of this chapter shows that this perspective fits the way Red Hatters define the Red Hat Society, where they see the Red Hat Society as something 'fun' freeing them from everyday drudgery and constraints. However, Huizinga and other scholars argue that there is also another central aspect to play that I have not yet discussed: that is, that it is 'ambiguous' (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Huizinga sees play as an elusive practice that resists logical structure and defies modern contradictions as between wisdom and folly, real and unreal, truth and illusion, and belief and make-belief (see also Aupers, 2014). In the second half of this chapter I show that this ambiguity is also characteristic of the Red Hat Society. While the Red Hatters, on the one hand, situate the Red Hat Society as uncomplicated fun, they simultaneously tell stories about the Red Hat Society having 'serious' sides. These serious aspects often turn out to be part of the fun and form important motives for participation in the Red Hat Society. After giving some illustrations of this, I draw my conclusions about the ability of play to turn into seriousness and seriousness into play.

The 'magic circle'

In chapter 1 I discussed three 'formal' characteristics of play that exist within the work of Huizinga and Caillois. These characteristics are exceedingly visible in the Red Hat Society and the way in which the Red Hatters describe it, starting with

the 'free' and 'voluntary' character of play. The Red Hatters stress throughout my interviews that the Red Hat Society is something they willingly chose to participate in, because it gives them pleasure. Betty, for instance, feels that the Red Hat Society is really something she did not "have" to do, but was "allowed" to do: "Pleasure is actually the main thing." Most of the activities that are scheduled are non-binding, which is also an aspect that appeals to the Hatters. "And you can join if you like," Marion says, "but you don't have to, if you think it is too much for me right now, I will let this one go by. It's voluntary." This is how Marijke explains it:

> Marijke: I also had someone who had to quit because of health but also different other reasons, who thought 'o god the third Thursday is coming up again'. And she really felt it as an obligation. Yes, and then you have to quit, because then it's not fun anymore.

The "third Thursday" Marijke refers to is their chapter's monthly get-together, which this woman experienced as an obligation, rather than as something fun; that while 'fun' is the goal, if we follow the accounts of the Red Hatters.

"It is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play," Huizinga argues (1950: 3), while he emphasises that 'voluntariness' is thus necessarily a key aspect of play. As Caillois (1979: 6) also argues "there is (…) no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement," because if play would be forced "it would become constraint, drudgery from which one would strive to be freed." A second characteristic that both Huizinga and Caillois name is that play is 'bound by rules'. In the Red Hat Society these 'rules' consist of the dress-code, the fact that only women are allowed to participate and the hierarchy that it instates, consisting of 'Queens' and 'ordinary' Red Hatters. Interestingly enough, the Red Hat Society very often says to be a "disorganisation" without any rules (see Cooper, 2004). However, it seems more accurate to say that the Red Hat Society temporarily suspends 'ordinary' social structure, with which

it does retain 'some rules'. As Joyce, for instance, notes: "The Red Hatters started with the rule [that] you wear a red hat and purple clothing. (...) So there are rules."

The costume and voluntariness are part of what separates the Red Hat Society from other practices that people may engage in within their everyday lives. This is the third, overarching, characteristic of play: that it is secluded from the rest of life. Play presents itself as another world in which the 'rules' that structure the 'ordinary' are temporarily replaced with new 'rules'. Both Caillois and Huizinga attribute a 'higher' status to this play world. Caillois calls it a "pure space" and Huizinga a "magic circle" arguing that: "Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection" (Huizinga, 1950: 10). Victor Turner (1982) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1972) respectively call play a "liminal space" and "anti-structure", arguing that play moves beyond the different types of role-sets, statuses, judicial and economic laws that inform social hierarchies and behaviour. Hence, play offers an unconstrained space in which people can experiment with different aspects of the social order.

Red Hatters in Wonderland

I would like to exemplify this argument with a popular culture reference to Lewis Carroll's stories about *Alice in Wonderland* (originally published in 1865), in which a young girl, called Alice, dreams about having an adventure in a world with social and physical laws that are nothing like our own. Central to the stories is that Alice tries to come to grips with this 'new world' and its rules, roles and conventions which make absolutely 'no sense' to her. Alice tumbles down a rabbit hole and suddenly she can talk to animals and inanimate objects, although they all seem to speak to her in riddles. Among the many odd characters Alice meets a 'Queen of Hearts' who decapitates her subjects for no reason at all, and a 'Mad Hatter' whom she joins in a tea party.

> "Your hair wants cutting," said the Hatter. He had been looking
> at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first

speech.

"You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice said with some severity: "it's very rude."

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"

(Carroll, 1998[1865]: 60, italics in original)

At times, play reverses ordinary social rules and conventions. This for instance happens in carnival, as well as some tribal rituals, when the 'peasant' becomes the 'king', 'men' dress as 'women', 'women' dress as 'men', and 'work' is substituted for 'leisure' (cf. Bakhtin, 1998; Gluckman, 1954). This 'role' and 'rule' reversal is a general trope in Carroll's writings, like when the Mad Hatter tells Alice that it is 'normal' to celebrate "un-birthdays" and 'silly' to celebrate birthdays. However, there are also times at which Carroll's Wonderland combines different social elements in even more complicated and illogical ways. As Turner (1983: 233) also argues "play is the supreme brico-leur of frail transient constructions" with messages that are sometimes "composed of a potpourri of apparently incong-ruous elements."

"Have you guessed the riddle yet?" the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

"No, I give it up," Alice replied. "What's the answer?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said the Hatter.

"Nor I," said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."

"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's *him*."

(Carroll, 1998[1865]: 60, italics in original)

One of the books published by the Red Hat Society, *Red Hats & the Women Who Wear Them* (2006), includes a chapter that is completely dedicated to Alice's 'Wonderland'. It featu-res Alice-themed hats made by Red Hatters, while it simul-taneously draws a parallel between the structural freedom of

'Wonderland' and the Red Hat Society:

> "In *Alice*, tea and madness go together in a wonderful, carefree way. That matches our modus operandi to a … well, to a tea! Tea parties have the undeserved reputation of being staid, fussy affairs where everyone's little pinkie sticks out and no one says anything shocking. Not so in our world – we call it 'Red Hatters in Wonderland'" (Red Hat Society, 2006: 37, italics in original).

The Red Hat Society thus defines its play world as setting itself apart from the social order of ordinary life. In the Red Hat Society's playful tea party things become possible that are otherwise impossible, in the 'boring' ordinary tea party. What we witness here then, is a form of negotiation of the ordinary state of affairs within play. Another example of this is that the Red Hat Society encourages its members to "Eat Dessert First", which is the title of the official Red Hat Society dessert cookbook. "Conventional wisdom dictates that the hard part has to come first; then – and *only* then – the pay-off follows. We even structure our meals on this model," Sue Ellen Cooper says (2007: v, italics in original). The Red Hat Society offers a self-professed remedy to this structure, giving women permission to reverse the rules and eat desert first.

In practically all her writings, Cooper uses 'the little girl' as a symbol for this playful anti-structure. In the Red Hat Society's handbook (2004: 10) she, for instance, stresses that: "Silliness is a very important part of the Red Hat Society. Just because we are no longer little girls does not mean that we are entirely grown-up! Those little girls hiding inside the mature bodies just love a chance to get out and play once in a while!" The rediscovery of this little girl is also linked to Red Hatters transgressing commonly acknowledged rules of appropriate behaviour. This is expressed by Froukje, for whom this is one of the most appealing aspects of the Red Hat Society.

> Froukje: But mostly I am still that little girl that wants to dress-up. When I read [the Red Hat Society handbook] I thought this is me, because I am still this little girl. And I still like to be a bit

> naughty, because I still love playing 'ring and run.' Yes, I still do that. When I go out for dinner [with my husband] and I am wearing my red hat, then I still will always play ding dong ditch. My husband thinks it's terrible [laughs]. But his trick now is to condone it, and now the fun's gone.

When she wears her red hat, Froukje thus takes it upon herself to playfully break some of the rules of social conduct, in the same way as children do when they play (e.g. Rubin et al., 1983). This is not something she can easily do in everyday life, because there Froukje has to act mature, and then ringing a doorbell and running away is not considered acceptable behaviour. However, in the play world of the Red Hat Society it becomes possible to temporarily do away with these cultural norms (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Turner, 1983; Schechner, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1972): to reverse the rules, to wear a red hat with purple clothes even though the colours do not match, to become 'Queen' or 'Lady', to stop caring about the opinions of others, etc.

Play and seriousness
These examples of Red Hatters experimenting with ordinary codes of conduct not only show that the Red Hat Society differentiates itself from everyday life; the central feature of play according to Huizinga and Caillois. They are also examples of how the Red Hatters experience this everyday life as constraining at times. The Red Hat Society is situated by them as something that frees them from such drudgeries and constraints (cf. Van Bohemen et al., 2013). In a short television interview Renee tells a reporter that the Red Hat Society "is a bit of an escape from reality."[4] In my interview with her, she elaborates upon this point:

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4 The clip that I am referring to here was made by Tv Rijnmond and can be found on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY-zo5MERFa4&feature=youtube_gdata (last visited 22-10-2014).

> Renee: You know, there's so much you need to do in life; you need to get up in time, go to work, but before that, you need to shower, dress, brush your teeth, have breakfast, otherwise you cannot leave home. You need to play by the rules in the office, at work; there's someone above you and you need to do what that someone says, you need to talk to so-and-so. And we do not need to do anything, we just do what we like. And if you don't want to join, or don't feel like something, then you don't need to do anything. That's allowed! And that's what I like.

The constraints that the Hatters talk about are tied to different aspects of women's lives and include, among other things, gender, care, work, illness, status, and social convention. Joyce, for instance, similarly interprets being with the Red Hat Society as a negotiation of everyday responsibilities around care and work.

> Joyce: It always is stepping out of daily life for a moment and making it better. Well that's the Red Hat. It's (…) Annie steps away from the typewriter, and Mientje leaves her grandchildren, who she has to watch, for a little while, and Bep leaves her sick husband for a little while, and for a moment you're completely different. And Bep becomes Lady Felicia, and Mientje becomes ms Fantastica, (…) and that's just different. Then you're that. You're in your role and it's different.

While Renee stresses 'voluntariness' and 'pleasure' as ways to escape the rules and confines of everyday life, Joyce focuses more on 'role-play': on becoming someone else for a while. Hence, though all of the quotes in the above highlight different aspects of the Red Hat Society – voluntariness, playing another role, reversing ordinary rules of conduct, getting in touch with the little girl that lives inside you – they all come down to the same thing: the distinction between the Red Hat Society and everyday experiences. The Red Hatters situate the Red Hat Society against 'real' or ordinary life, which they deem 'serious' and 'constraining'. The Red Hat Society, on the contrary, is situated as 'fun' and 'liberating', because it frees them from the drudgeries of everyday life.

However, this is only half of the story as other parts of my data show that the distinction between the Red Hat Society and 'seriousness' is not always this clear. There are also many examples of Red Hatters who encounter serious aspects or consequences of the Red Hat Society. These consequences are often unexpected, but they are nonetheless part of the pleasure the Hatters have in the Red Hat Society. In practice, the Red Hat Society thus oscillates between 'fun' and 'seriousness'. The three sections below are intended as examples of how this happens. These examples are broadly related to the Red Hatters playing dress-up, making friends, and supporting each other during times of hardship. A special type of this support is the one that is offered in times of death and funerals; examples like these show with exceptional severity that the Red Hat Society – all things considered – is *more than ('just') fun*. This is also what Huizinga thinks of play more generally. He argues that people wrongly assume that play is fun and therefore the direct opposite of seriousness. According to him, the idea that 'play is not serious' is easy to refute as "the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed" (Huizinga, 1950: 5). This is the 'ambiguity' of play.

Other scholars from diverse disciplines also address this deep-seated aspect of play. According to Turner play is either a "liminal" or "liminoid" space, which both refer to "threshold" states: a period and area of ambiguity (Turner, 1982: 24). He believes that the things that people do while they are in the liminal are difficult to interpret, because such acts transgress cultural dichotomies and often point in multiple directions. Gregory Bateson (2006[1955]) and Richard Schechner (1985) focus more on the ambiguity of the message of play, the "this is play", which communicates that certain acts do not mean what they would normally mean in situations of non-play. As a result, the message "this is play" continuously begs the question: is this real or not, is this meant or not, is this truth or illusion, is this fun or serious? I ask this same question about the Red Hat Society, but focus instead on the content of its play.

Example 1: Playing dress-up

"Our hat is our freedom!" This is a quote taken from Annette, who sharply summarizes the function of the Red Hat Society costume as marking the entrance into the play world. This perspective on the hat fits the idea that the Red Hat Society is 'fun', 'liberating' and all in all 'different' from everyday life. Practically all the Red Hatters indicate that this means that they also feel different, in terms of their personality and emotions, when they wear their regalia. As Josje explains to me: "And it's play! It's just fun. The moment I wear that hat, I just am a Red Hatter. (...) it's not acting, but in that moment you just are that Lady. You even walk like one." Joyce is even more explicit when she tells me the following anecdote about dressing up for the Red Hat Society:

> Joyce: Joyce goes upstairs, changes, throws on all the trills, because I don't know if you remember what I was wearing with that Queens lunch[5], but I really had this super glitter suit on. I'd bought that on the market, because I sew my own clothes, and really over the top, as much over the top as possible, then I'm completely patched up and in the make-up I then put on (…), and then I come downstairs, and then I'm thus really someone else. I'm really made up and changed. I'm just… you also can't speak to me with Joyce (…) I won't react to that. At that moment I'm just someone different. And I'll go out the door, and people greet me, and I also greet differently.

Joyce's self-reported personality change is symbolized by her move towards the third-person in the first sentence. Her account coincides with Huizinga's understanding that 'dressing up' is where "the 'extra-ordinary' nature of play reaches perfection. The disguised or masked individual 'plays' another part, another being. He *is* another being" (Huizinga, 1950: 13, italics in original). However, most of the Red Hatters do not feel this strongly about actually becoming another person, but

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5 Joyce and I first met at an event called the 'Queens lunch', which is one of the Red Hat Society events that I attended during my fieldwork (field notes, 4 March 2011).

compare it to dressing-up for other extra-ordinary occasions, which are also situated in 'liminal' spaces.

> Monique: You get a kind of tingling (…), when you are com-pletely dressed-up like that. You absolutely feel happy, a bit like 'what are we going to experience today?' Just like when it's your birthday (…) and you're wearing your nicest dress.

Corrien says that it is like going to a chic party: "then you also feel different from when you walk in your ordinary clothes of course. And that's the same with the Red Hat." Although the Hatters thus differ in the extent to which they regard the Red Hat Society as a type of role-play, they agree that dressing-up takes them temporarily out of 'ordinary' life and into a more 'fun' world.

Ruth, however, tells a story that is somewhat different, where she suggests that her playful 'Red Hatter' self has also changed how she feels in ordinary life. She explains that the Red Hat Society has made her more confident in interacting with people on a day-to-day basis.

> Samira: Do you feel like another person when you are dressed in Red Hat Society clothes?
> Ruth: Yes then I'm RenA McStitch the Queen! (…)
> Samira: And how are you then different than normally?
> Ruth: Ohm maybe because I'm a bit more imperturbable, be-cause then I allegedly am royal, and just don't care about the world. In ordinary life that's not always possible, because then you always have people you regularly interact with, then you can't be like 'to hell with it, this is my thing'. In everyday life you always have to be mindful of other people. And that's not what I feel with the Red Hats (…).
> Samira: Yes, so you're more daring?
> Ruth: Yes.
> Samira: And is it also more self-assurance?
> Ruth: Yes that's it and that self-assurance works through in my everyday life. So it has only been good for me. My self-assurance has grown, but that has grown because you really have become someone from Mars and you meet people that I don't know and

who want to know what it is and who we are.

In the upper part of this quote, Ruth also situates the Red Hat Society as something 'separate' from ordinary life, freeing her from everyday constraints and conventions surrounding social interaction. Yet, she claims that this has had a more permanent effect on her personality. Other studies have similarly found that some Red Hatters gain confidence as well as a more active and positive attitude from their experiences in the Red Hat Society (cf. Hutchinson et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; Yarnal et al., 2011).

On the cruise that I described in chapter 2, I encountered another slightly different example of this. During the seven day cruise I shared a hut with Lieve, a Red Hatter from Belgium who suffered, for the past nine years, from a malicious cancer that had spread through her body. Her doctors had told her that she did not have more than a few months to live. She told me that the Red Hat Society had "saved" her life, because it had given her all sorts of 'fun' activities to plan and to look forward to. She, for instance, mentioned that in two months she planned to go to Brighton to visit an international convention. I noticed how every day of the cruise she dressed in purple, even though she only wore her red hat to the 'official' Red Hat Society activities. "These days I choose to only dress in purple," she said, "every day in purple" (field notes, 3 July 2011 and 4 July 2011). It is my interpretation that by doing this, Lieve attempted to extend the 'magic' of the Red Hat Society 'play world' as far as possible, making every day a day for play. It is worth noting that there were more women who seemed to do this, as they were also dressed in purple all the time. That while other Hatters felt that they had to dress-up too often during the cruise, for whom it detracted from the fun. Monique, for instance, told me that for her it threatened to "become overkill," arguing that dressing up has to remain fun (field notes, 4 July 2011).

Example 2: Nagging and friendship

In my conversations with the Red Hatters, they also very often talk about a common bond that they feel to exist between Red Hat Society members worldwide. As such, they tell many stories about how 'fun' and easy it is to make contacts with other Hatters whom they have not yet met. "I mean every Red Hat, it looks like they've known each other for years, because they embrace each other wholeheartedly," Corrien says. "And that's also what I like, the togetherness," adds Marlène, who experienced this when she and her friend travelled to Nashville for an international event that was also attended by founder Sue Ellen Cooper. Upon arrival Marlène had a chance encounter with Cooper whom she saw walking down the street. They started talking and next she knew Cooper invited Marlène and her friend up to her apartment: "Well and then we really talked with her for hours, with Sue Ellen and her daughter with the baby, that Linda who is also mentioned in the book [Cooper's friend whom received a red hat for her birthday] (...). And that was really nice and fun[6]." The Red Hatters see this type of 'bridging' as one of the main pleasures of the Red Hat Society.

As another of these pleasures they often mention that there is no nagging. The Red Hat Society has as one of its more informal 'rules' that members cannot nag about things when they come together. Many chapters adopt this prohibition, and many Hatters indicate that this is an important part of what makes the Red Hat Society fun.

> Sanna: But it is also, that's also what's said sometimes, 'guys, it's not a little club to nag and moan and be difficult' (…) but sometimes something does come up. Well and then someone wants to share something, and that's possible. (…) But of course that's

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6 The original Dutch word Marlène uses is "gezellig", a notoriously untranslatable term which indicates an experience of friendship, fun, homeliness, togetherness, but also uncomplicated or easy, as in this quote.

not the main thing, I mean, we just want to have a good time[7] and do fun things together, well and that's always what we do.

For Monique this is also a reason not to see other Red Hatters as friends, because for her friendship is about more than a shared experience of fun and the Red Hat Society is not.

> Monique: Actually it [the other Red Hatters] should not be friends of you, because with friends you talk about intimacies and health. That's not what this is! It's pure and alone experiencing the fun together. (...) We also have a golden rule that you can't nag. Well to a friend I do say that I need a knee replacement or this or that. But with us [the Red Hats] it's really, you just aren't allowed to talk about physical aches.

Some Red Hatters thus locate friendship outside the play world of the Red Hat Society, arguing that it conflicts with its central aspects of fun, freedom and voluntariness. Still, many Hatters simultaneously indicate that friendships do develop and that there is also a system of support. Janna for instance says: "Yes, gradually they do become friends. Because then you feel like yes, I think it's not going so well with such and so, so then you call them the next day or so and ask 'hey what's going on?' yes." While Monique on the one hand maintains that the Red Hat Society "is pure and alone [about] experiencing the fun together," she also says that she has made a friend through her chapter.

> Monique: But because I'm in this organisation [the Red Hat Society] a completely new world has opened up to me. I thus also made a friend through it. She had enrolled to be a member of my chapter. Well and we really click. With her I'm now going to Venice. So that's also an addition to it, that there are a couple of women with whom it clicks more than with others, that you also make real friends. That's not really the intention, but of course it does happen. That goes without saying.

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7 Sanna also uses the Dutch word "gezellig", see previous note.

For Monique making friends is thus an unexpected conse-
quence of the Red Hat Society. Other Hatters more or less see
this as a goal, since it is also something that is advertised by
the overall organisation, which states that the Red Hat Society
is about 'fun' and 'friendship' after fifty.

Like other studies about the Red Hat Society, I have also
found that Red Hatters offer each other emotional support
(Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al.,
2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; 2010). Red Hatters
give ample examples of how they have felt strengthened by
other chapter members who were there for them in times of
hardship. "They do feel for each other. I mean it's not only fun
and laughter. No, that does happen, but there are also very
serious things that get discussed," Froukje says. She particu-
larly experienced this a year before I met her, when she was
diagnosed with cancer.

> Froukje: Well, I had last year… well I will spare you the history,
> but one day I appeared to have a tumor in my heart the size of
> a tennis ball. (…) But the attention I then was given from the
> ladies. Unbelievable! And the amount of cards and presents and
> care.

Josje tells a similar story of companionship and support,
which she experienced after she broke her pelvis through a
skiing accident.

> Josje: If you have a small group, then you just have more com-
> mitment, you get to know each other, you learn to respect one
> another, you learn about each other's joys and sorrows (…). Last
> year I for example had to stay in bed for two months. Then I
> almost never was with the Red Hat, they all visited. I received
> cards, I received emails, texts. So yes you feel that connection.

The Hatters making friends and supporting each other in the-
se times of hardship are again aspects of the Red Hat Society
that are more serious. Moreover, for many of the Hatters this
is an important part of why the Red Hat Society appeals to

them. This is especially true for Mariska, one of my respondents, who joined the Red Hat Society after she had lost her mother who had been a Red Hatter for years. Her story shows how the Red Hat Society sometimes also has an important role in funerals, which most people would agree are the ('less fun' and) 'more serious' parts of life.

Example 3: Death and funerals

Mariska was not yet a member of the Red Hat Society when she also encountered the strong sense of solidarity that can exist between the Red Hatters. Her mother had been a Red Hatter for almost nine years when one day she became gravely ill. One year later, she passed away. Mariska and her mother did not have a good relation, and she thought of her mother's illness as their last chance to bond. Hence she decided to quit her job and to spend what would be the last year of her mother's life with her. Mariska experienced how almost every day her mother received phone calls, visits, flowers and other self-made things from her chapter the 'Purple Pimpernels'.[8]

The day her mother died Mariska had asked one of the Red Hatters, with whom her mother had become close, to watch over her so she herself could go out for a little while to take a walk. As faith would have it that Red Hatter died, suddenly, two days later. "And then I thought it seems like those two are just sitting with their little red hat on…, because both of them also got a red hat with them in their coffin. They both are sitting with their little red hats upstairs on a bench [laughs] making a long nose at everyone saying 'we continue the party here upstairs.'" On her mother's cremation there were more than sixty Red Hatters who were there to fulfil her last wishes and to support her chapter. They were the ones who were the last to be with Mariska's mother before she was cremated. This was not something that was fully understood by the people that did not know her mother well, but Mariska herself

8 This is an English translation of the Dutch name *'Paarse Pimpernellen'*.

thought it was very special.

> Mariska: Because my mother had really decided that the casket would stay there, everyone is going to leave, the Red Hatters can stay and they will send me off. And I consciously chose to, because they said 'even though you're not a Red Hatter at this time if you want to stay…'. And then I said 'well no this really is your 'celebration' as a manner of speaking'. So I left and the auditorium closed and they've just done their thing, so that was really something private for my mother.

Mariska's mother has certainly not been the only Red Hatter whose funeral was a testimonial of the strong impact the Red Hat Society has had upon her life. Researchers studying the Red Hat Society in the US found that this happens more often. Yarnal and her colleagues (2011) even titled one of their articles after this phenomenon: *"She was buried in her purple dress and her red hat and all of our members wore full 'Red Hat Regalia' to celebrate her life"*. In a conversation with her chapter members, Marijke also discussed her wish that they wear their signature colours to her funeral.

> Marijke: But and then the conversation comes to be about funerals. Well and then I said 'well if one of you would die, would you appreciate it if we are present in full regalia?' (…) And then some people said in the chapter that 'well I would feel awful to go to someone's funeral all dressed up'. Yes but then I said 'that depends on the person who is getting buried'. Because if that would be me I would really appreciate it if everyone would go like that. And then my family would also think 'well that's how she was and that was her life'. (…) and that are things we are going to be confronted with and that's not fun. But still you should go through that together.

The last sentence of this quote again testifies to the fact that the Red Hat Society also includes serious things that these women are sometimes faced with. Moreover, it also suggests that the boundary between the Red Hat Society and everyday life is not always solid. Marijke, for instance, literally says that her

family would think this "was her *life*".

It was only after her mother had died that Mariska truly came to understand the impact the Red Hat Society had on her life. Going through her mother's belongings, she found a huge amount of red hats and other adornments, which showed enormous commitment. Mariska hence concludes that the Red Hat Society must have meant much more to her mother than occasional moments of fun.

> Mariska: And when my mother had passed, I was really surprised by the enormous amount of stuff, hats, and my mother was really creative, so she made a lot of things herself, but she had a separate closet full of red and purple things and many hats that she had made herself, and really beautiful! (…) yes that I thought was really special and I also thought 'gee mum, why have you never said something about that?' But later I thought 'yes I never really asked you something'. You know of course I called sometimes 'then she said no I'm going away with the Red Hats', I said 'alright have a good time'. But that was it actually. And when in hindsight you find so much stuff you think 'lord', you know, 'it surely was much more than I would have thought'. It thus was so much more to her than just a club.

I believe that, given everything, the last sentence of this quote could just as easily have been the Red Hat Society 'was so much more to her than *just fun*'. Because of this experience, Mariska decided to honour her mother by joining a chapter of her own and by wearing the hats and clothes that she has made.

Conclusion

Since the appearance of Huizinga's and Caillois' pioneering studies, scholars commonly regard 'separateness' to be the main dimension of play. Huizinga's (1950: 13) most cited description of play is that it is "a free activity standing quite consciously outside of 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly." However, Huizinga is also very clear about play having another major characteristic that, up until today, remains understudied.

This characteristic is play's inherent 'ambiguity', which is also a subject reflected on by Bateson (2006), Schechner (1985), Bakhtin (1984), Turner (1982) and Sutton-Smith (2001). These authors suggest with Huizinga that play has the tendency to move into different directions at once. As such, play escapes the contradictions of real and unreal, truth and illusion, belief and make-belief, and fun and seriousness. Huizinga argues that the claim that play is 'not serious' is therefore easy to refute, because "the contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid (…), play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play" (Huizinga, 1950: 8).

This study has shown, so far, that this ambiguity is also at the core of the Red Hat Society, which continuously stirs into two seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, it is evident that the Red Hatters see the Red Hat Society as something fun, making it different from 'ordinary' life: it is voluntary, there are other rules, the Hatters adopt other roles, names and – occasionally – personalities. The Red Hatters hence see the Red Hat Society as liberating them from the drudgeries and constraints of everyday life and this is an important part of why they enjoy their membership. In some cases it seems as if the women are also working hard at maintaining the boundaries of the Red Hat Society so as the keep it 'just for fun'. They stress, for instance, that the Red Hat Society is not for talking about personal problems or making friends. However, despite these efforts, I have found many examples of the Red Hat Society still having 'serious' aspects. The Red Hat Society helps women deal with different difficulties in their daily lives, as is also suggested by other studies and then particularly those with a focus on 'coping' (e.g. Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; 2010). This study differs from previous studies about the Red Hat Society in that it lets in the ambiguity of its play, by which it not only shows that the Red Hat Society is serious, but also fun. The Red Hat Society is both: it is not all fun 'or' all serious, but it is fun 'and' serious.

Moreover, the examples of the Red Hat Society's serious

sides show that the boundaries of its play are not very solid. The magic circle is shown to be fluid as play leaks into the Red Hatters' everyday lives, and aspects of their everyday lives leak into play. The Red Hat Society, for instance, influences how some of the Red Hatters feel in their everyday lives, who they engage with in their everyday lives, the amount of support they receive in dealing with hardship in their everyday lives, etc. The example of the funeral, it may be argued, extends the influence of play even further than this, where play not only plays a role in ordinary life but also in the afterlife, with some Red Hatters literally taking their red hat with them into their graves. Sometimes the Red Hatter's ordinary lives also enter the play world when they share occasional instances of hardship. This all indicates that the boundary that is supposed to separate play from 'real' or everyday life is itself ambiguous. Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 95) also point in this direction when they notice about the magic circle that: "As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and an end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless." In short, the magic circle should be regarded as "a finite space with infinite possibility."

Because ambiguity is at the heart of play's boundary between itself and 'real' or everyday life, it can be argued that it is an even more fundamental dimension of play than separateness. Hence, this dimension deserves more empirical scrutiny and theorisation which is the object of the following chapters, starting with the next chapter where I show that ambiguity is also at the heart of the Red Hat Society's performance of identity.

Chapter 4: Negotiating femininity and age

In the previous chapter I approached the Red Hat Society from the perspective of play as a practice that, in some ways, sets itself apart from everyday life. I showed that the Red Hat Society is ambiguous as it moves between fun and seriousness and between being part of an extraordinary 'play-world' and of ordinary life. With regard to the former it was evident that aspects of the Red Hat Society leak into the everyday lives of the Red Hatters and vice versa. This finding, however, is still somewhat different from the idea that everyday life is itself played, as is implied by the social constructivist theories that I discussed in chapter 1. The current chapter hence looks at the Red Hat Society and the Red Hatters from the 'etic' perspective of play as identity performance. How can we understand the Red Hat Society, the Hatters and their enjoyments from this perspective?

In the next section I discuss the relation between this social constructivist perspective upon identity and the emergence of second-wave feminism, and its fierce rejection of 'femininity'. Then follow three empirical sections in which I show that the Red Hatters often reverse well-known cultural discourses and expectations around femininity and ageing. In the first section I argue that by 'celebrating' ageing, Red Hatters turn-around discourses that link ageing to physical and social deterioration. In the second section I show that the Hatters make a 'spectacle' of themselves, and as such contest the idea that older women should fade into the woodwork. And in the third section, I show that the Hatters counter a typically feminine role pattern by pursuing 'personal pleasure'. Because of this continuous 'norm', 'role' and 'rule' reversal, I call the performance of identity evident in the Red Hat Society an expression of *radical femininity*.

Feminism and femininity

As a specific group of scholars and activists, feminists have historically played an important role in the development and popularisation of a constructivist perspective upon identity. We may think for instance of Simone de Beauvoir's profoundly influential depiction of gender in *The Second Sex* (1953), with which she rejected the 'common sense' view that gender is natural for a perspective that acknowledges its cultural and ideological basis. De Beauvoir (1953: 249) famously expressed this by saying that "one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman." Not much later, her ideas would become part of what has become known as 'the second wave' of the women's movement, which had its being during the countercultural years of the 1960s and 1970s. This is a period that most of the Red Hatters experienced, first-hand, as girls and young women. Typical of the second-wave was the emergence of a host of different ideas, protests and organisations that challenged women's position on cultural, political, sexual and economic matters. By itself the second-wave was never built on a unified feminist ideology. Yet, together the works of popular feminist writers and scholars from that period did define a common foe, namely: 'femininity'. As Joanne Hollows (2000: 2) argues, "second-wave feminism, and the identity 'feminist', was predicated on a rejection of femininity." As a result, femininity became constituted as a 'problem' within feminist politics, as it was viewed as the main source of women's oppression (see Hollows, 2000; Johnson, 2004; Tong, 1992).

This is already evident in the publication that is considered to have started the second-wave in the US: *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan. In it, Friedan fiercely criticises a social development in the 1950s, in which the public involvement of women declined as relatively 'highly' educated middle-class women became stay-at-home wives and mothers whose only job it was to fulfil their feminine potential. According to Friedan, these 'Stepford-type' housewives led a constrained existence causing them unremitting unhappiness even in the face of material wealth. Her critique of feminini-

ty led Friedan to also be critical of its enactment in typically feminine leisure activities, which is also a returning theme within the second-wave and feminist writings after that period. Friedan specifically lashes out at women's magazines for perpetuating 'false' images of the happy housewife and the unhappy career woman, which told young women that domesticity is the road to fulfilment. Other feminist writers have since then condemned other popular feminine pastimes, such as romance novels, the woman's film, soap operas, balls and beauty salons, because they allegedly socialize women and girls into traditional feminine roles, teaching them to be caring, romantic and submissive objects of the male gaze.

A famous example is Germaine Greer (1970: 211) who calls romantic fiction "the opiate of the supermenial," enjoyed by the naive woman who, in fantasy, cherishes the chains of her own bondage. "If female liberation is to happen (...) this sterile self-deception must be counteracted," says Greer (*Ibid.*: 212). Molly Haskell speaks in very similar terms about the soap opera and woman's film, claiming that: "as soap opera, the 'woman's film' fills a masturbatory need, it is soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife" (Haskell, cited in Hollows, 2000: 42). Andrea Dworkin (1974: 115) argues about beauty practices and the physical pain they at times may cause, that they serve "to prepare women for lives of childbearing, self-abnegation, and husband-pleasing."

Over the years such ideas have sparked much controversy, not least within feminism itself. In the 1980s and 1990s, particularly, scholars in cultural studies like Janice Radway (1984) and Ien Ang (1990) started to criticise other feminists for presenting women who enjoy feminine activities as 'cultural dupes'. As they argue, the critiques of second-wave feminists are built on a notion that women passively absorb traditionalist messages embedded in cultural products. Radway and Ang respectively study romance readers and people watching soap operas, showing that – far from being passive – women 'doing femininity' are involved in a continuous activity of appropriating meaning to the products they enjoy; and within

this process they also challenge and negotiate dominant cultural norms and conventions (see Andrews, 1997; Harrison, 1997; Hermes, 1995; Hollows, 2003 and Radner, 1989; 1995 for similar analyses). As such, Radway and Ang argue that second-wave feminists frequently ignore the complex and often contradictory ways in which women give shape and meaning to their femininity. Judith Butler (1990) additionally criticises second-wave theories for positioning women as one monolithic group, thereby failing to recognise that femininity is crosscut by many other identities such as class, race, sexuality, marital status, motherhood and age. According to Butler, performances of gender are always situated, complex and multi-layered. As Connell argues, they include instances of compliance, co-optation and resistance (Connell, 1987; Davies and Harre, 1990; Leahy, 1994; Schippers, 2002; Smith, 1998; Weedon, 1988).

Because femininity is thus never straightforward, it is important not to reify it as many second-wave feminists have done, but to study its different manifestations, which means asking empirical questions: When is femininity performed? How is it performed? Under what conditions?, etc. These types of questions inform the remainder of this chapter, which studies how the Red Hatters perform femininity within the context of the Red Hat Society. In studying this, I will also specifically focus on how this performance of femininity is crosscut by age. That is, because gender and age both are central aspects of the Red Hat Society's performance of identity. We may recall, shortly, that the Red Hat Society is an organisation or network that offers leisure for women only, whereby it reserves the red hat for its members over fifty. On the one hand, the Red Hat Society can be seen as conforming to a classical femininity. For instance, because it emphasises feminine appearance, of which the hat is a traditional hallmark, and because most of the activities the Red Hatters engage in are also typically feminine. Frequently named chapter activities include: tea parties, lunches, singing, dancing, cooking, making flower arrangements, etc. However, as my analysis will show the

Red Hatters also challenge and contest hegemonic ideas about femininity and age (and the ways in which they intersect).

Still full of life and fun!

One of the most striking things about the Red Hat Society, for instance, is that it positions female ageing as something that merits celebration, with which it attributes special importance to reaching the age of fifty. The fiftieth birthday is used to mark a woman's transition into (officially) becoming a Red Hatter. I observed how this happened for Martine, who was one of the Pink Hatters I encountered during my fieldwork. She had invited me to her '*red*-uation' party, which took place on the exact day that she turned fifty. This party included a ceremony in which Martine was called to stand before her chapter Queen, who used a long plastic flower to tap Martine on both shoulders. After that she took Martine's pink hat and replaced it with a red fedora. This gesture happened before a group of about twenty other Red Hatters, who sat around a table with purple table cloths, and various high tea treats, including chocolates, scones and marzipan shaped in the form of red tea roses. The Hatters clapped their hands and proceeded to sing Martine a special birthday song that they had written for the occasion. Then the party continued as a more or less regular birthday (field notes, 8 November 2011).

Martine's '*red*-uation' is an example of the way in which the Red Hat Society uses the red hat as a reward to celebrate female ageing, turning this process that may be dreaded or feared by many women into something positive to look forward to. The cultural idea that ageing is a dreadful process is rooted in medical discourses that are commonly found within social gerontology and psychoanalysis, which focus on the loss that comes with age of physical and mental health and ability (Chivers, 2011; Nelson, 2004; Palmore, 1999; Silver, 2003). In relation to this, it is also commonly suggested that 'older' women are increasingly confronted with a social isolation as a result of illness and death of spouses (Hurd, 1999; Wearing, 1995). While expectations such as these also posit

ageing as a negative experience for men, some discourses of decay are more specifically directed against the ageing female body (Lock, 1993). This is, for instance, particularly visible in the way in which menopause has been conceptualized and treated by physicians as a disease or the "fatal touch of death itself" (Lyons and Griffin, 2003; Kristeva, cited in Silver, 2003: 383).

I found that the Red Hatters contest such discourses through a public display of fun, which according to them shows other people that they are 'still full of life'. Annette, for instance, uses this expression arguing that society tends to favour young people and hence marginalizes older women. The Red Hat Society, she says, helps them challenge negative stereotypes.

> Annette: And yes, it is also a bit of rebellion against the youth, a bit like 'guys there's no way you can put us out with the garbage!' Even though we're older, we are still full of life. I don't feel like fading into the woodwork.

In this quote Annette also resists the idea that midlife and older women should get used to becoming invisible in public life, which is seen as a typical result of women's ageing (Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Holland, 2004; Silver, 2003). The 'official' website of the Red Hat Society in the US says that it enables women to "shout back at the stigma on mature women in society with a mighty Red Hat roar." According to Joyce, there are two related ways in which the Red Hat Society does this.

> Joyce: It [the Red Hat Society] shows that for one there are a whole lot of older people [laughing]. (...) And secondly that they still have a whole lot of fun.

For the same two reasons Betsy Wearing (1995) argues that enjoying publicly visible leisure is a way for midlife and older people to counter discourses of decay. In this context 'fun' stretches beyond being a personal experience and becomes a meaningful cultural concept: an indicator of 'play' and 're-

sistance'. Because by showing that they still have fun, the Red Hatters go directly against interpretations of ageing as a negative experience of physical and social deterioration.

Some Red Hatters indicate that being with the Red Hat Society hence also helped them negotiate their own negative views about ageing. Although this is not something that I encountered much within my own conversations, the websites and books published by the Red Hat Society contain many examples of this. In *Red Hats & the Women Who Wear Them* (2006: 105), for instance, Pat says that before she joined the Red Hat Society she experienced much difficulty with becoming older.

> "Before I became a Red Hatter, I found it very difficult to accept the results of aging and hated those 'milestone' birthdays (...). Now, when I put on my red hat, I feel young at heart and forget about my wrinkles, extra pounds, and aches and pains and focus instead on the joy of another fun-filled get-together with my chapter sisters."

Pat combines the medical discourse (the 'aches and pains') with a discourse about losing a youthful appearance (the 'wrinkles and extra pounds'), which both work together in turning the ageing female body into something pathological. Yet, most of the Red Hatters do not experience ageing as dreadful at all. In fact, they express the opposite: that it is actually quite fun to become older. This is particularly the case for Martine, whom I interviewed before she invited me to her '*red*-uation'. I asked her if she also felt that it is important to celebrate ageing, and she answered:

> Martine: Yes, completely! Because I'll tell you, I don't colour my hair and every grey hair is applauded by me. And this week, I'll show you, I was brushing my hair and one of them let go, I think 'sure, but that one I'm going to paste in my diary'. Look here it is...
> Samira: Oh yes.
> Martine: It's a really long, grey curl. I'm really proud of it. I feel it's really fun to get older. And sometimes they say 'you should-

n't tell your age', but I still do it. Everyone is allowed to know I'm in my fiftieth life year.

Like most of the other Red Hatters I spoke with, Martine does not share Pat's initial fear of getting older. As a result, the Red Hat Society has not altered the way she views ageing as she already felt ageing was something to enjoy and celebrate.

The Red Hat Society also promotes a 'rule' that prohibits members to 'nag' about illnesses and other personal hardships. As I also explained in the previous chapter, many of the Red Hatters define this rule as a source of pleasure and oppose nagging with the fun experiences they strive after (see chapter 3).

> Janna: The nice thing is, you don't have any obligations. It's just cosy, it's gay[1], we are not going to nag, and you don't get the chance to go on for hours about all your illnesses or other stuff. We have known each other for quite some years, of course, so you do ask how things are, but you cannot go on for half a night. It's just, we have an uncomplicated evening, and if you want to talk, you can talk about easy things; everyone has their problems and you can leave them at home that night.

By prohibiting 'nagging' the Red Hat Society relates itself to a view of older women as always complaining about everything, as is embodied in the figures of the 'hag', the 'mother-in-law' and the 'senile old lady' (Greer, 1991). As I showed in chapter 3 this rule does not mean that the Hatters do not support each other in times of hardship. However, it does signify an attempt made by the Hatters to publicly define the Red Hat Society as 'fun'.

With this public exhibition of fun, the performance of femininity that is promoted by the Red Hat Society challenges ageist discourses that suggest that ageing is a dreadful experience for women (in a way that is comparable to that descri-

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1 Janna uses the Dutch word "gezellig", which is notoriously untranslatable. In this case it refers to a feeling of cosiness, uncomplicatedness and easiness.

bed by Hurd, 1999 and Wearing, 1995, for midlife and older people in general). While these discourses claim that ageing leads to their physical and social demise, the Red Hat Society by contrast lets women over fifty engage in publicly visible leisure. During such activities the Red Hatters display themselves as a group of seemingly like-minded women, who all dress in the same (vibrant) colours, which creates an image of the socially active woman of middle age and older. As said, Red Hatters often connect this image with showing others that they are 'still full of life'. The Red Hatters thus turn-around different negative expectations around female ageing, as they are 'active' instead of 'inactive' and 'social' instead of 'isolated'. They engage in 'fun' instead of 'nagging' about hardship, and they 'celebrate' ageing instead of 'fearing' its potential negative outcomes. As one Hatter put it in one of the Red Hat Society's publications (Red Hat Society, 2006: 100): "My hat makes me feel like I'm saying, 'Hey, everybody! I'm over 50 and still full of life and fun!'"

Back into the limelight
Even though fun is one of the Red Hat Society's most pronounced aspects, the thing that draws the most attention remains its spectacular style of dress: the red hats, purple attires, boas and flashy jewellery are literally flaunted by the Red Hatters during their events and then especially during the national and international conventions. These conventions always include a Red Hat Society parade in which the women showcase themselves and their regalia to the public. I went along to two of those parades during my fieldwork, where I saw how people passing by momentarily dropped their activities to gaze at the women. Some did even more than that and started to take pictures or spontaneously wave at the Hatters. Other people stopped the women to ask what it was that they were part off. Most of the Red Hatters took the time to answer them and to pose for their (telephone)cameras. They also responded to the attention of newspaper- and television reporters (e.g. field notes, 21 April 2011 and 3 July 2011).

Betty explains that she draws "many positive feelings from that (...) how happy people get from seeing us. People always think we are performing." Indeed, many of the Red Hatters consider this to be the most fun aspect of the Red Hat Society. Janna, for instance, also says that she likes the attention the Red Hatters get from people and how their presence seems to make them happy.

> Janna: It just looks so joyful. And there are always people coming up to us asking 'what is this, what do you do?' Yeah, I think that's fun. It's not just that it cheers us up but very often others too. Occasionally someone says, pffff, ridiculous bunch (...), but usually people do cheer up when they see us.

Sue Ellen Cooper and the Red Hat Society organisation link this public attention, and the Red Hatters' enjoyment of it, to celebrity culture. They compare it to the Red Hatters pretending to be stars for the moment that they wear their hats.

> "People just assume you're famous when you wear a beautiful hat. And somehow, you start to feel like a celebrity; you become incognito and a standout all at the same time. Everywhere you walk, there is a red carpet. Everywhere you look, people glance at you in admiration" (Red Hat Society, 2006: 23).

According to Jackie Stacey (1994) this 'pretending' to be stars offers women relief from everyday burdens and responsibilities, while it also lets them embody an ideal of feminine beauty. She argues that the female star is an important role model on which cultural ideals of glamour and feminine appearance are inscribed. She is a fiction that ordinary women do not get to embody going about their everyday lives, but are nonetheless considered to strive after. John Berger captures the dominance of beauty in hegemonic conceptions of femininity with his saying: "Men act, women *appear*. Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 1972: 45, italics in original). This ideal of feminine attractiveness is built around a youthful appearance, which means that as a woman beco-

mes older the ideal becomes even more and more difficult to reach. Hence, midlife and older women often report having to battle feelings of being invisible in public life (Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Greer, 1991; Stalp et al., 2008; 2009).

The public invisibility of older women goes together with the expectation that they try and dress more modestly, and "perhaps even take less trouble and care with their appearance" (Holland, 2004: 117). The Red Hatters' choice for the hat and extreme colours challenges such ageist discourses about feminine appearance that together suggest that older women should fade into the woodwork (see also Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2014; Yarnal, 2006; Yarnal et al., 2011). Some of the Red Hatters enjoyed their spectacular attires so much that when I met them for a one-on-one interview they were also dressed in full Red Hat Society regalia. Froukje is one of these Hatters, and she explains the joy of looking conspicuous as follows:

> Froukje: Even if you're out with just the two, even if you're out on your own, then I already have a lot of looks coming my way. But I just love that. Because in my private life I already had a red hat, I already had it for twenty years. Well sixteen years. But if I'm just here shopping in Heerenveen², by myself, I don't wear this hat or these clothes, but I nearly always have a purple coat or a purple hat on. I just like that. And then people also look at me, I also like that. Indeed, what's the fun of that? [laughing] It must be a disorder, I don't know.

Joyce explains the fun of looking conspicuous more in terms of the position of older women in society. According to her the clothes indeed help to make middle-aged and older women more visible.

> Joyce: This is indeed part of the game, that if you're walking around in your fantastic outfit, everybody is looking at you. Everybody thinks it's great. (...) That's just the charisma of the clothes. And women my age [usually] don't get this attention,

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2 Heerenveen is a small city in the Northern part of the Netherlands.

because we have become somewhat invisible, but then suddenly we are visible again.

One Red Hatter expresses this with the saying: "my hat has put me back into the limelight." With their conspicuous attires, the Red Hatters thus negotiate a specific aspect of the culture around women's ageing. At this point the Red Hat Society operates in similar ways to many youth subcultures, like the Punks, Mods and Skinheads described by Dick Hebdige (1979) in his valued study about "the meaning of style". Hebdige shows that these groups also use spectacular dress as a signifier of cultural resistance (Brake, 2013; Cresswell, 1996; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Tasker, 1993). As for these groups, the clothes of the Red Hatters sometimes evoke strong reactions from other people, which is why not all the Red Hatters feel comfortable exhibiting their regalia while they are on their own. Some women hide their hats in a bag until they are with their group. The uniformity of the group with everyone dressed in the same colours then becomes a safe space for these women to look different.

Some of the Red Hatters talk about this 'looking different' in terms of resisting the hegemonic beauty standard, like Josje who questions the way that it idealizes youthfulness: "Why aren't I allowed to get grey? Why aren't I allowed to get wrinkles?" However, not all of the Red Hatters reject beauty as an important part of femininity. In fact, there are also Red Hatters who, conversely, praise the Red Hat Society regalia because it enables them to embody this ideal, making them feel young and beautiful again. This is, for instance, expressed in the club song of the 'Purple Roses' (field notes, 16 March 2011, italics added).[3]

So here we are for the umpteenth time
With the Purple Roses
For a nice day, because pleasure is fine
With the Purple Roses

3 This verse is a translation from Dutch.

> Dressed in purple, with a hat that is red
> *Feel woman*, *feel young*, that's where we're at
> Your hat chic and grandiose, at the tip of your nose
> With the Purple Roses
> Put your worries away, *the prettiest*, that's you
> Everything is possible, anything goes
> With the Purple Roses

This verse frames the Red Hat Society as a source for women to feel feminine, by making them feel young and beautiful. In the next chapter I describe this conformity of some of the Red Hatters to feminine beauty in more detail. I show that the Red Hatters who value this aspect of the Red Hat Society commonly feel that dress-up should be used to make them look chic as a class specific beauty ideal (see chapter 5). However, were the Hatters adopt this beauty ideal, they also easily combine this co-optation with situated challenges and negotiations of some of its (age specific) consequences.

Of course, it is a well-known fact that the beauty ideal has been central to many second-wave feminists' critiques of femininity, and that this has also remained a main concern of feminists since, voiced among others by Sandra Bartky (1990), Susan Bordo (1993) and Noami Wolf (1991) who argue that this "beauty myth" turns women into passive objects of male desire. This analysis shows, however, that the Red Hatters actively perform this aspect of femininity, and that this performance is hardly ever straightforward; which is a position that has also been defended by cultural studies scholars such as Hilary Radner (1989; 1995) and Lyn Harrison (1997). In fact, it is in this performance of a feminine appearance that the Red Hat Society shows many complexities and ambiguities. We may say that by trying to look young and beautiful, some of the Red Hatters conform to reproducing a conventional feminine identity, but we must also acknowledge that they do not do this all of the time. They also voice critical opinions, whereby they challenge the idea that this identity is no longer available to women of middle-age and older. The Hatters do this, particularly, by making a 'spectacle' of themselves, with

which they challenge midlife- and older women's invisibility in public life. The Red Hatters are 'feminine' where they are not expected to care about their appearances anymore, they are 'visible' where they are supposed to fade into the wood-work; and as such they again turn-around dominant cultural norms around femininity and ageing.

It's me time!
The fun of the Red Hat Society – whether it comes from dressing up in extravagant costumes or joining other women in frivolous activities – is often contrasted by the Red Hatters to women's caretaking responsibilities. The Red Hat Society Cookbook (2007) opens with a theme song in which the line echoes: "All my life, I've done for you. Now it's my turn to do for me." As such, the Red Hatters negotiate yet another set of discourses around femininity; that in this case define women as prime caregivers who are supposed to look after others before they think of themselves. Such ideas still dominate our conceptions of femininity, even though women nowadays are often also employed outside of their homes. Arlie Hochschild (1989) argues that women are commonly forced to work a "second shift" in which they combine their greater share of responsibilities for the family and household with a paid position (see also England, 2010). There are many studies that hence suggest that women in general have less time available to spend on leisure than men (e.g., Henderson and Allen, 1991; Lois, 2010; Shaw, 2001; Wimbush and Talbot, 1988). Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) argue on top of this that women 'taking time for themselves' often encounter feelings of guilt, because this "ethic of care" is part of their own moral compass.

The Red Hatters, by contrast, say that they actually enjoy doing something for themselves for a change. The way they see it, the Red Hat Society offers them a welcome moment for "personal pleasure". "You know we're all, at a certain point, we're considered to be done, we're the mother of such, we're the wives of so, done! Now I'm going for myself," is how

Ruth describes the appeal of the Red Hat Society. Some of the Hatters express this by saying that the Red Hat Society allows them to enjoy leisure time without their husbands and children. Martine for instance says:

> Martine: But men are not the subject. We are the subject. (...) And that's what I like, that you're allowed to be selfish sometimes. Yeah, that you're allowed to find something fun and also spend money on that. That's also special, fun.

Martine not only raises the issue of claiming time for personal pleasure, but also the money that this requires. Indeed, it is considered one of the consequences of the ethic of care that women are less likely to spend time, but also money on themselves (Vogler, 1998).

This is also something that I encountered when I talked to two Red Hatters during a high tea. I asked the women why they had joined the Red Hat Society, upon which one of the women answered that she felt that this was the only organisation that she could join solely for her own personal enjoyment. She continued with telling me an anecdote about a dinner she had with the Red Hatters and a friend whom she had invited to come along. At the same time, her husband was also having dinner together with some other husbands of Red Hatters, who had decided to come together when their wives were out donning their red hats. During the dinner the Red Hatters had only ordered a main dish, while the Hatter's friend had also liked a dessert. Afterwards her friend had said to her that she should not pinch her pennies the way the other Hatters had done: "the men are out now too, do you think that they have been this parsimonious!" Later that evening, the Hatter had asked her husband what he and the other men had spent and this turned out to be three times the amount spent by the women. She closed the anecdote saying that this could also pose an interesting sociological question: "Why women are less willing to spend money on themselves than men?" (field notes, 14 June 2011).

It is suggested that this is because women often feel they

should take care of others and their pleasures before they think of their own. As said, the Hatters tend to contest such ideas by choosing to do something for themselves ('for a change'). Another example is given by Marja who states that the only goal she and her chapter have with the Red Hat Society is personal pleasure.

> Marja: We have explicitly said that our only goal is personal pleasure. So no contributions to knowledge or skills, or whatever, in terms of the women's movement. Really personal pleasure is the only goal.

The interesting thing here is that Marja says that she and the other Red Hatters consciously refrain from efforts to improve the position of women in society, and to have personal pleasure instead. However, by choosing personal pleasure she already challenges an important aspect of the cultural position of women. Francine Deutsch, for instance, also notes that "when women refuse to conform to gender norms, take time for recreation despite family responsibilities (...) they undermine the stereotypical perceptions that buoy up an ideology of inequality" (Deutsch, 2007: 113).

Sanna a thirty-eight year old Pink Hatter with three young children gave the most elaborate example of how personal pleasure in the Red Hat Society can help women negotiate care giving responsibilities.

> Sanna: I think that the period that I lived at home indeed, I was very concerned with pleasing others, especially my parents. So yes, then you put yourself on hold a little, then you do what they want and what they think is good, and you let this come over you. Well and then when you finally leave the house to go studying (…). Well, then you're really focused on yourself. Well, I didn't find that problematic at all (…). But then you really are focused on yourself, then I think you're actually very selfish in everything (…). Then I met my husband at school there. (…) And then you're doing a lot of things that are good for you and for him and for the couple. (…) And now with children, yes then you've taken it a step further, then you're not only busy

with your husband, but also your children. Then again you're not working on yourself. And that's what you have with the Red Hat, so there I *am* concerned with myself. So now you compensate it a little again. I mean, at a certain point you think 'sure guys, I'm not in this world to make everybody glad and happy, I'm also still here myself.'

Sanna's story may be a-typical in the sense that she is much younger than most of the Red Hatters, whose children, if they had any, are not likely to be living at home anymore. Still, as we have seen, the idea that most of their lives have been about pleasing others and that it is now high-time for some 'me time' is shared by more women.

Of course there are reasons to assume that discourses around care produce fewer constraints for midlife and older women, since they usually do not have young children anymore. Still, there is some discussion about whether this means that caretaking responsibilities actually stop or rather change form (Dillaway, 2006; Gallagher, 1994). Most likely is that the recipients of women's care change with age, where care for children becomes less important and is replaced with care of grandchildren, parents and – maybe even – non-related people. There is, for instance, research that shows that older women are often assumed to do volunteer work (Gallagher, 1994). This is also something that the Red Hatters contest, by stressing time and again that the Red Hat Society is not about volunteering. Sanna and Janna explain this very clearly.

Sanna: And we are often asked 'do you also support a cause?' And then we say 'yes, ourselves. We are our own cause'. And then they look a little like, 'huh, is that possible?', because shouldn't you have some kind of cause? Well in principle we don't have that, just ourselves, a little fun for ourselves, that's all there is to it.

Janna: What I like is that we do not have to do any charity work, because with other service clubs you have to take action for different causes, for instance water wells in Africa. That is something you can do for the rest of the month, but we do not do

that.

Because the discourses that define hegemonic femininity in our society instruct women to direct their pleasures toward the care for others, women taking pleasure from doing something for themselves automatically constitute a challenge to existing gender norms. In this way, the acts of the Red Hatters resemble those Radway (1984) discusses about romance readers, who too are looking for a form of self-indulgence that takes them away from ongoing care responsibilities. The same is true for women who read women's magazines, as work by Joke Hermes (1995) shows us.

What the Red Hatters especially share with these examples is that the leisure they engage in is often typically feminine in terms of its content. Frequently named examples of their activities are: tea parties, lunches, shopping frenzies, (belly-)dancing classes, beauty workshops, cooking and making flower arrangements. Like women's magazines and romance novels, such activities are often considered to be expressions of a hegemonic femininity and to profess gender conformity. However, as Radway and Hermes argue, women who enjoy these activities also resist an important aspect of hegemonic femininity, as they take 'a break' from their responsibilities around care. The Hatters seem to take it even further than this, by actually professing that women choose to go for themselves for a change. Moreover, the Red Hat Society allows for this challenge of femininity and care to become distinctly visible as it offers its leisure in a highly public and conspicuous package. To give one last example, the official US website maintains a page with testimonials of supporting members, which is provocatively titled: "It's me time!"

Radical femininity
This analysis of the Red Hat Society has thus made visible many of the layers and complexities that performing femininity can entail. Again we see the Red Hatters moving into multiple directions at once: we can see them enacting a classic set of norms that are associated with being properly femini-

ne, while also critiquing some of these same norms and their consequences for middle-aged and older women. Therefore, I would like to call the performance of femininity apparent in the Red Hat Society an expression of *radical femininity*, because the Red Hatters at once enjoy radically feminine practices and activities with which they conform to hegemonic gender norms, while they also rebel against some of these same norms.

Of course the term 'radical' is widely used as a negative etiquette for (groups of) people who challenge culture on matters of identity and who are, hence, considered by the rest of society as 'going too far' or 'being excessive'. These are also two aspects that are visible in the Red Hat Society, which is why I deliberately choose to use and re-appropriate the 'radical' in 'radical femininity'. The first aspect that I refer to is 'excess', the 'going overboard', which is a distinct trademark of the Red Hat Society: with the Red Hatters engaging in 'shameless self-indulgence', 'making a spectacle of themselves', and publicly 'exhibiting fun for older women'. With these acts the Red Hatters challenge conventionalised notions of femininity, and the ways in which they intersect with age. This is the second aspect of radical femininity, namely that the Red Hat Society – in this sense – has political power. The Red Hat Society is not politics in terms of the meanings it has for Red Hatters, but it does have potentially far reaching political implications on the level of its performance of identity.

The Red Hat Society thus calls upon excess as a disruptive power, something that it often accomplishes by turning things around. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Hatters reverse existing norms and conventions: they celebrate ageing, while ageing is often surrounded with dread; they claim attention through extreme appearances, where they are expected to become invisible, and; they do something for their own 'personal' pleasure, where they are expected to shelve their own 'wants' in order to care and cater for those of others. In chapter 3 I argued that this reversal of social rules and conventions is a characteristic of play when it is conceived as a bounded

practice. It is, for instance, linked to the carnivalesque, which Bakhtin (1998: 251) describes to be "the reverse side of the world." He argues that: "All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à lenvers), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties" (Bakhtin, 1984: 11).

Hence, excess can be seen as an important aspect of play, as it temporarily shelves social structure and allows for behaviour that goes beyond the 'usual' or that what is considered 'proper' and 'normal'. We may say, following Bakhtin (1998: 254), that excessiveness is "the violation of the usual and the generally accepted, life drawn out of its usual rut." In this context it is not surprising that excess has been theorized as an act that pushes the limits of femininity primarily by those studying feminist comedians: like Susan Glenn's (2002) study of *Sarah Bernhard* and Kathleen Rowe's (1995) study of *Roseanne Barr*. These individual female performers used excess often in the form of the grotesque to make visible the taken for granted rules that structure being woman. Rowe calls them "unruly women" and Glenn "female eccentrics", who "disrupt the norms of femininity and the social hierarchy of male over female through excess and outrageousness" (Rowe, 1995: 30). The Red Hat Society operates in similar ways to such theatrical and television performers: it is located within play and it is inherently ambiguous.

As we have seen, the Red Hat Society moves between compliance and resistance of hegemonic femininity. At the same time it is not politics, but it does have potentially far reaching cultural-political consequences. Conceived in Butler's terms, radical femininity simultaneously deconstructs and rebuilds some of the codes of femininity and therefore it is a performance that in some ways 'troubles' gender (Butler, 1990). It is clear that by showcasing excess the Red Hatters create new discourses about what it could mean to be a woman of middle

age and older, discourses that challenge and negotiate the ones already in existence. The Red Hat Society hence falls within a broad understanding of politics, which sees it as those practices aimed at bringing about change in society. In the past this definition of politics has been used to include new social movements and the personal experiences of marginalized groups as sites of power, dominance and resistance (Fennema and Van der Wouden, 1982). It is like Betty says: "despite [the fact] that the Red Hats don't have a political colour, and we never talk about politics, but it [the Red Hat Society] still has the power."

Conclusion
As my analysis in this chapter has shown, ambiguity is again at the heart of the Red Hat Society and its performance of identity. The Red Hatters constantly move between compliance and resistance of hegemonic norms around femininity and age. On the one hand, the Red Hat Society includes classically feminine performances with women wearing hats, dressing up, and engaging in other beauty practices; all of which are things that the Red Hatters enjoy. Very often they also enjoy doing typically feminine activities such as lunches, shopping, crafting, making flower arrangements, cooking, etc. Yet, the Red Hatters also challenge and negotiate age and femininity, and then primarily by invoking excess: by enjoying leisure time for themselves, by dressing in extravagant colours and by publicly exhibiting fun for older women. As such, the Hatters show signs that they both enjoy performing femininity in more or less conventional ways and in more or less challenging ways.

A result of this is that the Red Hatters cannot be placed in an either/or position between 'feminism' and 'femininity'. In the beginning of this chapter I explained how these two were constructed as opposite identities by feminists of the second-wave, who saw femininity as an oppressive force (Hollows, 2000). This rejection of femininity and its enactment in leisure is very evident in the work of popular writers from the second-wave, such as Friedan and Greer. In itself this is an in-

teresting fact, since many (though certainly not all) feminists of the second-wave also propagated a more or less constructivist perspective upon identity, by arguing that femininity and masculinity are not natural but social: consisting of culturally learned and enforced behaviour. Yet, at the same time these feminists of the second-wave still reified femininity, as something that is necessarily conformist and oppressive. This analysis by contrast has shown that femininity is always a performance that is situated, complex and often contradictory (see also Butler, 1990 and Connell, 1987). The Red Hatters, who have often experienced the heydays of this second-wave, constantly move between and combine elements of perceived 'feminine' and 'feminist' positions together in sometimes unexpected ways. The Red Hat Society, it may be argued, offers them a third-way between these two positions: a way to negotiate the volatile space between 'femininity' and 'feminism'.

I have tried to capture this third-way by introducing the term 'radical femininity' to refer to the way in which the Red Hatters push the limits of hegemonic femininity by using excess. Within this performance, femininity does not stand on its own but is constantly crosscut by age. However, age is not the only 'other' identity that is relevant to the Red Hatters. As I will show in the next chapter, their performance of femininity is also crosscut by another important dimension: by 'class'. This dimension introduces diversity among the Hatters and, in some ways, divides them into two camps.

Chapter 5: Two types of Red Hatters

The previous chapter concluded that the Red Hatters perform a radical femininity through which they negotiate some of the (age specific) cultural norms and conventions that surround femininity. I described this 'radical femininity' as a performance that reverses some of these norms and conventions by invoking excess as a disruptive power, and I showed that one of the main ways in which the Red Hatters 'do' this is by 'making a spectacle of themselves'. In describing how the Hatters parade conspicuous looking attires, consisting of red hats, purple dresses, jewellery and other accessories, I already suggested that we are not dealing here with one uniform group of women, who all consciously negotiate femininity in similar ways. In fact, there are profound differences between chapters and individual Hatters: between the hats they wear, their clothes, their ideas, their public presence and demeanour. In other words, Red Hatters demonstrate widely diverging 'styles'. The purpose of this chapter is to describe these differences in rich empirical detail as well as to put them in their individual and social contexts.

These differences are very evident in the red hats that are worn by the Hatters, which come in many shapes and sizes. In the introduction of this book I described how I attended a Red Hat Society convention in Zwolle, and how I travelled there by train. During that train ride, a Red Hatter sat behind me with a hat shaped like a giant teapot, complemented by two matching cups. Another woman, who sat a bit further before me, had a hat made entirely of boas, plus a plastic crown which was displayed at its centre. Yet another of the Hatters wore a hat with a big yellow chicken on top and coloured eggs placed all around it. However, there were also women who wore much more modest and elegant looking hats, with almost no decorations. These hats looked like they were purchased from official hat designers, while the hats that I described before

often appeared to be self-made. The other clothes of the Red Hatters also differed in terms of shape and adornment. While some garments were extravagantly decorated with 'bling', boas, shiny fabrics, little rhinestones, lace gloves and other accessories, other outfits looked more neat and consisted of tightly pleaded skirts, jackets and red pumps without other accessories (field notes, 21 April 2011).

While the previous chapter considered the Red Hatters as one monolithic group in studying how they perform femininity and age, this chapter aims to be more sensitive to these types of differences in (dress-) style. I will mainly be asking two questions: How are they different? And, how do the Hatters who wear them relate to one another? I will argue that these differences, more or less, divide the Hatters into two groups that maintain different perspectives upon the Red Hat Society, and what its aims and purposes are supposed to be. The two main styles that can be discerned among the Red Hatters differ most of all in their relation to 'respectability', which according to Beverley Skeggs (1997) remains an important indicator of middle-class femininity. I draw upon her work, as well as on Veblen's (1994[1899]) and Simmel's (1957[1904]) classical accounts of fashion at the turn of the nineteenth century. Veblen and Simmel argue that women's appearances played a central role in the formation of the middle class, as they were used as symbols of a new morality and a middle-class taste. According to Skeggs, this resulted in an entanglement of femininity with 'respectability' as a signifier of a middle-class identity, which has been used by this middle class to keep lower classes at bay: as a way to reach 'status' and 'distinction'.

In the next section I argue that the Red Hatters who wear chic or elegant hats and clothes perform this respectability, with which they indeed try to establish themselves as women of a 'higher' social standing. The other group of Hatters, who wear the more eccentric and extravagantly decorated hats and clothes, I argue, differentiate themselves from this attempt at a middle-class distinction by making their own hats and garments, preferably against the lowest possible costs. What this

analysis then shows, compared to the previous chapter, is that the performance of identity that is visible within the Red Hat Society not only consists of a performance of femininity that is crosscut by age, but also a performance of femininity that is crosscut by class. I use two mini-biographies of Red Hatters to describe in more detail how the two styles are situated within different individual and social contexts. I conclude this chapter by arguing that the Red Hatters who make their own hats and clothes also use their 'style' to form an identity, which in this case represents a working-class femininity. With this finding, I criticise the way in which Veblen and Simmel describe the working class as mindlessly emulating a middle-class taste.

Respectability as distinction

Earlier in this book I discussed that the costume is an important marker of radical femininity and play within the Red Hat Society. However, the Red Hat Society dress codes are reasonably broad and only prescribe women to wear a red hat and purple looking clothes. This leaves much room for variation, which the Red Hatters use to create their own styles within the overall code. This is most visible during the bigger Red Hat Society events that bring together multiple chapters, like the convention in Zwolle. In the introduction to this chapter, I described some differences in the attires of the Red Hatters that overall seem to suggest that a distinction can be made between two main styles: one that combines elegant and expensive looking hats with fashionable purple clothes, and one that consists of self-made and wildly decorated hats and clothes (field notes, 21 April 2011).

The cruise to Norway that I took together with almost two hundred Red Hatters included a "Fancy Red Hat Show" that can be used to further illustrate this distinction. The show was hosted on the last day at sea in a club on one of the ship's middle-decks. There some of the Red Hatters walked over an improvised runway, with their families and other chapter members sitting in the audience. Of course the Red Hatters were mainly showing off their hats, as it was a 'hat show'. However,

most of them were also invited to wear expensive jewels from the cruise's jewellery store. Yet, the most interesting thing about this show, for my own purposes, was that there were two prizes to be won: one for the most "beautiful hat" and one for the best "pimped hat".[1] This meant that the Red Hatters who participated in the show were from the onset divided into two categories: while some wore chic and glamorous hats, there were others that looked more eccentric, with hats decorated in the most imaginative and crazy ways possible (see picture 6). For instance, one woman had a big champagne bottle on her hat with green leaves of a plant hanging out of its mouth, while the woman who won the award of "best pimped hat" that day had decorated her hat with an upside down Cola cup (field notes, 9 July 2011).

The Red Hatters also talk about these differences in style, as Froukje says: "And everyone does it in her own way, but you've seen that already. (…) Some do it almost in a vulgar way, and others do it in a very chic way, and so you have all sorts of differences." Froukje adds to this that she thinks this variation is "wonderful". However, some of the other Hatters voice more critical opinions. Annette, for instance, also says she enjoys the variation, but she does not want her own chapter members to look too eccentric, with extravagantly decorated hats.

> Annette: I don't like that. Then I say [my chapter members] are allowed to do a lot, but they should keep it a bit sophisticated (…). You notice with chapters of which the Queens [dress-up] with lots of bells and whistles, then the entire chapter adopts

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1 The hat show was announced in a "Sea Journal" that was written for the Red Hatters, and announced all of their special Red Hat Society activities. For the show the Hatters were called "to honour an old tradition of the HAL (Holland-America Line), where ladies present themselves with their most beautiful or pimped hat." This call thus already included the two prizes for the "most beautiful" and the "best pimped" hat.

Picture 6. Taken of two Red Hatters during the 'Fancy Red Hat Show'. The Hatter on the left won the prize of "best pimped hat, while the woman on the right won the prize for most "beautiful hat".

> this. And then I say no guys, I don't need that many bells and whistles. (…) So I'm somewhat more conservative.

Annette thus describes her own style as "conservative". Renee adopts a similar position and also prefers to dress more modestly and chic when she is with the Red Hat Society. She is also critical about Red Hatters who express other codes of conduct.

> Renee: Yes and I did notice that there is a very diverse range of women who participate, that's what I've seen on different get-togethers. There are also many women who… from other chapters

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> I mean (…) who all of a sudden think I go all out, well that, I think, is a bit ridiculous.

Josje is familiar with the type of criticism expressed by Renee and Annette. She is one of these Red Hatters who want to "go all out" when dressing up. As she explains it, she aims to take her Red Hat Society regalia "over the top". Josje remarks: "And when you see what a great hats we all have. But then a respectable Red Hatter, of a different chapter, says: 'it looks like carnival'. And then I say yes we are happy." Another way in which Josje responds to negative comments about her style is by arguing that the Hatters who express this actually sell the Red Hat Society short, which vice versa is also what Renee says: "and then I do feel that you devalue it [the Red Hat Society]. You should have some kind of dress-code that you should uphold when you join."

As can be read from these comments, the two styles are not trivial matters of taste but inform an ongoing discussion about the meaning of the Red Hat Society. The notion of 'respectability' lies at the heart of this discussion, which is already noticeable in Josje's use of the term "respectable Red Hatter" to indicate a group which ideas are different from her own. According to many of the women, especially those with a preference for chic or elegant hats and clothes, respectability should be maintained and defended as a main feature of the Red Hat Society. Monique clearly articulates this idea when she argues that women wearing the Red Hat Society regalia have a reputation to uphold.

> Samira: Do you feel like another person when you're dressed in Red Hat Society clothes?
> Monique: Yes, it somewhat feels like a uniform, with positive aspects. Sometimes I do feel like 'not now'. I just want to go relaxed in black, or incognito. Because when you're in those colours, you're part of a group. And yes, you also have a name to ruin. So you have to be mindful of what you're doing, what you're saying, because you're part of the Red Hat Society. And (…) by doing something negative you can discredit the entire Red Hat Society. So you do have to behave according to standards I think.

Beverley Skeggs argues in *Formations of Class & Gender* (1997) that 'respectability' is a signifier of class-related taste that historically has been used by the middle class to keep lower classes at bay, that is, as a type of 'distinction'. As Nead (1988) explains, a shared notion of respectability and morality developed in the nineteenth-century England which united the different fractions that made up the middle class. This unitization was a dual process in which the middle class acquired coherence by differentiating itself from upper and lower classes. Developed as "a property of middle-class individuals defined against the masses" (Skeggs, 1997: 3) respectability became a sign of social legitimacy, a standard to which to aspire, especially by those who were not seen as naturally imbued with it, i.e., the poor and 'undeserving' members from lower classes. This bourgeois distinction placed women at the centre of moral judgements, because they were the ones who were scrutinized for the maintenance of the new standards (Finch, 1993; Skeggs, 1997). Hence, the concept of middle class femininity became entangled with respectability, which was translated in a strict regulation of women's sexuality and appearance (Nead, 1988); morals that, in their turn, found expression in the ideal of the proper 'lady'. During the nineteenth-century, this 'lady' hence developed into a very dominant archetype of femininity (Dyhouse, 1981; Poovey, 1984; Allen, 2009).

The central position of women's appearances in the formation of the middle class is also highlighted by Veblen (1994[1899]) and Simmel (1957[1904]) in their accounts of fashion. In his classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* Thorstein Veblen argues that the emerging bourgeoisie, or 'leisure class', adopted fashion as a profoundly useless and wasteful product to demonstrate its pecuniary standing and supremacy over the working classes. Veblen coins the term "conspicuous consumption" to describe this phenomenon by which people consume goods without obvious usefulness in order to show their economic power: that they can afford to be wasteful, to adorn themselves in unpractical or physically restricting clothes, and to engage in leisure. Within this system, he argues, women

became central as objects of display: "as literal bearers of their husbands' or their fathers' wealth, they were visible indices of a man's position in his quest for social prestige" (Poovey, 1984: 10). According to Veblen, Victorian women were thought of as no more than "men's chattel," as they were the property of their male master, showing 'his' ability to pay. The appearance of the lady managed this by displaying her incapability of doing physical labour. As Marybeth Stalp and her colleagues (2009: 233-234) argue typical feminine dress, such as high heels, hats, skirts, long hair, and corsets functioned as obvious "barriers to women's ability to do any kind of physical work, further placing a well-dressed woman in the status of the leisure class." However, although the lady's position was founded upon passivity and dependence, she did have the power to distinguish herself from the 'vulgar' working-class masses (Allen, 2009).

Moseley (2002) suggests that this is a reason why working-class women today may aspire to be 'like a lady' or 'ladylike'. "Being 'respectable' emerges as a key way of 'passing' for middle-class, through appearance and conduct, which while producing great anxiety, enables access to certain kinds of power otherwise unavailable to working-class women," she argues (2002: 19-20). Such desire is reflected in popular culture, for instance, in the adoration of old Hollywood stars like Audrey Hepburn, who is consistently described by female fans as "a lady" and "not sexy" (Moseley, 2002). Among Red Hatters it is also reflected in the popularity of the title 'Lady' as a prefix to their fantasy names. Most of the Red Hatters call themselves 'Lady ....' followed by their personally invented names. On top of that, there are also many instances that feature 'acting ladylike' as central to being with the Red Hat Society.

My interview with Martine, for instance, showed that some of the Red Hat Society chapters place great value upon 'keeping up' this type of respectable appearance. I learned that Martine grew up a member of the working class. Her parents divorced when she was four after which her mother was unable to care for her and had to put Martine up for adoption.

Within this context, Martine adopted a working-class type of femininity which exhibits more sexual freedom than the ideal of middle-class respectability allows for. When Martine first joined the Red Hat Society she felt strongly pressured, by her chapter, to act more 'proper' – like a lady – when it came to displaying her sexuality. Interestingly enough, in the following quote Martine talks about this as a positive experience.

> Martine: What I also experienced as very positive, that was with [my chapter], because they really value being chic, that now I'm more aware of how you act ladylike. Because the past few years I was becoming a little too banal, too naughty. So now I'm again, and that's something I find very positive, I'm aware of how to present myself more ladylike[2].
> Samira: Yes, and what's that ladylike?
> Martine: A certain type of reserve towards men, but still seeing them and also interacting with them, but not too happy. Also more respect for myself, that I think 'I may be happy someone is giving me attention', because I love attention, but that I respond more ladylike. And that's certainly because of the Red Hat Society.

In order to act 'more ladylike', Martine also had to change the style of the clothes she wanted to wear to Red Hat Society events. She joined the Red Hat Society with the idea that she was going to wear (self-made) eccentric hats and clothes. However, her chapter Queen told her that if she wanted to become a true Red Hatter, she had to adjust her style and make it more 'chic'. At the time I interviewed her, Martine was a Pink Hatter and so she explained how she needed to look for a new pink hat that fitted the respectability requirements of her chapter.

> Samira: How do you get hold of the red hats and other Red Hat Society stuff? Yes, in this case of course it's a pink hat.
> Martine: Yes I'm actually…, during my first meeting with [my chapter], I didn't have a pink hat. And I have an entire collection of hats that hang attached to my stairwell. And there I had

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2 Here Martine uses the English term 'ladylike'.

a white hat, which I draped a pink voile around, with all kinds of decorations. But then they did tell me that I was actually not supposed to wear a carnival hat with all sorts of embellishments. So then I thought 'oeff, now I need to think of something else'. (…) And luckily an acquaintance of mine had a [wide brimmed hat] in her store. She sells secondhand clothes, but also carnival stuff. And what I think is really funny is that this hat was actually approved by the Queen, but it's a carnival hat, well she doesn't know that [laughter], because it looks from the same material as the other hats worn by those ladies. And that again shows a bit of the rebellious Martine [laughs].

Martine's joy in secretly getting a carnival hat approved shows a way in which she negotiates the discourse of middle-class respectability. It signifies that Martine does not simply abide by the rules she is presented with, and that she resists albeit in a covert way. Not much later she decided to leave her chapter and join another which left more room for her creativity.

The evidence of a working-class woman negotiating middle-class respectability opposes one of the main aspects of the distinction theories of Veblen and Simmel, because they present the working-class as mindlessly emulating middle-class appearances. Particularly Simmel sees this as the driving force behind the fashion system. He argues that the upper classes try to establish distinction by dressing differently from the lower classes, who then try to bridge the gap by imitating their style. The upper classes, however, abandon their style as soon as it is copied, so that "the game goes merrily on" (Simmel: 1957: 545). More recent work in fashion is critical of this idea that fashion 'trickles down' from the higher to the lower classes (Entwistle, 2000; Partington, 1992; Wilson, 2003[1985]). In her description of working-class women's relation to Dior's 1950s 'New Look', Angela Partington (1992) stresses how these women creatively adapted the style according to their own preferences. As she argues, what they made "was not a 'watered down' or less creative version of the 'real' thing" (Entwistle, 2000: 62). Rather than trying to obtain the status of the middle class, these working-class women used their creative

skills to create and articulate their own class identity by altering middle-class fashion. It is important to note that by doing this these women equally exhibited their own means of exclusion, which means that distinction is not something that only the middle- and higher classes perform.

Two types of hats in context
Looking at the more eccentric style embraced by some of the Red Hatters, a similar process seems active in the Red Hat Society. In making their own hats and clothes, these Hatters seem to consciously reject the ideal of respectability adopted by others, with which they also perform their own class-related 'identity' and 'distinction'. How this works exactly can be shown from a mini-biography of one Red Hatter who has consciously adopted an eccentric Red Hat style. I have chosen for Josje whose position with regards to the Red Hat Society I have shortly introduced before, but other Red Hatters could also have been presented here. Hence, while Josje's story is specific in terms of how aspects within her life history interact with her ideas about the Red Hat Society, style and respectability, it is also in many ways similar to that of other Red Hatters who also prefer to dress eccentric. Therefore I have chosen to use some quotes and ideas of these other Red Hatters as illustrations, to show that Josje's ideas and experiences are indicative of a more general class-related position towards femininity and the Red Hat Society.

Of course it is important to also show the other side, of Red Hatters who enjoy the chic Red Hat style and attempt at a middle-class distinction through respectability, because it is in their particular relation that these two positions acquire their meaning. Hence, I follow Josje's biography with a mini-biography of Renee who has very different ideas about style in the Red Hat Society, but who also shares in some of the life experiences and pleasures that Josje describes. Again Renee's ideas about style have wider meaning, because they are shared by more Red Hatters who are used to further elucidate her position.

Renee and Josje are of similar age, at the time I spoke with them they were just above and below sixty-six, which means that they grew up in the same historical context. Next to this they share that they are both retired, divorced and mother, but they also share in a specifically dramatic life experience, as they both have lost a child. Although this experience itself cannot be considered the same for Renee who lost her teenage son and for Josje whose infant child never left the hospital, both explain the impact has caused them years of distress. This is also one of the frames in which they interpret the pleasure they now draw from the Red Hat Society. Yet, in spite of these comparisons, when it comes down to style both women exhibit rather different perspectives.

On being creative
I met Josje in Tilburg, a medium-sized city located in the Southern part of the Netherlands. It was a surprisingly sunny spring day in 2012, but we did not experience much of it as we decided to meet inside a (rather well-known) sandwich shop, where we could talk in quiet. Josje was a slender looking woman of sixty-seven with long brown hair which she had tucked together in a ponytail. She had not been a member of the Red Hat Society for long (just over a year), but that did not stop her from being "wildly enthusiast" about it. Josje could not remember exactly when she first encountered the Red Hatters, but she did remember that there was no chapter around for her to join, which is why she forgot about the Red Hat Society after that. But then she saw the organisation again one day on television, which is when she turned to the internet and started looking for a nearby chapter for a second time. This time she succeeded: a chapter had just been founded in Tilburg. Two weeks later Josje officially became a Red Hatter.

As Josje explains, she grew up in a working-class family and neighbourhood. Her father moved away from his family business to work in the factory when he was fourteen. "I think he has never earned more than minimum wage," says Josje. However, because Josje's mother took over her grandmothers'

laundry store, which made more than her father could make, her family was one of the richest in the neighbourhood: "we had double the wage, if not more, than the neighbours." Josje describes how this found expression in her families' adoption of more respectable social standards in the form of dinner etiquettes.

> "In those days we ate, so I'm talking about 1950, with knife and fork. And with the neighbours the breadboard stood on the table, that's why we sometimes wanted to eat at the neighbours', and the neighbour woman would butter the bread and then throw it to the children. And we just had a plate, with knife and fork. So we did live in a working-class neighbourhood, and then it was already noticeable that I walked too straight."

One of the main things that this quote shows is that class, like gender and age, is a performance: it is something that is done, and achieved within social interaction. Although her family was better off than many of the other families in her neighbourhood, as a girl Josje often had to negotiate with her parents about money for a good education. Her three brothers were allowed to attend the schools of their own choice, while Josje was forced to put her ambitions to rest and attend domestic school, in preparation of marriage. Her mother maintained that her family could not afford higher education for her only daughter, but Josje still managed to negotiate her way into a school that educated her to become a primary school teacher. This was her profession until she reached her retirement.

Josje is single with one adult son. She divorced her husband after she lost her first born child, still an infant, which led her into a depression that lasted for ten years.[3] After work ended, Josje noticed a decline in her social life. While on the one hand she had more time than ever to spend on leisure,

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3 Of course this is a very emotional and sensitive subject, which is why I was reluctant to ask precise questions about the experience. This is also why I did not ask Josje about the name and gender of her baby, which I did not find out as she also did not bring it up herself.

there were not as many people around to actually spend it with. This is one of the things she likes most about the Red Hat Society, that she can enjoy leisure time with women of around her age. However, this is not the only reason why she is ent-hused about it. When asked in the beginning of the interview why she maintains that "the Red Hat Society is for her" Josje answers that it is because here she is allowed, even encoura-ged, to dress "over the top". She explains that she has always enjoyed dressing eccentrically, but that this changed after the loss of her child.

> Josje: And also because of that terrible period, when I was over it,
> I looked in my closet and everything was grey, black and brown.
> And before I was always dressed 'over the top'. So big earrings,
> my hair like this, short skirts, heels, you name it, I just wanted to
> shock and look conspicuous. But then you've lost that, because
> I felt like 'what do I care if I'm wearing a red blouse, because I'm
> just sad'. (...) But then I saw those Red Hats and then I thought
> 'wow, I'm going to join them'. So now with the Red Hats I dress
> completely over the top again.

Later in the interview Josje interprets her participation in the Red Hat Society as a way of making up for the years she has lost after the loss of her child. The clothes have an important role in this as, for her, they signify fun and happiness.

With her Red Hat Society attire Josje aims to look conspi-cuous. When asked what makes this fun, she answers in a way that places her within a sub-cultural tradition that uses spectacular appearances as a resistance against prevailing so-cial expectations. Josje exclaims: "I always say: 'I'm a born fe-minist'. I've never done what other people expected me to." Josje also specifically considers the style of her appearance to be an important source of this resistance throughout her life. She started making her own clothes when she was twelve, and tried to make them in a style that broke the rules of fashion (cf. Woodward, 2007). She for instance explains that she refu-sed to wear jeans at the time that they first became fashiona-ble. Here her story is similar to that of Martine and Joyce, two

women who also grew up among the working class and who also started to make their own clothes in their teens. Martine elaborates how when she was young she enjoyed dressing different from the standards in school. When she encountered the Red Hat Society this was one of the things that appealed to her: the unfashionable combination of the colours red and purple.

> Martine: And the story of course of the founder, how do you call that, the person who instigated it [the Red Hat Society]. Well, delightful isn't it? Just thinking I'm going to dress in outrageously purple and red and I'm not going to care about this years' fashion, I'm just going to wear deep purple and red. Well, splendid, it fits me perfectly! People also don't act surprised when I tell them I'm going to join this organisation. 'O, that's really something for you', they say.
> Samira: Yes, and why does it fit you?
> Martine: Because I've always wanted to be a little different than others. Yes, also in school and also with clothes.
> Samira: Could you give an example of that?
> Martine: Yes for a couple of months I've worn a tracksuit to school, that was in primary school, I would wear a tracksuit. Everyone had jeans and so on, and I wanted to be different. For a while I've also worn wooden shoes to school, and then the wooden shoes also became fashionable. But I've really worn those yellow types of wooden shoes to school, those kinds of things I also did. And yes, for some time I've also worn a beret to school, while nobody was wearing anything on their head, you know. And I made my own clothes, I knitted my own sweaters. (...) so just different from others. That's something I've always had a little. A bit eccentric is what it is.

As was mentioned before, Martine's chapter initially made her change her Red Hat Society style into something more of a confirmation of middle-class fashion and respectability. Josje by contrast continued her efforts in making her own clothes as different from the mainstream, when she joined the Red Hat Society.

Josje now teaches workshops in making hats and clothes for Red Hatters. As a result, she says that being with the Red

Hat Society helps bring out her creative self: "so it gives you a united feeling, but also a young and creative feeling." She and her chapter especially resist the idea that looking attractive is about wearing expensive clothes. According to Veblen and his account of fashion at the end of the nineteenth century, this idea was central to middle-class distinction which used women's dress to show pecuniary power. This should however be nuanced somewhat because the morality of respectability that emerged around the same time also propagated restraint, which defines the excessive display of wealth as a matter of bad taste (Dubois and Laurent, 1994). Today this is most evident in how the nouveau riche (like soccer players and their wives) are not considered classy but cheap in their conspicuous consumption. Josje likewise defies middle-class taste by wearing excessively conspicuous clothes, but she also resists the idea that these clothes should show-off economic wealth. Instead she considers it a special challenge to make spectacular, "over the top", looking attires for the cheapest possible price.

> Josje: I mainly teach workshops on making hats. So there are also many of the Red Hat that buy hats of 240 euro's, and with us in our chapter it is 'you look great for the least amount of money'. (…) every time we see each other it is: 'Wow!', 'Yes 4 euro', 'Yes 2 euro, made it myself'. We've also started dying our clothes, otherwise it becomes an expensive ordeal and now it is just the excitement to look as great as possible for the least amount of money as possible. And I'm the one with the ideas, I drive everyone crazy.

This shows that Josje has no interest in following in a middle-class ideal of fashion. More than that, she creates her own class related identity within the Red Hat Society, which defines creativity as its most valued property. It is through creativity in making and designing their own clothes, that these working-class women resist the respectability of the middle class.

Josje's favourite hat hence is also one she made herself. She once bought a hat during carnival for six and a half euro's and then modified it with a Velcro band so that she can easily

change its look with different accessories.

> Josje: So I've made all sorts of different rims to attach to it, with Christmas I've attached all sorts of lights to it. And then I've put Christmas twigs into it. (…) at the high tea [where she went recently] I've made a different top again (…) completely filled with flowers. That one is literally over the top. With one hat I can make five or six hats. And that I just enjoy.

Joyce gives a similar account of making her own hats and Red Hat Society attire.

> Joyce: Yes because actually there is no limit to what you can do. It can never be too mad in my eyes. Right now I'm for instance making a hat, because you know in your birthday-month you get to wear a purple hat, so I'm making a purple hat.[4] And then I'm making all kinds of boxes in all sorts of colours, it's really going to be a birthday hat with presents on it.

With their hats Josje and Joyce reject the restraints and sobriety of respectability, which for them also means that they are not trying to conform to a typically feminine ideal of beauty. Instead Josje consciously rejects an ideal in which "woman" according to her "is presented as a luscious cookie", in which she derives her femininity from looking beautiful and youthful, as the latter is implied by the hegemonic beauty ideal (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Clark and Griffin, 2008; Wolf, 1991). Josje protests: "of course you have to look good for yourself, but why aren't I allowed to get grey? Why aren't I allowed to get wrinkles? (…) Why do I have to have breasts that when I'm eighty, I have two of those balloons right here?" She also maintains that when it comes to attractiveness ageing is less favourable to women than to men: "Why do men become

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4 The Red Hat Society indeed has as a 'rule' that in the month of their birthday, Hatters reverse the red and purple aspects of their attires: wearing a purple hat with red clothes, instead of the red hat and purple clothes. Again this is a way in which the Red Hat Society celebrates ageing.

more attractive as they get older and women don't?" More in general Josje likes it that the Red Hat Society challenges some of these negative stereotypes of older women.

Overall Josje manages to articulate this type of challenge towards hegemonic discourses of femininity and age by dressing in eccentric shapes and colours that are considered unfashionable for women her age. However, her dressmaking story shows that Josje also challenges a more specifically classed notion of femininity, by trying to fabricate cheap and conspicuous looking Red Hat Society attires. Not much has been written about women making and designing their own clothes, although it has been defined by some as a typically marginal position (Buckley, 1999). Historically it has been an economic necessity for working-class women to create their own and their families' clothes, which were looked down upon by the more privileged as signs of not being able to 'keep up' – with fashion, that is (Burmen, 1999; Buckely, 1999). However, for Josje and the other women who enjoy making their own clothes, this is not a necessity but a conscious choice: a choice for resistance. As bell hooks explains we should "make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility" (hooks, 1990: 153). By designing their own red hats and attires Josje and the other eccentric Red Hatters create a radical creative space from which they articulate their own sense of self as working-class women.

Of course this type of resistance against the discourse of middle-class respectability also evokes resistance from the other side. The eccentric style is rejected by some Red Hatters as looking "too carnivalesque". Sometimes this is expressed in more or less insulting comments, that these Hatters "look like Christmas trees", for instance, which is what I have heard multiple times during my fieldwork. Angela McRobbie (2004) sees this as a more widespread trend in which insults made against working-class women in prime time television shows such as *What Not To Wear* or *Ladette to Lady* incorporate symbolic

class violence as a type of light entertainment. Josje is also well aware that her style represents one view of the Red Hat Society that not every other Red Hatter shares. According to Josje there are "conservative" or "respectable" Red Hatters who tend to see the Red Hat Society as a type of Lions or Rotary club, which are typically middle-class society clubs. Josje responds to negative comments made by other Red Hatters by saying that she thinks that these women "don't do the Red Hat Society justice".

On being respectable
Renee is one of those Red Hatters whose ideas about the Red Hat Society and its proposed style are quite different from Josje's. She does, in fact, define the Red Hat Society as "a type of Lions club for women." I met Renee in the winter of 2011, in the lobby of a hotel next to the university in Rotterdam. She was the first of the Red Hatters I interviewed and had already helped me get into contact with more of my respondents. Renee entered the room a stately looking woman of sixty-five with half-long greyish-blond hair. She wore a purple sweater on top of some blue jeans. Renee is one of the first Red Hat Society Queens in the Netherlands. For her it all started in 2005 when she read an article about the Red Hat Society in a Dutch national newspaper. She immediately felt drawn to the idea of the organisation and went to a department store to buy a red hat together with the official Red Hat Society handbook, written by founder Sue Ellen Cooper. At the time Renee worked for a casting bureau where she approached two colleagues to join her chapter, when they did, she made it official by registering her chapter with the American organisation. Since then Renee has had an on-and-off relation with the Red Hat Society. She has abandoned her chapter more than once, but she has also come back each time and up until today is still Queen of a chapter.

When it comes down to what she likes most about being with the Red Hatters Renee's story is very similar to that of Josje. Like her she is particularly interested in the social aspect

of maintaining contacts with other women of a similar age and with similar life histories: "I enjoy being with women my own age (...) doing fun things with likeminded women." She particularly feels that these women have a better understanding of the things that go on in each other's lives: "When you are of a certain age, you all have been through things (…) and this brings comfort." For Renee this idea of sharing similar experiences is related to the loss of her first born son Mark, who died to a disease at the age of fourteen. Just like Josje, Renee hence interprets her enjoyment of the Red Hat Society within a narrative of loss, depression and the rediscovery of fun.

Renee also shares with Josje that she grew up among the working class. As she explains, she grew up in Rotterdam under poor conditions after the Second World-War: "I even experienced a time in which we did not have warm water." Next to her father, her mother supported the family as a sales woman, a job she would perform for forty years until she reached retirement at sixty-five. Still Renee remembers the period she grew up in as a time in which "as a girl you just did not count as much as a boy." She had a brother who was always put first, even though she did better in school. Her parents however did allow her to follow higher education, so in that aspect "they were progressive," Renee remarks. When she was seventeen Renee moved to London to become an au pair, and from that point onwards she lived in various countries around the world. At twenty-three she became a stewardess for an Italian airline, and she moved to Rome. She commemorates how she met her first husband "in the swimming pool of the Intercontinental Hotel in New Delhi," an American, who also lived Rome.

Renee has been married and divorced twice. With her first husband she had two sons with whom she lived in America and Beirut, amongst other places. During this time she describes that she lived with many privileges and luxuries. In Beirut her house had a maid and in America its own swimming pool. However, Renee has not remained economically wealthy, and sometimes this gives her feelings of exclusion which she negotiates by saying that life "is not about what you have, but about

who you are."

> Renee: I've had everything: I've had a house with a swimming pool in America, I had a wonderful seven room apartment in Beirut, with a BMW in front, and a maid every day. I drank coffee with the wife of the Dutch ambassador. I flew first-class to the Netherlands. Where do I live now? I live in a flat for people over fifty-five. But I'm still the same.

She says that through her appearance people cannot tell that she is not wealthy and she works hard at maintaining this image of herself.

> Renee: If I dress very chic, but I have no penny in my pocket. The last couple of months have been very bad for me. But no one has noticed that for even a second. Because I put on my expensive clothes, and I'm a madam. And I have no penny in my pocket. But I'm still the same person.

Although Renee is not really wealthy anymore, her appearance helps her pass for middle-class. She has learnt to act like a lady and perform respectability in a convincing way.

For her this performance of respectability is also important within the Red Hat Society. Dressing-up is one of the main aspects that make the Red Hat Society fun according to Renee, who uses an analogy with dressing for the theatre to express how the clothes of the Red Hat Society make her feel different, more special, than her regular attire.

> Renee: Because when we used to go to the theatre, or the opera, or a play, we also dressed nice. They don't do that anymore. (…) And that I like, when we for instance go somewhere, that we say 'well we try our best' (…), everyone goes for it. The one is dressed in a beautiful purple jumpsuit, the other is wearing a nice purple skirt with something nice on top (…). It just looks so festive. Yes, you already have fun prior to going out, when you are dressing at home.

For Renee trying to look special through her Red Hat Society

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attire is mainly about looking fashionable, even though people usually think this is difficult to achieve with the colours red and purple. She is critical of other Red Hatters who dress too sexy or conspicuous: "I always say '[those women] have come out from underneath a rock.'" With the entrance of more chapters who employ this more eccentric style, the Red Hat Society has lost part of its exclusiveness, is what Renee emphasizes.

> Renee: I thought in the beginning it was somewhat more exclusive, and we also really did our best (…), now you have much more purple, but back then five, six years ago you didn't have that, and we really looked for nice-looking purple clothes, or I purchased nice-looking hats from the Red Hat Society in America, so that you had a bit of a special hat. (…) so you also were somewhat more exclusive. Then we went to the day of the romantic music [an event hosted annually in Rotterdam], and then there was a chapter (…), where they walk in a flower dress with a red hat. Well that's unacceptable.

The statement that the Red Hat Society "used to be more exclusive" indicates a definite attempt at middle-class distinction, which is reached through a respectable appearance. Here Renee defines looking exclusive as something that is reached through wearing fashionable designer hats and clothes, which opposes the exclusivity, aimed at by Josje and others, which is reached through wearing excessive, one of a kind, homemade hats and clothes.

From an outsider's position it may seem strange that Renee comments that she does not want to look conspicuous, while she is wearing a red hat with purple clothes. However, this is a distinction that the Red Hatters make amongst themselves. Marja who prefers the creative eccentric style for instance also notes that there are Red Hatters who dress chic in a way that they do not look conspicuous.

> Marja: What I really enjoyed was with Prinsjesdag [an annual royal event in the Netherlands], of course there were a lot of women, and well I had a sash with all kinds of fabrics, and some other decorations, and there multiple women came to me (…)

that it was put together really creatively. Because I have to say that some indeed are in purple, but they just as well could have been on their way to office, (…) then I think 'yes, you're in purple, but indeed you don't really want to look conspicuous'. With the main group you see 'o they belong with the group', but if they had just walked through the city, you could have thought 'well a well groomed woman, looks nice, and coincidentally in purple and red'. That combination is likely something you don't see every day, but that was not even noticeable on the outside, red coat, red hat and red shoes, and you have your purple clothes underneath your coat, that way you can also go to the city, as a manner of speaking.

Renee's vision on dressing for the Red Hat Society is comparable to that of Marion who also says that she tries to select clothes that look beautiful and fashionable, rather than creative.

> Marion: But I always do try to look nice. I always try my best. Also when I wear regular clothes. (…) But also in purple I do try to look nice. (…)
> Samira: So it is in red and purple, but not too much 'over the top'?
> Marion: Yes not with all those boas and other stuff. Because there are some who really look like wheeaauh! [makes noise to indicate disgust] And now purple also is in fashion, so that also makes that it does not look as conspicuous.

For Marion and Renee participation in the Red Hat Society is not meant as a challenge to ideals of feminine beauty, but as an embodiment of these ideals. Renee adopts this dominant view that beauty is an important requirement for being feminine.

> Renee: And first of all I also think you should do it for yourself. I think you owe it to yourself to look good.
> Samira: Yes and why's that?
> Renee: First, you're a woman and you also have to look feminine. And second you're not supposed to neglect yourself. And

'when you've got it, you flaunt it'.[5] That's what my mother would also say, sometimes (…), you should show what you've got! And that doesn't have to be vulgar, you don't have to be conspicuous, you don't have to claim attention, to provoke, but just, if you look nice, you should show it. And not just… and of course you should look your best, and you should do everything to look your best, I think. But you also have to have something to tell. I shouldn't just be a silly blonde.

Renee's comment in the last two sentences illustrates how different discourses of gender can easily be combined in one narrative (you have to look feminine, but you cannot be a 'dumb blonde') which entails both endorsement and criticism of hegemonic femininity (see also chapter 4).

Her comment that "you don't have to be conspicuous, you don't have to claim attention, to provoke" marks the main difference between the fancy or chic style she likes to carve out for herself with the Red Hat Society and the eccentric style employed by Josje. Both styles are indicative of two class-related attempts at distinction within the Red Hat Society. While Renee gives an example of the formation of a middle-class identity that centres around respectability (cf. Skeggs, 1997), Josje exemplifies a simultaneous formation of a working-class feminine identity that centres around creativity (cf. Partington, 1992). While the first 'respectable' identity embraces fashion as a way to reach distinction, the 'creative' identity rejects fashion, which is no less an attempt at distinction. Because by refusing to submit to fashion these Red Hatters also try to show that they are unique, or more even, that they are different from those Hatters who cling to fashion out of an effort to look respectable.

Conclusion
This chapter was meant to show the diversity that exists among the Red Hatters, and how this is reflected in their interper-

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5 Renee uses the original English expression: "when you've got it, you flaunt it".

sonal relations. As I have explained, the Red Hatters demonstrate widely diverging styles of dress particularly in the hats that they wear. Overall a distinction can be made between two main styles: one that consists of eccentric hats, which are often self-made, cheap and heavily decorated, and one that consists of chic and expensive hats with almost no decorations, or at least nothing excessive. Sue Ellen Cooper explains that since she founded the Red Hat Society her hat-style gradually changed from the second to the first. She started the Red Hat Society with wearing chic and conservative hats, but over the years her hats became bigger and bolder, and "now it's 'anything goes!' when it comes to my red hat" (Red Hat Society Inc., 2006: 9). Some of the Red Hatters I spoke with also move or have moved between the two styles. However, among other Hatters the styles inform a clear difference of opinion about the meaning and purpose of the Red Hat Society. As such, the two styles illustrate two contrasting performances of femininity as it is crosscut by class.

The chic and expensive looking hats give expression to a performance of respectability, which is historically connected to a middle-class femininity. According to Beverly Skeggs (1997), but also Veblen (1994) and Simmel (1957), this performance of respectability as articulated in women's dress and appearance has been important in the development of the middle class. It played a crucial role in its 'distinction' from particularly lower, but also higher classes, which is how the middle class established itself as a class with a specific identity. The eccentric looking hats worn by Red Hatters express a resistance towards this middle-class identity. These Hatters oppose respectability by making their own clothes that are both cheap and in no way modest. Historically this dressmaking is tied to the women of the working class, because they did not have the means to buy their clothes, as they did in the middle class. As such, these women were forced to rely on their own creativity in making clothes for themselves and other family members (Buckely, 1999; Burmen, 1999).

It has long been recognised that women from a wor-

king-class background may aspire to pass for 'middle-class' and, as such, attempt to embody a respectable femininity by adorning themselves with chic or expensive (looking) clothes. In fact, the idea that people from working classes try to gain more status by copying the style of the middle-class is central to the theories of both Veblen and Simmel, as well as many other authors of fashion and popular culture. As Joanne Entwistle (2000: 62) argues, Veblen and Simmel "are the most famous proponents of the theory of fashion as emulation, according to which styles start at the top of the social hierarchy with an elite class opting for a distinctive style of dress; the class below, seeking to emulate the status of this class, gradually adopts the style and fashion thus 'trickles down.'" While Entwistle is critical of this theory, my analysis of the individual and social contexts of the two Red Hat Society styles indicates that there is some truth to it. The story of Renee, for instance, clearly shows that some working-class women indeed attempt to appear like they belong to the middle class. However, this is not the whole story, as Josje shows that not all working-class women necessarily want this. Some actually try to articulate their own identity at the intersection of femininity and class. New styles thus also emerge from the so-called 'lower' ranks of society, which also do 'distinction'. This means that, contrary to what Veblen and Simmel suggest, distinction is not something that is reserved for the 'higher' classes: it is done by people from all walks of life.

With this statement I conclude this part of the research about Red Hatters' performances of identity within the Red Hat Society. I have shown that the Hatters perform different intersecting identities (femininity, age and class) within the context of the Red Hat Society, and that they 'do' these identities in different ways that both conform to and deviate from the dominant cultural expectations. In the next chapter I look in more detail at the reception side of the Red Hat Society: how audiences make sense of it all.

Chapter 6: Husbands and media

During the cruise with Red Hatters I attended a 'Royal Dutch High Tea', which was served on the middle deck of the ship on the first afternoon that we were at sea. I sat at a table together with four Red Hatters and two men. The women, of course, wore red hats and purple clothes, but these men were also dressed in clothes that had certain purple elements. One of the Hatters proudly demonstrated that the inside of her husband's jacket was also purple. "Fun isn't it?! I bought it for the lining," she said to the Hatter next to her, whose own husband wore both a purple shirt and braces. The men, in particular, were very interested in my research and immediately started questioning me about how I had come to study the Red Hat Society. "Why study the Red Hat Society?" "How did you get this idea?" they asked, and I tried to answer them as well as I could (field notes 4 July 2011). Also at other events I often got questions like these from the husbands who seemed awfully curious about my motives and ideas in studying the Red Hat Society (e.g. field notes, 14 June 2011).

In this last empirical chapter I reverse the curiosity, turning the spotlight towards the husbands and the reception of the Red Hat Society. As their significant 'others' these husbands form an important environment and audience of the Red Hatters. Yet, no study has been conducted about how they as well as other important audiences make sense of the Red Hat Society. What do they think of the Red Hat Society? What do they understand it to be? How do they feel about its goals and objectives? I look at two main audiences of the Red Hat Society: next to the husbands I also study news media. I study the latter because they are the link between the Red Hat Society and a general public, they inform society about the phenomenon and are important in bringing its core messages across and mobilizing new women to join. I look, more specifically, at newspapers and the way they report about the Red

Hat Society.

It may be recalled that in the previous chapters I have shown that ambiguity, in different respects, is a distinct quality of the Red Hat Society. In chapter 3 my analysis revealed that the Red Hat Society continuously flows from fun to seriousness, and back. Moreover, I showed that this seriousness of the Red Hat Society means that aspects of the Red Hat Society play-world leak into the everyday lives of Red Hatters, while aspects of their everyday lives also enter the Red Hat Society play-world. In the following chapters, I extended upon one serious aspect of the Red Hat Society by showing how it allows for a negotiation of hegemonic cultural ideas about femininity and ageing. I argued that the Red Hatters perform a radical femininity by being excessive, with which they reverse and thus challenge some of the cultural expectations and stereotypes facing women of middle-age and older. In both chapter 4 and 5, I illustrated that one of the chief ways in which the Red Hatters achieve this is by making a spectacle of themselves. Like Clema explains, the red hats and purple clothes form a statement: "It's really not something inconspicuous. It really is a statement."

In what follows I study how husbands and newspapers make sense of this statement. I do this by drawing upon the literature about 'frames' and 'framing', which offer a social constructivist approach to interpretation. Through the work of Bateson and Goffman, I explain that interpretations are necessarily selective, highlighting some aspects of a given reality above other aspects. I also argue that in interpreting new information people use existing cultural scripts, which is why new phenomena are commonly measured against dominant social values and their rules and restrictions. Then I look empirically at the properties of the dominant frame with which newspapers and husbands describe the Red Hat Society, where I show that the 'fun' of the Red Hat Society is emphasised over its 'serious' aspects. These serious aspects only play a marginal role in the background and they are often completely left out of the descriptions of the Red Hat Society used by husbands

and newspapers.

Frames of interpretation
"Why write a book about these 'crazy women'?" "How can you write an entire book about a group of women who just want to have fun?" "Why would you study them from a sociological perspective? Isn't a psychological perspective more suitable to describe the Hatters?" As said in the introduction of this chapter, I frequently encountered questions like these during my fieldwork, and they were often posed to me by husbands of Red Hatters. At first sight these questions may appear to be a form of curiosity, asking me for an interpretation of the Red Hat Society. However, when examined more closely these questions are themselves already interpretations, containing some specific ideas about what the Red Hat Society is. These ideas are mainly that the Red Hat Society is too trivial a subject to do 'serious' (sociological) research about. We can see, for instance, that the Red Hatters are characterised as "crazy women" who "only want to have fun". As a result, we may even say that these questions are not really questions at all, but rather 'frame' setting messages: because they are not 'asking' me how to interpret the Red Hat Society as much as they are 'telling' me how to interpret the Red Hat Society.

The term 'frame' (of interpretation) has originally been introduced by Gregory Bateson (2006[1955]), who defines it as a meta-communicative message that delineates the conditions under which something is communicated and tells us something about how a specific piece of communication is meant to be judged. Sometime after this introduction Erving Goffman picks up the term in his essay *Frame Analysis* (1974), in which he argues that people are continuously engaged in the activity of making sense of reality, whereby they interpret, classify and organise information about certain experiences, actors, issues and events. Through these activities people are constructing meaningful "frameworks", which answer the question 'What is going on?' in a certain situation. This question is sometimes asked explicitly, but most of the time the answer is so obvious

for those involved that it is only posed tacitly. The frameworks that form the answers are also commonly referred to as "schemata" of interpretation – which from a social constructivist perspective can also be conceived as specific performances of reality: because they are activities with which people give meaning to, and thus 'create' reality.

Both Bateson and Goffman present 'play' as an example of a particularly complex type of frame. This is due to the fact that it differentiates itself from the 'reality' of ordinary life. Goffman (1974: 560) argues that theatre, fun, irony, fantasy and the like are "lively shadows of events [that] are geared into the ongoing world but not in quite the close way that is true of ordinary, literal activity." Bateson similarly states that play as message – the "this is play" – is a "paradoxical frame". According to him, this frame communicates that certain acts do not mean what they would normally mean in situations of non-play. Hence, people perceive of play in terms of 'the negative': they equate it with the 'unreal', the 'fake', 'make-belief', 'illusion' and the 'unserious'. Humans are not the only species that seem to do this since animals also play. Bateson notes that in the animal world playing often looks like fighting, but the animals – as well as the observers of animal play – somehow understand there to be a difference between this 'playful fight' and the 'real fight', so that "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson, 2006: 317). The dramaturge Richard Schechner (1985; 2006) argues that things are even more complex than this. According to him, play is not so much a 'negative' but a "double negative": it is 'not real – not not real', 'not serious – not not serious'. This means "the playful nip may not be a bite, but is indeed what a bite means" (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 1). This again refers to the aforementioned ambiguity of play, which I have shown is also an important characteristic of the Red Hat Society.

These authors and their theories on frames argue that interpretations are always selective and necessarily emphasise specific aspects of a given reality, while they also omit others

(see also Gitlin, 1980). Entman (1993: 53) has been largely responsible for popularising frame analysis in contemporary communication studies, and he stresses these same ideas: "Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience." He argues furthermore that "an increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory." It is not that people who are confronted with a certain frame will automatically adopt this frame, but the ways in which they can perceive of something – the opportunities for competing interpretations – are limited by the frame (Hall, 1980). According to Entman, framing thus involves selection and salience. His perspective has, however, been criticised for assuming too much intentionality in the construction of frames, especially when compared to the theories of Bateson and Goffman which emphasise that frames are the result of interactions between different actors, so that they do not come about intentionally (Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011).

This is especially visible in the way news frames come about from an interaction between organisational routines, working theories of the news, journalists, subjects and an intended audience (Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978; Van Zoonen, 1992). Because the news discourse generally needs to appeal to as large a public as possible, and because time is generally scarce, it often maintains a common sense stock of knowledge (Benford and Snow, 2000; Mendes, 2011). The discourse then coincides with shared beliefs that "despite the elusive nature of their content, are known to and accepted by a majority of the society as (...) conventional wisdom" (Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 57). These shared beliefs and expectations also structure people's everyday interpretations, as they provide people with the necessary guidelines of how to make sense of new information. As said, these 'cultural' guidelines are often taken for granted, which means that people generally will make sense of new phenomena according to these guidelines and their 'logic', 'rules' and 'requirements'. Hence, it is no sur-

prise that phenomena that break with these dominant codes are often looked upon with fear and disdain, since they challenge commonly accepted norms and values (cf. Cohen, 1972; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). However, while the Red Hat Society also breaks with some dominant codes of conduct, its reception tends to be positive.

Mainly positive responses

This at least is how the Red Hatters themselves feel that people, both in their private and public environment, tend to react. "Yes it's just a happy picture," says Marlène. "And that's what the women here also always enjoy, that people come to you and say 'gosh what's this?' And that's also something (...) that I notice, that everyone becomes really happy from it." Of course there are occasions in which people respond negatively to the Hatters, by making fun of them or by talking about them in a disapproving way, but the Hatters who experience this generally explain that this is the exception. Josje for instance gives an example of some vile comments that she and her chapter received during a day out, but hastens to add that this is not the general reaction: "And that we have experienced in some occasions with small groups of mostly youngsters, who are like 'what are those old hags doing here?!'. (...) But that's really very rare (...) that someone reacts negatively. And then we're also willing to explain it to people." While the reaction that Josje describes came from people outside of her immediate circle of family, friends and neighbours, Betty and Sanna explain that within this environment we can find roughly the same responses. There is some negativity and rejection of the Red Hat Society which is often expressed in the form of jokes, but most people react positively.

> Betty: Or they make jokes about it. (…) Well, they [the children] do know what it's about, because that's something I've told them. And well they also think it's kind of funny, and the things that we do (…). So that's how people react actually. I've had totally no rejection like… no, more like well 'yes that kind of fits you, a bit crazy'.

Sanna: Yes and my husband also thinks… yes he does have to laugh about it a bit I believe, but he also realizes that in principle it's also serious, and that I just really like it. So he just lets me go and he thinks it's all fine.

The idea that "it's fine" or "(just)fun" is also how the husbands typically react to the question of their wives joining the Red Hat Society. In this sense their responses thus mimic those described by Betty and Sanna. However, in these responses it is not immediately evident that they also realize that the Red Hat Society is also 'serious', as Sanna suggests. "I think it's kind of funny, (…) but nothing more," one husband characteristically responds, and Mark and Peter give similar answers:

Mark: I didn't think anything about that. I had no idea what the Red Hat Society was. Yes, a couple of ladies who dress-up in purple with a red hat and do fun things. Go out, have dinner and I don't know what else. Well, come together. Yes, fine, wonderful, I've no problems with that.

Peter: O, I think that's fine. Yes, no, yes well. That's her choice, it would not be a club for me, you know. If something like that would be for gentlemen (…). It would not be my choice, no. (…) [But] if she draws a lot of pleasure from that. Well, then she should just do that.

For these men the most important thing is that their wives take pleasure in the Red Hat Society, and then they are basically 'okay' with it. They also commonly state that they do not give the Red Hat Society that much thought, because it is not their thing: "it's her thing." Another man told me that: "As you probably saw around the house, I have my hobbies and this is her hobby."

Ben seems more enthusiast and says that he thinks it is "wonderful" that his wife is a Red Hatter: "Yes, I have a fun wife, so she only has fun ideas." When asked what he likes about the Red Hat Society he also says "[t]hat she draws a lot of pleasure from it," but he also emphasises that the Red Hat Society has a playful character. "That of course is one big the-

atrical performance, women playing dress-up. (…) They put on their little red clothes and they're laughing." In this quote Ben thus situates the Red Hat Society as a type of mimicry play that allows the Hatters to have fun. Similar responses and characterisations of the Red Hat Society can be found in the newspapers, who also report about it as something playful and fun to do for the women in the target group. It is interesting though that while the Red Hat Society in principle complies with important journalistic values and routines, which are formulated around 'newsworthiness', 'visibility' and 'timeliness' (Tuchman, 1978), not many news articles have been written about the Hatters, at least in the Netherlands. Only about a hundred unique news articles appeared in about seven years, and most of them appeared in regional- instead of national newspapers. In the next section I look at the properties of the dominant frame with which these newspapers, as well as some husbands, interpret and describe the Red Hat Society.

Just fun, not serious
Of course it is not true that husbands and newspapers only use one frame in describing the Red Hat Society. The husbands in particular talk about the Red Hat Society in various ways. However, when their descriptions are compared with the ones found in newspapers, one frame is clearly dominant: this is the frame that the husbands tend to use first when talking about the Red Hat Society, and that the newspapers use almost exclusively. This frame has several characteristics, which can almost all be found within the two passages below, in which Rob explains how he felt about his wife joining the Red Hat Society.

> Rob: Well then we talked about it, about what that actually is [the Red Hat Society]? And I have to say that that appealed to me. Yes, as men we have the freemasons. I'm a freemason. (…) But that's all still somewhat more serious… and that happy and dressing-up and then you notice that they [the Hatters] become different from that, yes it's kind of fun.

When asked why he thinks the Red Hat Society is kind of fun, Rob answers:

> Rob: Yes, the frivolousness and that it's without pretences that appeals to me, it's just having fun, and one of the first things that I heard as a rule (...) is no nagging. Yes, with a women's group that's almost impossible, is it not?! But that you, that appeals to me a great deal and that they just do their things for themselves, that are just fun and they're all of the age that children have left home, many are grandmother. Always busy, always responsibilities, that they can let go of that. Yes, that really appealed to me, I must say.

One of the first things that can be noted about this description is that the overall tone is positive: Rob explains that the Red Hat Society is fun and appealing to him. That is the general moral judgment that is made in this frame. According to Entman (1993) frames generally have four functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments and suggesting remedies. The way in which these functions are defined, however, implies a 'negative' moral judgment, so that definitions of situations, actors or events automatically become 'problem definitions'. However, as is evident in Rob's characterization of the Red Hat Society the overall moral judgment of a frame can also be positive. Earlier in this chapter, I also cited another husband who hence concluded that he has "no problem" with the Red Hat Society.

This is also how the Red Hat Society is judged in the newspapers. In one of these papers (De Stentor, 10 December, 2005) it is argued that the Red Hat Society is fun and that is exactly why it is not a problem:

> "Was it not such a happy idea, then you could have called it sexism or gender discrimination: a club for only women of fifty years and older. Who, dressed up with a red hat and preferably

purple clothing, shamelessly go on the spree[1]."

Within this frame 'fun' is situated as the central characteristic of the Red Hat Society. As is also evident in Rob's description: "it's just having fun." He situates the Red Hat Society as a type of play, with the Red Hatters dressing up and becoming someone different for the moment. As I have also explained in chapter 3, this idea fits with a definition of play as a practice that is different from everyday life, which gives the Hatters a break from everyday burdens and constraints. This definition fits with the characterization of play of Huizinga, Caillois, and also Bateson, who argue that play is a bounded practice that is separated from ordinary life (see chapter 1). I have shown that this is a description that is hence also used often by the Red Hatters themselves. What is most striking in Rob's description is that he explicitly says that this makes the Red Hat Society 'fun', and 'not serious': it is frivolous and "without pretences". This is also the definition of the Red Hat Society that is used in almost all of the newspaper articles.

According to the papers, what we are dealing with here is a leisure organisation for women over the age of fifty, who wear red hats and purple clothes and do fun things. The latter is stressed with different phrases that often begin with the assertion that the only thing Red Hatters want to do is "have fun" or "act mad". Only three articles tell a different story and entertain the possibility that the Red Hat Society is about more than just fun.

> "The Red Hat Society is an international fun-for-50plus-women society (…), a society for women of fifty years and older, who want to have fun together. As a sign of their frivolous side they wear a red hat." (NRC, 5 March, 2005)

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1 The original Dutch phrase that is used here is "*de bloemetjes buiten zetten*," which broadly refers to a situation in which people go out to party or have shameless fun.

"Doing fun things. That is the only goal of the Red Hat Socie-ty, an international association of 50-plus-women." (Trouw, 20 September, 2006)

Even the feminist monthly *Opzij* uses this frame to describe the Red Hat Society: "The Red Hat Society is an informal as-sociation of women over the age of 50 who want to have un-complicated fun. Anything goes. Only a red hat is an absolute must" (Opzij, 1 November, 2005). Mark, one of the husbands, gives a similar interpretation of the Red Hat Society as the one that dominates the newspaper coverage. "But, as I understood it a couple of ladies. Well, I heard some names, and many of them I know. And they put on some unusual clothes, put on a red hat and go out to have fun[2]. Well yes, I think that's fine." He also explains that his wife sometimes misses a more profound objective with the Red Hat Society.

Mark: What I do have and that's also what my wife says. She likes the Red Hats[3], but it is a bit… a, pointless in the sense that they don't have… Look, they don't work for a charity (…). This is only coming together and, just cosy[4], drinking a glass of wine having a nice dinner, but not… that, that's what my wife tells me at least, that, she sometimes says that she misses that with the red hats. (…) She sometimes misses something like, a reason or… I don't think you should look that much into it. But that, that's not there. It's just a group of silly old women, if I may say so candidly.

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2 Mark uses the term "*gezellig*", as I explained in previous chapters this is a term that is often used in Dutch but that is notoriously diffi-cult to translate. In this context it means to have fun.

3 Mark uses the term "*Rode Hoedjes*", which actually means "litt-le Red Hats". In Dutch there is an addition (-*je*) that is sometimes placed at the end of a noun to indicate that something is small or smaller, as in this case. This addition is often used when men or new-spapers talk about the Red Hatters and their activities.

4 Again Mark uses the term "*gezellig*", which in this context means "cosy".

What Mark suggests here, coincides with accounts of Red Hatters who also often stress that the Red Hat Society is not about charity (but about fun), which is also something that is picked up by the newspapers (with 14 direct references in total). Rob further explains his idea that the Red Hat Society is fun and not serious by comparing it to the activity when men go out 'drinking with the guys'.

> Rob: Well, look, you can become member of a drama club or of a book club or of a bridge club. (…) But there something is expected from you. You have to, your straightjacket, you have to play by the rules. (…) Not with the Red Hat Society, you go there, you dress-up, and no matter how mad you act, yes, that just goes with it. So I also understand that very well. I understand that very well. That's what we men used to have, by going out in the evening with the guys to drink a small beer after a tennis match. But when you become older, like me, then that's over then you all have your own lives and you don't go with a couple of friends, at least I don't, at sixty. Like 'guys we're going to the pub for a little while'. But that was also without pretences, that was also having a laugh and that was leaving everything behind. I can really imagine that for women that's very special.

Again Rob thus emphasises that there is a distinction between the Red Hat Society and everyday life, by arguing that it offers a break with social structure in which women can leave behind ordinary responsibilities and constraints. Interesting is that he believes that the Red Hat Society offers the women more freedom in this sense than other types of play, in which there are more rules.

Most of the newspapers add to the idea that the Red Hat Society is 'just fun' and not serious by stressing that it is not politics, thereby citing a claim that can also be found on the Dutch national website: "A-political, not-religious, no ideological principles, no higher goal or special ambition. It is about enjoying life, doing fun things together and inspiring each other" (Amersfortse Courant, 21 March, 2005). In chapter 4 I argued that the Red Hat Society is not politics in a traditional sense, but does have potentially far reaching political

consequences, as the Hatters challenge and negotiate their so-cio-cultural position as women of middle-age and older. This is not something that the newspapers pick up, except for the first article that has been written about the Red Hat Society in the Netherlands, which appeared in February 2005 in *NRC*. While in this article it is also claimed that "[t]here is no political agenda (...) [and that] the only goal is to have fun together," this article does consider the Red Hat Society to have subversive potential. This is already expressed in the title of the article: "The new women's movement: Red Hat Society." In the body of the text the Red Hat Society is defined in the following way:

> "The Red Hat Society is the newest women's movement, a type of fun loving resistance against the dominant youth culture." (NRC, 26 February, 2005)

Interestingly enough the frame with which newspapers interpret the Red Hat Society changed after this first article, and this is exceptional because usually the organisation of the news dictates that the first article is decisive in setting the frame (Hall et al., 1978). However, in the coverage of the Red Hat Society the focus changed from 'emancipation' to 'fun'.

Within this context newspapers literally stress that Red Hatters do "fun things" (50 literal references) and that they do not hold "meetings" (5 literal references), have "rules" (17 literal references) or any other "obligations" (12 literal references) except for wearing the red hat and no nagging. Particularly the no-nagging-rule of the Red Hat Society is attributed great importance. One paper (Amersfoortse, 21 March, 2005), for instance, notes that: "In the Red Hat Society it is strictly forbidden to nag. There is even a penalty to be paid when nagging occurs." This no-nagging-rule is mentioned in most of the articles (42 times in total) and even stars in many of the article titles (9 in total), see the four examples below:

> "Red Hatclub: Nagging is forbidden" (Dagblad van het Noorden, 20 February, 2006)

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> "Laughing, screaming, no nagging" (Telegraaf, 31 June, 2009)
> "Especially no nagging, but making fun" (Tubantia, 26 April, 2012)
> "Just making fun and no nagging" (Algemeen Dagblad, 2 February, 2013)

Another important aspect of the dominant frame with which newspapers and husbands interpret and describe the Red Hat Society is the reason why people should also allow these women to have fun. This reason is found in the role of caretaker that these women have fulfilled throughout their lives.

Newspapers usually refer to this by shortly citing a Red Hatter who explains that the women have experienced many responsibilities caring for others and now desire a change of pace by having fun. One paper, for instance, cites Sue-Ellen Cooper who says: "Our entire lives we have gone out of our way to please others now we take time for ourselves" (Telegraaf, 5 November, 2005). Newspapers in general present this as a legitimate reason for why the public should also allow the Hatters to be frivolous for a change. This interpretation is found in more studies about older women in the news, in which they are also allowed more room to indulge themselves with fun, because as caretakers they have fulfilled their debt to society, having raised their children (Hamid-Turksoy et al., 2014). Although the Red Hatters' engagement in fun can hence be said to challenge a highly dominant discourse of femininity, namely that of the woman as 'caretaker' (Van Bohemen et al., 2014; Stalp et al., 2008), the dominant interpretation of the press is not that this conveys a subversive message. While newspapers and husbands also discuss the role of caretaker, the way in which they do this is often slightly different: they do not suggest that the Red Hatters hence challenge or negotiate hegemonic cultural rules, but they see it as a justification for fun. Frank offers an alternative interpretation, because he does argue that the Red Hat Society also has different serious aspects, of which the break with care responsibilities is one. He thinks, however, that not many other men also understand it this way.

> Frank: Only I think that they didn't understand it completely that it thus [long silence], that it for the women was something to not [think] about the dishes and cleaning the house and pfff [makes sound that indicates a feeling of exhaustion] the children etcetera, and all kinds of ailments (…). Just that you can be together for once for fun[5].

Only in some occasions do the newspapers explicitly draw the link between care responsibilities and femininity. Most of the time they argue that these women are from a generation in which they have had to care for others.

The dominant frame that is used to describe the Red Hat Society as a whole is also reflected in the characterization of its members, as they are also described as women who just want to have fun. In most of the articles the Red Hatters are referred to as 'women' or 'ladies', but in some of them they are also called 'girls'. Of course, this is a rather unconventional way to characterize women of middle age or older. Hence it has a somewhat cynical ring to it, which is amplified with the adjectives that are sometimes used to qualify the Red Hatters as "over aged" (Haarlems Dagblad, 16 May, 2011), "post-menopausal" (Het Dagblad van het Noorden, 23, April, 2012) or "wrinkle" (De Gooi- en Eemlander, 2 May, 2007) girls. However, the mere description of these women as girls also fits within the frame of them as a harmless and playful group of women. They suggest that we do not have to take these women too seriously. Something that is added to by the use of stereotypes, which often pertain to the women not being in control over their emotions: examples are that they laugh uncontrollably or talk too much.

> "Within the tearoom [where the Hatters have gathered] it is a cackle that's just unbelievable" (Haagsche Courant, 31 March, 2005).

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5 Frank uses the term "*gezellig*", which in this context means "having fun".

In the original Dutch phrase that is used in the quote above (*"gekakel van jewelste"*) the women are compared to chickens, indicating that they are laud, talk too much and without listening to one another. Also in the descriptions of the Red Hat Society by the husbands, such stereotypes tend to return. They are also part of the way in which these men perform 'gender' differences between men and women. For example Ben who argues that the Red Hat Society clearly shows some of the emotional differences that exist between women and men.

> Ben: I always have to laugh when I see that chatter, when I see those ladies jabber, then I think, well a splendid, here you see splendidly that there's a difference between men and women. (…) That they've other interests and they engage with each other in a different way. That they interact differently. Men who interact have other things to talk about and they've other emotions than women who interact. I think that that's very visible. (…) [Men] are much more competitive and focus more on necessary communication. Not that simple, that giggling.

Rob uses the stereotype of older women who nag and also suggests that they talk too much and uncontrollably. Once a year the Hatters of his wife's chapter all come to visit, about which he comments: "Yes, they remain women of course. [Then] it really is a henhouse over here."

    In sum it is suggested that the Red Hat Society is something fun to do for women over the age of fifty, and it is not something serious. Like one paper notes (De Stentor, 10 December, 2005): "Once a month the little girls do something light-spirited. A little lunch, a little wine, a little talk, a little miniature golf and in the winter spool knitting, making flower arrangements, origami, wonderful is it not. And aside from that, everyone looks at these red-and-purple appearances. That is the dream of every older girl is it not?" In some of the papers it is suggested that the Red Hatters do not take themselves or the Red Hat Society too seriously, and this is often labelled as something 'fortunate'. "We are just like children. We want to have fun. But we will keep our legs on the ground,"

a Red Hatter assures readers in an article in *BN/De Stem* (26 April, 2006). Similar assertions of only fun and not too much seriousness are given in two other articles:

> "De Wilde and Van Woudenberg Hamstra [the two founders of a Red Hat chapter in the Netherlands] relativize their initiative: 'Actually it is nothing serious. And who knows: maybe we will bleed to death. But then we did have a whole lot of fun'." (Amersfoortse Courant, 14 March, 2005)

> Another new chapter Queen notes in *AD 't Groene Hart* (7 January, 2006): "It [the Red Hat Society handbook] says I have to practice on that waving. (…) That I only did once, at night in my bed. You should never take yourself too seriously of course."

These examples show that the behaviour of the Red Hatters are restricted by some rules, because they also should not become too serious: as long as they are (only) having fun, the Red Hat Society can be considered fun by the papers as well as the husbands. The question then is if this remains when the Red Hatters also become serious.

Conclusion

In the interpretation of the Red Hat Society by two specific audiences, the husbands and newspapers, certain aspects of the narrow definition of play developed by Huizinga (1950), Caillois (1979) and, among others, Bateson (2006), return. In this definition play is seen as a specific practice that separates itself from everyday life, as something that offers players freedom from 'ordinary' rules and responsibilities, and from drudgery and constraints. This is also how the husbands and newspapers see the Red Hat Society, as a type of play, which is enjoyable for the Hatters exactly because it provides them with the space to do something 'fun' outside of everyday life. Such an understanding of the Red Hat Society overlaps, in part, with the understandings of the Red Hatters (see chapter 3). However, while Huizinga also argues that play, conceived as a bounded practice, is 'ambiguous' in the sense that it con-

tinuously moves between fun and seriousness, and while my study has shown empirically that this is certainly true for the Red Hat Society, this ambiguity disappears almost completely in the dominant frame with which the husbands and newspapers describe the Red Hat Society.

In this frame the emphasis is on the 'fun' of the Red Hat Society, on the fact that the Hatters do fun things, laugh and come together, without nagging or making an effort to support a good cause. They 'just' want to have 'fun' it is claimed by the newspapers and the husbands, which I have argued in chapter 3 is something the Red Hatters also frequently say. However, when looked at their complete stories and the things that they do when they go out together, it is very clear that there are also serious sides to their play. Previous studies about the Red Hat Society have equally noted these serious aspects that together can be subsumed under the headings of 'coping' and 'identity'. On the coping side, other studies also show that the Red Hat Society provides women with different types of social support and positive experiences (Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; 2010). On the identity front, some scholars argue that the Red Hat Society grants Red Hatters with the means to negotiate their social positions as women of middle-age and older (Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2014; White-Farnham, 2013; Yarnal et al., 2011). How the Hatters do this exactly, is something that I have shown in the previous two chapters (chapter 4 and 5). Yet, the Red Hatters are not met with the same negative responses that are often directed at groups who challenge culture on matters of identity (cf. Cohen, 1972; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). However, the consequence of this absence of negative responses seems to be that they are not really taken seriously.

Within the dominant frame with which the husbands and newspapers understand the Red Hat Society the 'serious' aspects go unmentioned, except for some short references to women's caretaking positions and some – even rarer – mentioning of the invisibility of middle-aged and older women in

society. The Red Hat Society is not linked to emancipation or politics, and the caretaking position of women is most often used as a legitimation for why the women want to do something 'fun' and 'not serious', for a change. The implication is then that the Red Hat Society is not serious, but that this is also something that we should allow the Hatters to be, because they have fulfilled their social duties by taking care of their families and by working their entire lives. Hence, the act of engaging in 'fun' is also related to cultural ideas of femininity and the ways in which they interact with age, so that 'older' women are likely to be permitted with more room to play.

Now that it has become clear that husbands, like news media, see the Red Hat Society as just fun and not serious, the questions that many of them asked me, about my motives for doing a sociological study about the Red Hat Society, are set in a 'new' perspective. If it is nothing serious: "Why then study the Red Hat Society?" In the conclusion of this book I will once more try to answer this essential question.

Conclusion: The social construction of play

In the beginning of this book I described one of my first en-counters with the Red Hat Society, which took place during a national convention in Zwolle. On that day, I followed a group of about four-hundred Red Hatters through the country, the city and, eventually, into a beautiful historical theatre. The theatre formed the main setting for the convention, and, as I explained, this produced a rather curious scene. This had to do with the idea that normally there is an obvious distinction within theatre between the staged performance, or 'play', and the people in the audience, who are only watching the play. In theatre the act of playing is visibly marked by the stage, the curtain, the lights and the actors' costumes, which all make clear where play begins and where it ends: the play takes place on the stage and it hence ends where the stage ends, when the curtain rises the play is set into motion, when the curtain drops the play is over. Yet, none of these 'rules' seemed to ap-ply today. With the Red Hatters sitting in the audience, the act of playing was no longer confined to the stage as a bounded space, nor limited by the time set by the performance of the show (field notes, 21 April 2011).

While Johan Huizinga (1950: 13, italics in original) talks about play as a "magic circle" which he describes as "a *step-ping out of* common reality into a higher order," this example shows the fluidity of this order. Indeed, the anecdote illus-trates the complex and ambiguous relation that exists between play and 'real' or everyday life, which has been a returning theme throughout this study about the Red Hat Society. Pre-vious studies have remarkably overlooked the importance of play as an essential quality of the Red Hat Society (with the exception of Yarnal, 2006 and Yarnal et al., 2008), leaving a void in the literature that I aimed to fill. To this end I formu-lated four descriptive research questions and one explanatory

question. In what follows I revisit and answer these questions, not only to offer a thick description of the Red Hat Society and its meanings for its members, but also to develop a situated critique on current perspectives on play. Through the analysis of the Red Hat Society, I aimed to construct building blocks for a new approach to play, that can account for the 'ambiguous' relationship that exists between play and its social context, which I will specify in this conclusion.

The Red Hat Society and ambiguity
The first research question that I asked in this study was a rather simple one: 'What is the Red Hat Society?' Throughout this study I have looked at this question mainly from the perspective of the Red Hatters and the reasons they have for enjoying the Red Hat Society. This was also the second research question that I posed: 'Who are the Red Hatters and why do they enjoy the Red Hat Society?' As the previous chapters have shown there is not just one answer to this question. In fact, one of the main outcomes of this study is that the Red Hat Society offers the Hatters many different pleasures, which also means that the Red Hat Society means many different things to them. Another main outcome of this study is that these different meanings and pleasures of the Red Hat Society are regularly contradictory.

First, I showed in chapter 3 that the Red Hatters see the Red Hat Society as a fun activity that they engage in at leisure time, with which they sketch a notable difference between the Red Hat Society and their everyday lives. The Hatters indicate that in everyday life they experience social rules, roles and responsibilities that have come to feel like drudgeries and constraints. The Red Hat Society, they argue, offers a temporary break from these drudgeries and constraints. They stress, for instance, that the Red Hat Society is voluntary and contains 'other' rules of conduct: within the Red Hat Society they can reverse cultural norms and conventions, they can wear a red hat with purple clothes even though the colours do not match, they can rediscover 'the little girl' inside themselves, they can

become an entirely different person with a different name and social status, and more. However, while the Hatters hence experience the Red Hat Society as a 'fun' break from everyday life, there are also more 'serious' sides to the Red Hat Society in which the latter actually seems to play an important role also within their everyday lives.

For instance, while many Red Hatters maintain that the Red Hat Society should not be about friendship and supporting each other in times of hardship, which they feel would bring it too close to home, they all say that friendship and support do happen automatically (see also Barrett et al., 2012; Hutchinson et al., 2008; Kerstetter et al., 2008; Radina et al., 2008; Son et al., 2007; 2010). The women I spoke with, moreover, all consider these more 'serious' aspects as part of the appeal of the Red Hat Society: they like it that they have made friends through it and they feel strengthened by the support that they receive from their fellow Red Hatters. I argued that these examples of support and friendship show that the Red Hat Society is not just a fun activity that the women engage in at leisure time, but also something that has a more profound influence on their 'ordinary' or everyday lives: as the Red Hat Society in this case has a hand in who they engage with within their everyday lives, how they feel about themselves in their everyday lives, and how they deal with hardship in their everyday lives. Nowhere is this influence of the Red Hat Society clearer than with some of the funerals of Red Hatters, as there are Hatters who literally take the red hat with them into their graves.

That the Red Hat Society does not exist on a separate plane away from 'ordinary' experiences and activities is clear, too, in the ways in which it challenges and negotiates hegemonic cultural norms around gender and age. In chapter 4 and 5 I argued that the Hatters perform different 'intersecting' identities within the Red Hat Society (femininity, age and class), and that they 'do' this in ways that sometimes coincide but at other times also conflict with some of our 'ordinary' cultural expectations and conventions. Particularly in chapter 4, I

showed that Red Hatters take pleasure from the idea that they challenge and negotiate certain cultural stereotypes of women of middle-age and older (see also Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2014; White-Farnham, 2013; Yarnal et al., 2011). The Red Hatters, for instance, enjoy showing other people that they are 'still full of life'. They do this by enjoying publicly visible leisure in conspicuous looking attires, with which they stand out from the general crowd. We may say that they make a spectacle of themselves through which they draw the attention from other people in public spaces. Again this is a major source of pleasure for the Hatters, who feel that other people really enjoy seeing them. Some of these Red Hatters indicate that they feel that as they have become 'older' they have become (somewhat) invisible in public life, but not so when they are with the Red Hat Society: then suddenly they are visible again (see also Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Yarnal et al., 2011). The Red Hat Society also creates a space for them to do something for their own enjoyment, which the Hatters often contrast with everyday responsibilities around care. They argue that the Red Hat Society makes sure that they take time for themselves: for their own indulgence. Because women in our society are instructed to direct their pleasures toward the care for others, women taking pleasure from doing something for themselves automatically constitute a challenge to existing gender norms (Deutsch, 2007; Hermes, 1995; Radway, 1984; Stalp et al., 2008; 2009; Van Bohemen et al., 2014).

It is not that the Red Hatters only resist hegemonic expectations around femininity and ageing, as they also find joy in doing femininity in more conventional or even traditional ways. However, there is a certain subversive quality to their performance of femininity and age, which results mainly from its excessiveness. I tried to capture this subversive quality and the ambiguity that is inherent in its performance with the term 'radical femininity'. I chose to re-appropriate the 'radical' in 'radical femininity' to indicate that the Red Hatters transgress cultural boundaries by doing femininity in a highly conspicuous and unconventional manner. The idea that

doing femininity can be subversive goes against second-wave feminist conceptions of 'femininity' as a necessarily oppressive identity. This conception is particularly evident in the work of popular writers such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, in which they condemn typically feminine leisure activities like reading women's magazines and romance novels, as well as attending balls and beauty salons. While these feminists of the second-wave also propagate a more or less constructivist perspective upon identity, by arguing that femininity consists of culturally learned and enforced behaviour, they still reify femininity in their fierce rejection of these activities. My analysis of the Red Hat Society however shows that these women who also enjoy feminine leisure, perform femininity in complex and often contradictory ways: in which they thus both conform to, and challenge and negotiate hegemonic cultural norms and expectations. I use the term 'radical femininity' to describe this mechanism in which some of the cultural norms around femininity are disrupted through a performance of excess and outrageousness.

In chapter 5, I showed that the Red Hat Society is not just a performance of femininity that is crosscut by age, but also a performance of femininity that is crosscut by class. This performance of class has a profound influence upon the relations between the Red Hatters. As my third research question I asked: 'How do the Red Hatters relate to one another?' During my research it quickly became apparent that the Hatters are not one uniform group, but maintain different ideas about what the Red Hat Society is or should be about. These different ideas are conspicuously reflected in the red hats that are worn by the Hatters, where a distinction can be made between a group that wears expensive and elegant hats and a group that wears self-made and eccentric hats. I argued that these different hats reflect two opposite attempts at class distinction. The women who wear expensive and elegant hats tend to value respectability, which according to Beverley Skeggs (1997) is an important indicator of middle-class taste and femininity. The 'respectable' Red Hatters are often critical of the 'other' Hatters

who they consider to look too eccentric or too sexual. According to this group, the other Hatters have not really grasped the concept of the Red Hat Society: 'they are doing it wrong!' However, this is vice-versa also what these other Hatters claim about the respectable Hatters. The Red Hatters who wear eccentric hats often draw upon their own creativity in making and designing their own hats and clothes. I argued that they hence embody a working-class femininity, because they oppose respectability by making their own clothes. Historically this dressmaking is tied to the women of the working class as they did not have the means to buy their clothes like the women of the middle class (Buckely, 1999; Burmen, 1999).

These 'eccentric' Hatters show that 'distinction' is not only something that is done by the middle- or higher classes, or by people from the working class who want to move up the social ladder. The latter idea is central to many theories about fashion and popular culture, dating back to the work of Veblen and Simmel and their accounts of fashion at the turn of the twentieth century. While this study has shown that there certainly are women from the working class who aspire to pass for middle-class by adopting a respectable appearance, there are also working-class women who do not aspire this. Instead they use their creative skills to create and articulate their own class identity. This means that the Red Hat Society is again ambiguous in the sense that there are Red Hatters who abide by historically defined hegemonic norms around femininity and class, while there are also Red Hatters who oppose these norms. Another thing that is shown by these two performances of middle-class and working-class femininity within the Red Hat Society, is that the latter is not completely 'free' or 'frivolous' to the Red Hatters. It is also a more serious matter to them, which becomes evident in the way in which the two groups of Red Hatters cling to their styles and critique each other, which on occasion also results in the exchange of more insulting comments.

The first three empirical chapters of this book thus show that the Red Hat Society has serious sides through which it

bridges the distinction that is often drawn, also by Red Hatters themselves, between play and everyday life. Interestingly enough, these serious sides go almost completely unmentioned in the characterisations of the Red Hat Society made by the audiences that I studied. As my last descriptive research question I wanted to know: 'What do audiences think of the Red Hat Society?' I looked at husbands and newspapers as two important audiences in the private and public lives of the Red Hatters.

In chapter 6 I showed that these audiences generally consider the Red Hat Society in positive terms. However, this overall judgement is based on the idea that the Red Hat Society is solely about fun, and that there are no more serious sides to it. Husbands and newspapers describe the Red Hat Society as 'frivolous' and without pretences, and the Hatters as a group of 'silly old women' who only want to do fun things. On this point, the accounts of the husbands and the newspapers coincide with parts of the accounts of the Red Hatters. Like the Hatters, they also argue that the Red Hat Society offers women a 'fun' environment in which ordinary life is temporarily suspended. The Red Hat Society is described as 'a break' from everyday drudgeries and constraints. However, this is just one of the – contradictory – meanings of the Red Hat Society that could be discerned from this study. Next to it being fun, the Red Hatters also speak about the Red Hat Society helping them make friends and creating a system of support, and besides that, their actions challenge and negotiate dominant ideas and stereotypes about women of middle-age and older. This is why I concluded that the Red Hat Society also has other meanings in which this 'separation' from everyday life clearly becomes fluid, as the Red Hat Society leaks into the Hatters everyday lives, while their everyday lives also flow into the Red Hat Society.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the empirical chapters of this book is that the Red Hat Society is ambiguous in the sense that it is both 'different' and 'the same' as 'ordinary' life. This 'ordinary' life is the social context in which play

takes place, consisting of the social relations and the 'rules', 'roles', 'expectations' and 'experiences' that are part of these relations. The Red Hat Society continuously moves between being 'different' or even 'opposite' to this social context and being 'similar' to this context: on the one hand it is situated by the Red Hatters and their audiences as a fun and leisurely activity that differs from everyday experiences, while on the other hand it is also a definite part of these everyday experiences as the Hatters make friends through the Red Hat Society and support each other in times of hardship; on the one hand, it is a critique on hegemonic gender discourse and that what people ordinarily deem 'normal' or 'appropriate' behaviour for women of middle-age and older, while on the other hand it also confirms certain elements of this discourse. A question that then remains it how to make sense of this ambiguity of the Red Hat Society. That is why I formulated one more explanatory research question: 'How can we understand all this from the perspective of play?' In the remainder of this conclusion I will focus on this question in order to arrive at a better understanding of the Red Hat Society.

Towards a new perspective
In the beginning of this book I have discussed two perspectives on play that are for the most part mutually unaware of each other (see chapter 1). The first perspective consists of Huizinga's and Caillois' idea of play as a bounded practice that is separated from the rest of 'ordinary' life. The second perspective I derived from the social constructivist notion of 'performance', which regards the whole of everyday life, or 'reality', as a type of play. Both these perspectives have specific qualities that have proven to be useful in this study. Still, they equally have specific limitations, which make that – taken separately – they cannot fully explain the Red Hat Society. Huizinga's and Caillois' formalistic classifications of play make too rigid a distinction between play and its context, and this produces problems when we look at the *meaning* of the Red Hat Society, which this study has shown is directly linked to the

social context in which it is performed. The 'etic' perspective of performance produces an opposite problem, because it no longer allows for a distinction to be made between play and its context: play and context are one and the same in this perspective. This produces problems particularly when we look at the *function* of the Red Hat Society. Because the Red Hat Society fulfils a specific function when it comes to identity and culture: it creates a space for experimentation, which is due to the fact that people (in this case Red Hatters, husbands and media) see it as something that is different from its 'ordinary' social context. In the following sections I explain in more detail the limitations of both perspectives on play in relation to the outcomes of this study.

The meaning of play
According to Huizinga many cultural practices take the form of play: religion, law, war, philosophy and art, all of them bear characteristics that he considers to be *sub specie ludi*, specific of play. However, while it then seems impossible to separate play from the rest of social life, these characteristics that Huizinga assigns to play do work towards this idea. Indeed, in the opening chapter of his book Huizinga develops a formalistic definition of play in which 'separateness' is its most fundamental dimension: play sets itself 'apart' from its social context, he argues, it is a temporary world within the 'ordinary' world. Roger Caillois develops a similar definition of play based on a list of its characteristics that also boil down to 'separateness': play is a 'free' activity, governed by its own 'rules' and bounded by 'time' and 'space'. Caillois (1979: 6) argues that "play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life (…) [through] precise limits of time and space." Quite radically, he maintains that: "Nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant" (*Ibid.*).

Based on the outcomes of this study we can say that this idea that play is a hallowed space that is carefully isolated from the rest of life, is problematic. Instead I showed that all sorts of interactions take place between the Red Hat Society and

its social context. On the one hand the Red Hat Society is experienced by the Red Hatters and their audiences as something 'different' from everyday life, something that offers them freedom and relief from 'ordinary' rules and responsibilities, which also gives them the opportunity to take on other (fantasy-) roles and social positions. However, at the same time we see that aspects from the Red Hat Society also find their way into the everyday lives of the Red Hatters, like the examples that I already gave of the friendships and the support during hardship. This also works the other way around: aspects of the social context also return within the Red Hat Society. Take for instance the cultural ideas and expectations that exist around femininity, age and class, which inform the Red Hatters' social positions. As we have seen, the Red Hat Society is moulded around these types of cultural discourses, which it at some points challenges and negotiates, and at other points confirms. The Red Hat Society thus continuously acquires its meanings in interaction with the social relations, the rules, the roles, the expectations and experiences that structure everyday life. Play should hence not be viewed as a 'world-apart' that is 'bounded' and 'separated' from the rest of life; because, contrary to Caillois' idea that noting outside play is relevant for the play, the Red Hat Society shows that the relevance of this context can hardly be overstated. It is within this social context that play has its meaning as well as a specific function.

The function of play
Jacques Ehrmann and his colleagues (1968) also criticise Huizinga and Caillois for making too rigid a distinction between play and its social context. However, these scholars take a complete opposite stance, which is also problematic because they argue that play and its social context are basically one and the same: "the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played," they argue. "Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable" (*Ibid.*: 56). This idea that 'reality' is in fact 'played', I have argued, is more widespread as it is part of social constructivist theories and then particularly those that per-

tain to identity. In chapter 1 I gave Goffman and Butler as two prominent examples of scholars who draw upon the 'theatre' as a metaphor for social life, with which they argue that the whole of social reality is a 'performance'. This study has shown once more that this notion of performance can be very useful in the study of identity, where it helps to show that identity is not a natural quality of people but something that is done and achieved within different social contexts. However, when used in its more radical form, like Ehrmann and colleagues do, this analogy that is drawn – through the notion of performance – between play and social life also creates problems.

The most important of these problems is that it cannot account for the fact that people still do perceive of play as something 'different'; like the Red Hatters, husbands and newspapers, who see the Red Hat Society as something that is 'different' from everyday life. As Bruce Wilshire (1976: 202) argues, the problem with the theatre metaphor is that it "obliterates the distinction (...) between those behaviours cooked-up for the moment and those that are integral, habitual, appropriate, sanctioned and perceived by all to be so." While we cannot see play too rigidly as an activity that is 'separate' or 'isolated' from its context, my analysis of the experiences of the Red Hatters shows that it remains a very specific practice within social life that is perceived of as 'different' from 'ordinary' life. People thus differentiate between play and its context: they continuously make distinctions between 'play' and 'non-play', 'on-stage' and 'off-stage', 'real' and 'faked' performances, 'serious' and 'unserious' ones. Here also lies the function of play in relation to its context, because play opens a space for cultural experimentation where the rules and regulations that structure and confine everyday life can be challenged and negotiated. I showed that the Red Hatters indeed draw upon this space to explore and try-out new identities, as they perform a 'radical femininity' with which they turn around certain dominant cultural rules, expectations and conventions around femininity and ageing (see chapter 4 and 5).

Moreover, the audiences' reactions to the Red Hat Society,

which I discussed in chapter 6, show that this performance of radical femininity does not lead to much negativity about the Red Hat Society. The Red Hatters are not perceived as 'radical' in the sense that they go too far, doing something that is unacceptable. This can be seen as a confirmation of the idea that in differentiating 'play' from 'real' or 'ordinary' performances, people in general evaluate and sanction behaviour that is perceived to occur within play differently from behaviour that is perceived to take place outside play, within everyday life (Bateson, 2006; Butler also admits this 1988: 527). As long as the illusion of 'difference' is maintained one is generally allowed to break ordinary codes of conduct that cannot be broken in everyday life, where this type of behaviour would surely be punished in some way.

This argument is similar to that made by scholars within cultural studies, like Janice Radway (1984) and Ien Ang (1990) who argue that 'fantasy' creates the possibility for women and men to move beyond everyday structural constraints and explore new social positions and identities. Play and fantasy offer an "unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions, or those which are in some way too dangerous or too risky to be acted out in real life, can be adopted" (Ang, 1990: 85-86). Because the Red Hat Society takes the form of play the Hatters' challenges and negotiations of their cultural positions are then turned into unthreatening acts. Of course, this is always at the risk that Red Hatters' challenges and negotiations of culture will not be taken seriously by the general public; as the audiences also only see the 'fun' of the Red Hat Society. For that reason I have elsewhere compared play to a "bee's sting robbed of its venom," that is, a sting without the hurt (Van Bohemen et al., 2014: 596).

Overall we may then conclude that we should not see play and its social context as separate worlds, because they continuously and mutually influence one another. However, we do need to differentiate between the two, because people perceive them to be something 'different' and this distinction is meaningful to them. This is the ambiguity of play, because it

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is neither separate from 'ordinary' life, nor does it completely coincide with 'ordinary' life.

The magic of play

Hence the contours of a new perspective on play are now drawn. By trying to characterize play in terms of a set of formal characteristics, Huizinga and Caillois present play too much in fixed terms. Play, however, is not static but dynamic, and as such we also need a dynamic approach. This approach can be found in social constructivist theory, but not as it has been used so far to equate play with its social context, in which both are presented as one and the same thing. Taking into account that play does create the illusion that it is somehow 'different' we may arrive at a new social constructivist perspective on play. We then need to see play – like identity – as something that people 'do' within the context of everyday social life, in which they continuously define and redefine it as something that is 'different' from its social context. Play is a specific activity that is perceived of as something 'different', or a 'break', from 'real' or everyday life. However, because of the performative nature of play this 'difference' is always fluid, it continuously needs to be done, the limits of play continuously need to be set. There are no solid boundaries between play and its social context, but the fact that it is considered to be something 'different' does have a specific function as it makes of play a relatively safe space for people to experiment with culture. Play offers a space to experiment with identity without really attacking hegemonic power structures and invoking resistance from those whose beliefs may be troubled by this performance. This space seems especially useful for marginalised social groups, like the midlife and older women of the Red Hat Society, who can use the symbolic safety of the play frame to negotiate their social position. We may say that the real 'magic' of play lies exactly here, in creating this opportunity.

- There lies the 'magic' of the red hat!

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De magie van de rode hoed: Een studie in de sociologie van spel en identiteit

De Red Hat Society is een internationale vrijetijdsorganisatie voor vrouwen van vijftig jaar en ouder, die in eigen woorden stelt deze vrouwen een platform te bieden voor "plezier" en "vriendschap". Leden worden ook wel Red Hatters genoemd omdat ze tijdens momenten van gezamenlijk vertier gekleed gaan met een rode hoed en daarbij vloekende paarse kleding. Veel van de vrouwen versieren hun toch al opvallende outfits met nog meer accessoires, zoals rode handschoenen, shawltjes, boa's en markante sieraden. Oprichtster Sue Ellen Cooper uit Californië was samen met haar man op vakantie toen ze in de herfst van 1997 plots op een *vintage* rode hoed stuitte. Ze besloot de hoed te kopen, nadat ze er eerst wel even over had nagedacht: want misschien zou ze hem wel nooit dragen. Toen haar beste vriendin een aantal maanden later op het punt stond om vijftig te worden en grapte over haar 'ouder' worden, moest Cooper denken aan een bekend Engels gedicht geschreven door Jenny Joseph (1961). In het gedicht, dat de titel *Warning* draagt, waarschuwt de ik-persoon dat ze 'stoute' en tegendraadse dingen gaat doen als ze oud is. Één van die dingen is het dragen van een rode hoed met paarse kleren. Cooper gaf het gedicht als verjaardagscadeau aan haar vriendin, samen met een rode hoed. En zo is de Red Hat Society in 1998 officieel ontstaan.

Cooper gaf ook haar andere vriendinnen dit cadeau zodat ze op een dag in een theehuis in het rood en paars samen konden komen. Sindsdien heeft het concept zich als een olievlek verspreid doordat steeds meer vrouwen er kennis van namen en besloten met eigen vriendinnen op andere plekken afdelingen op te richten. Volgens de officiële website van de Red Hat Society waren er in 2010 meer dan 20.000 van deze afdelingen in meer dan 25 landen, waaronder Australië, Engeland en Nederland. Ons land kent op dit moment zo ongeveer 100 afde-

lingen verspreid over het hele land. Iedere afdeling van de Red Hat Society wordt geleid door een vrouw die de titel 'Queen' draagt, zij is de afdeling begonnen. Ook de andere Red Hatters adopteren vaak een fantasienaam en titel als ze zich bij een afdeling aansluiten. Dat mogen ook vrouwen zijn die jonger zijn dan vijftig, alleen wordt van hen verwacht dat ze een roze hoed dragen samen met lila kleding. De rode hoed en de paarse kleren worden bewaard als beloning voor het bereiken van de vijftigste verjaardag.

Wanneer de Red Hatters hun rode hoeden opzetten in de publieke ruimte is één ding zeker, ze trekken veel bekijks. Sue Ellen Cooper zegt hierover in een videoclip dat er "*magie* zit in de rode hoed". Gegeven het spelelement dat de Red Hat Society kenmerkt, doet deze uitspraak al snel denken aan een beroemd concept van de Nederlandse historicus Johan Huizinga. Dit is het concept van de "magische cirkel" dat hij in 1938 introduceerde in zijn klassieke werk *Homo Ludens* (Latijn voor: 'Spelende Mens'). Huizinga gebruikt deze term om aan te geven dat spel een speciale menselijke activiteit is die op verschillende manieren breekt met het alledaagse leven. "Spel is niet het 'gewone' of 'eigenlijke' leven. Het is een uittreden daaruit in een tijdelijke sfeer van activiteit met een eigen strekking" (Huizinga, 1950[1938]: 35). Deze 'uittredende' functie van spel wordt over het hoofd gezien in de academische literatuur die over de Red Hat Society gaat. Hierin speelt spel opmerkelijk genoeg bijna geen rol, terwijl dit duidelijk de essentie vormt van de Red Hat Society, denk alleen al aan het feit dat de Red Hatters in kostuum naar buiten gaan, om dan samen 'leuke' activiteiten te ondernemen.

In dit onderzoek probeer ik de Red Hat Society te begrijpen vanuit het perspectief van spel. Om dit adequaat te kunnen doen stel ik vier open en beschrijvende onderzoeksvragen: Wat is de Red Hat Society? Wie zijn de Red Hatters en waarom halen zij plezier uit de Red Hat Society? Hoe verhouden deze Red Hatters zich tot elkaar? En wat denken mensen van buiten de Red Hat Society, het publiek, over de Red Hat Society? Aan deze vragen is een verklarende vraag toegevoegd: Hoe kunnen

we de antwoorden op bovengenoemde vragen begrijpen vanuit het perspectief van spel?

In het theoretische *hoofdstuk 1* van dit proefschrift beargumenteer ik dat er in de wetenschappelijke literatuur twee manieren zijn om spel te benaderen die beide bruikbaar zijn voor de analyse van de Red Hat Society. De eerste benadering van spel ontleen ik aan het werk van Huizinga en andere speltheoretici als Roger Caillois en Victor Turner, die spel zien als een specifieke praktijk die zich onderscheidt van het 'echte' of alledaagse leven. Allereerst stellen zij dat spel een 'vrije handeling' is waar mensen uit vrije wil aan deelnemen, omdat zij dit plezierig vinden. Dit vormt de eerste breuk met het alledaagse, waarin er ook dingen zijn die gewoonweg 'moeten'. Een tweede breuk wordt gevormd door de regels van het spel: door middel van regels creëert het spel een eigen orde, die buiten de orde van alledag staat. Dit onderscheid wordt vaak nog eens extra aangegeven door ruimtelijke en tijdelijke grenzen. De meeste spellen vinden plaats binnen een duidelijk afgebakende ruimte, denk aan een speelbord, veld, toneel, arena of beeldscherm; en daarnaast heeft ieder spel een begin en een eind. In het geval van de Red Hat Society lijken deze ruimtelijke grenzen niet een hele grote rol te spelen, maar hier is het kostuum dan weer van belang omdat dit – de rode hoed – aangeeft dat wat hier gebeurt een niet alledaags fenomeen is. Het mag immers worden verwacht dat deze vrouwen in hun dagelijks leven andere, minder opvallende, kleren dragen. Daarom is dit perspectief, van spel als een 'niet-alledaagse' praktijk, een geschikt vertrekpunt voor de bestudering van de Red Hat Society.

Een tweede benadering van spel kan worden gevonden in sociaal constructivistische theorieën. Auteurs van deze theorieën maken vaak gebruik van analogieën die spel gelijk stellen met het alledaagse leven. Hierbinnen is de 'theatermetafoor' de bekendste, waarmee het sociale leven wordt vergeleken met een toneelspel waarin alle mensen naar elkaar constant verschillende rollen opvoeren. Het sociaal constructivisme is een theoretisch paradigma dat zich primair verzet tegen 'essentialistische' denkbeelden waarin het sociale leven

wordt gezien als een uitkomst van een meer fundamentele 'realiteit' die voorafgaat aan cultuur. Volgens het sociaal constructivisme bestaat deze zogenaamd 'objectieve' realiteit niet, want geen enkele realiteit gaat vooraf aan cultuur. Dat wat mensen 'realiteit' noemen is altijd een menselijk product, een gigantisch web van betekenissen die mensen continu met elkaar creëren en in stand houden. Dit doen zij simpelweg door te handelen, ofwel te 'acteren', en hier zien we dan gelijk de logica van een vergelijking met het theater. Het sociale leven bestaat uit mensen die handelen, rollen spelen, waarmee ze allerlei ideeën in het leven roepen, die gaan over henzelf en over de wereld om hen heen. Deze analogie met het theater is vooral populair onder theoretici die zich bezighouden met identiteit, waarvan Erving Goffman en Judith Butler twee bekende voorbeelden zijn. Zij beargumenteren dat identiteit, of het nu gaat over gender, leeftijd, klasse of ras, niet het resultaat is van een achter de cultuur gelegen natuur of biologie, maar van culturele activiteiten. Identiteit is iets wat mensen 'doen': door middel van hun gedrag communiceren ze aan anderen verschillende ideeën over wie zij zijn als persoon.

Natuurlijk is dit ook iets wat de Red Hatters doen, en dan zowel in hun dagelijks leven als in de Red Hat Society. Vanuit dit perspectief kunnen we de Red Hat Society dan ook zien als een specifieke *performance* van identiteit, waarin Red Hatters verschillende ideeën tentoonspreiden over wie zij zijn als vrouwen van middelbare leeftijd en ouder. Binnen dit idee zit echter wel een ander idee van spel dan dat wat we vinden bij Huizinga. In sociaal constructivistische theorie wordt het hele sociale leven namelijk opgebouwd uit spel: het leven is één grote *performance*, terwijl spel bij Huizinga een aparte praktijk is binnen het sociale leven, iets wat zich afscheidt van alle andere praktijken. Waar Huizinga's perspectief het best lijkt aan te sluiten bij de manier waarop mensen zelf betekenis geven aan spel, is het idee van *performance* meer een perspectief van de onderzoeker dat universele geldigheid heeft, omdat het sociale leven en de betekenissen die we daaraan toekennen in iedere mogelijke samenleving voortkomen uit menselijk han-

delen. Ik stel dat de sleutel tot het begrijpen van de Red Hat Society ligt daar waar deze twee perspectieven elkaar kruisen. Het is namelijk een 'spel binnen een spel' en wel op twee manieren: enerzijds is het een spel binnen de algemene *performance* van het alledaagse leven, maar anderzijds is het ook een *performance* van identiteit die de Red Hatters uitvoeren binnen de symbolische grenzen van het spel.

Hoe dit precies in zijn werk gaat zet ik uiteen in vier opeenvolgende empirische hoofdstukken. Maar daaraan voorafgaand beschrijf ik allereerst in *hoofdstuk 2* de methodologie van deze studie. Voor deze studie heb ik etnografisch onderzoek gedaan naar de Red Hat Society in Nederland. Ik heb data verzameld uit verschillende bronnen: participerende observatie, interviews en (online) geschreven documenten. Tussen maart 2011 en april 2012 heb ik negen activiteiten van de Red Hat Society bijgewoond, waaronder een cruise van zeven dagen met Red Hatters en hun mannen. Deze cruise was van bijzonder belang voor het onderzoek omdat ik zo de Red Hatters gedurende meerdere dagen mee kon maken en ook op momenten dat ze niets voor de Red Hat Society deden. Ook gaf de cruise mij de mogelijkheid om met mannen en andere verwanten van Red Hatters te spreken. Naast deze observaties heb ik ook diepte-interviews gehouden met achttien Red Hatters en boeken en websites van de Red Hat Society geanalyseerd. Er is nog uitgebreider met mannen gesproken en ik heb nieuwsartikelen uit Nederlandse kranten geanalyseerd. Ik heb al deze data geanalyseerd vanuit een *grounded theory* benadering, waarin door constante vergelijking van de data (veelal uitgeschreven tekstfragmenten) is gezocht naar betekenisvolle overeenkomsten en verschillen. Het coderen heb ik in drie fases uitgevoerd, waarin ik zowel inductieve als meer deductieve strategieën heb toegepast. In de eerste fase heb ik categorieën vastgesteld door de constante vergelijking van de tekstfragmenten. Hiermee heb ik de voornaamste thema's en categorieën vastgesteld die in de data gevonden konden worden. Vervolgens heb ik deze thema's en categorieën gecodeerd in een datamatrix. In een tweede fase heb ik de thema's verge-

leken met de literatuur over de Red Hat Society en over spel en identiteit. Ik heb de data opnieuw doorgelezen met nieuwe theoretische inzichten in het hoofd om zo nieuwe thema's op te sporen. In de derde fase heb ik deze thema's verder uitgewerkt aan de hand van relevante citaten die ik in themabestanden heb geplaatst. Vooral de tweede en de derde codeerfase heb ik een aantal keer herhaald totdat zich geen nieuwe thema's meer aandiende.

Hoofdstuk 3 is het eerste empirische hoofdstuk van dit boek en bestudeert de eerste twee onderzoeksvragen: Wat is de Red Hat Society? Wie zijn de Red Hatters en waarom halen zij plezier uit de Red Hat Society? In dit hoofdstuk bestudeer ik deze vragen vanuit het perspectief van spel zoals we dat vinden bij Huizinga en anderen, zoals Caillois en Turner. Als gezegd benadrukken deze auteurs de onderscheidende dimensie van spel als een praktijk waarmee je buiten het alledaagse leven treedt. In de eerste helft van hoofdstuk 3, laat ik zien hoezeer deze benadering van spel aansluit op de zienswijze van de Red Hatters die de Red Hat Society definiëren als iets 'leuks' wat hen tijdelijk bevrijdt van alledaagse verplichtingen en beslommeringen. Ze geven bijvoorbeeld aan dat de Red Hat Society een activiteit is waaraan ze uit 'vrije' wil en voor hun persoonlijke plezier deelnemen. De Red Hat Society heeft 'andere' regels en de Hatters hebben het gevoel dat ze ineens dingen mogen en kunnen die ze anders niet zouden doen: een rode hoed dragen, bijvoorbeeld, met paarse kleren, voor het moment Queen of Lady worden, het kleine meisje in zichzelf herontdekken, en bij al deze dingen niet langer bezorgd zijn over de meningen van anderen.

Zo stappen de Red Hatters in een spelwereld die hen voor het moment helpt ontsnappen aan de regels en verplichtingen van alledag. De Red Hatters plaatsen de Red Hat Society daarom ook tegenover het alledaagse leven dat zij 'serieus' en 'beperkend' vinden, terwijl zij de Red Hat Society juist zien als 'leuk' en 'bevrijdend'. Toch laat ik zien dat dit leuke en bevrijdende van de Red Hat Society niet het hele verhaal is; de meeste Hatters geven namelijk aan dat de Red Hat Society

weldegelijk ook serieuze kanten heeft. Deze serieuze kanten dragen ook in belangrijke mate bij aan het plezier wat ze uit hun lidmaatschap halen. Een van deze serieuze aspecten is dat de Red Hatters vriendschappen vormen en elkaar steunen in moeilijke tijden. Het meest extreme voorbeeld hiervan is gelegen in de steun die ze elkaar bieden tijdens begrafenissen. Er zijn situaties bekend waarin het bijvoorbeeld de laatste wens van een Red Hatter was om begraven te worden in Red Hat Society stijl: in paarse kleren, met een rode hoed en met de andere groepsleden ook in die kleuren aanwezig. Ook volgens de Hatters leidt het geen twijfel dat dit de minder 'leuke' dingen zijn in het leven, maar tegelijkertijd vinden zij dat het wel dingen zijn waar ze samen doorheen moeten en elkaar in moeten bijstaan.

Het gevolg is dat de Red Hat Society zich constant beweegt tussen 'plezier' en het 'serieuze' en in die zin is zij ambigu. Volgens Huizinga is deze ambiguïteit een belangrijk kenmerk van spel in het algemeen, zo stelt hij (1950: 36): "De tegenstelling spel – ernst blijft te allen tijde een zwevende. De minderwaardigheid van het spel heeft haar grens in de meerwaardigheid van den ernst. Het spel slaat om in ernst, en de ernst in spel." Dit kenmerk van spel is tot op de dag van vandaag weinig bestudeerd. In dit hoofdstuk open ik de discussie over de ambiguïteit van spel door te laten zien dat het zich niet alleen laat toepassen op het contrast tussen spel en ernst, maar op de magische cirkel in zijn geheel. Wanneer de Red Hatters de serieuze kanten van de Red Hat Society bespreken blijkt namelijk al snel dat de symbolische grens die spel onderscheidt van het alledaagse leven niet solide is. De Red Hat Society beïnvloedt bijvoorbeeld hoe sommige Red Hatters zich voelen in hun alledaagse leven, met wie ze daarin omgaan en hoeveel steun ze ontvangen bij de omgang met moeilijke gebeurtenissen. Andersom is het soms ook zo dat deze gebeurtenissen de spelwereld van de Red Hat Society indringen, bijvoorbeeld wanneer een Red Hatter de mogelijkheid wordt geboden om hier tijdens een bijeenkomst over te praten. De 'magische' grens tussen spel en het dagelijkse leven is dan in feite vloei-

baar: daarbij lekt het spel op momenten het alledaagse leven in, en het alledaagse leven loopt op momenten het spel in. Ik stel daarom dat ambiguïteit de centrale dimensie van spel is, omdat zij aan de basis ligt van de 'uitzonderlijke' dimensie van spel.

In *hoofdstuk 4* ga ik dieper in op één van die serieuze aspecten van de Red Hat Society, en dat doe ik door te kijken naar de manier waarop de Red Hatters een identiteit doen. In dit hoofdstuk kijk ik dan eveneens naar de eerste twee onderzoeksvragen die ik heb geformuleerd, maar nu benader ik die vanuit het perspectief van *performance*. Ik stel dat feministen historisch gezien een belangrijke rol hebben gespeeld in het ontwikkelen en populariseren van dit sociaal constructivistische perspectief op identiteit en de sociale wereld. Dit deden zij door de natuurlijkheid van gender te verwerpen. Simone de Beauvoir (1953: 249, schuine tekst in het origineel) vatte het idee al scherp samen door te stellen dat: "One is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman." Haar ideeën werden al snel opgenomen in de tweedegolf van het feminisme, welke plaatsvond ten tijde van de tegencultuur van 1960 en 1970. Deze feministische golf was niet gebaseerd op een eenduidige ideologie, maar desondanks valt er in het werk van bekende schrijfsters uit die periode wel een gemeenschappelijke vijand te ontdekken: namelijk 'vrouwelijkheid'. De 'feministische' identiteit werd in deze periode geconstrueerd op basis van een verzet tegen de 'vrouwelijke' identiteit, die werd gezien als de voornaamste bron voor de maatschappelijke onderdrukking van vrouwen.

Dit vinden we onder andere terug in het werk van Betty Friedan en haar *Feminine Mystique* (1963), waarin zij onder andere kritiek uit op vrouwenbladen die volgens haar een vals beeld creëren van de gelukkige huisvrouw tegenover de ongelukkige carrièrevrouw, met moederschap als de ultieme weg naar voldoening. Andere tweedegolf feministen vertolkten soortgelijke kritieken op vrouwelijkheid en typisch vrouwelijk geachte vrijetijdsactiviteiten: zo veroordeelden zij onder andere het lezen van de *Bouquetreeks*, het kijken van romantische

films, soaps, en het bezoeken van schoonheidssalons.

Aan de hand van deze studie naar de Red Hat Society be-
kritiseer ik de eenzijdige weergave van 'vrouwelijkheid' door
feministen van de tweedegolf. Dit doe ik allereerst door te be-
argumenteren dat vrouwelijkheid een multidimensionale *per-
formance* is die wordt gekruist door andere sociale identitei-
ten zoals klasse, ras, huwelijkse staat, ouderschap en leeftijd.
Daarbij is die laatste natuurlijk van groot belang voor de Red
Hat Society. Dan laat ik zien dat de *performances* van vrou-
welijkheid zoals we die kunnen vinden onder de Red Hatters
gelijktijdig dominante culturele ideeën over vrouwelijkheid
bevestigen maar ook problematiseren. De bevestiging zien we
vooral in de nadruk die er is op het uiterlijk van de vrouwen,
met de hoed als een traditioneel symbool voor vrouwelijkheid.
Daarnaast zijn de meeste activiteiten die de Red Hatters on-
dernemen ook typisch vrouwelijk te noemen, veel genoemd
zijn bijvoorbeeld: thee drinken, lunchen, dansen, koken en
bloemschikken.

Maar tegelijkertijd draaien de Hatters ook dominante en
stereotype vertogen over vrouwelijkheid in combinatie met
leeftijd om. Zo vieren ze het ouder worden en laten ze zien
dat oudere vrouwen nog steeds plezier hebben en sociaalac-
tief kunnen zijn. Ze zijn nadrukkelijk aanwezig in de publieke
ruimte waar ze met hun rode hoeden en veelal spectaculaire
andere accessoires de aandacht trekken van omstanders. Dit
in tegenstelling tot ideeën dat oudere vrouwen niet horen op
te vallen in de publieke ruimte: dat zij thuis horen achter de
geraniums. Ook draaien de Red Hatters voor het moment de
typisch vrouwelijk geachte zorgrol om, door eens iets voor
henzelf te doen. Één keer in de maand gaan ze voor hun eigen
plezier, in plaats van te zorgen voor man, kinderen, kleinkin-
deren of voor een ander, zogenaamd, goed doel.

Omdat Red Hatters zowel dominante noties ten aanzien
van vrouwelijkheid onderschrijven als bekritiseren staat ook
hun *performance* van identiteit bol van de ambiguïteiten. Het
zou gezegd kunnen worden dat de Red Hat Society hen een
guldenmiddenweg verschaft tussen een 'feministische' en een

'vrouwelijke' identiteit. Ik heb geprobeerd om deze midden-
weg te begrijpen door hiervoor de term 'radicale vrouwelijk-
heid' te introduceren. Natuurlijk wordt de term 'radicaal' vaak
gebruikt als een etiket voor mensen die cultuur bekritiseren
en daarin volgens de rest van de samenleving 'te ver' gaan.
Nu vinden we hier twee aspecten die ook te vinden zijn in de
Red Hat Society. Het eerste aspect is de 'buitensporigheid', of-
wel 'extravagantie', waarmee de Red Hatters de grenzen van de
dominante cultuur tarten: door publiekelijk plezier voor ou-
dere vrouwen te promoten, extreem op te vallen, en schaam-
teloos iets voor zichzelf te doen. Als gezegd, bekritiseren de
Red Hatters hiermee conventionele ideeën ten aanzien van
vrouwelijkheid en leeftijd. Zo heeft de Red Hat Society, hoe-
wel zij niet strikt een politieke beweging is, in potentie wel
verstrekkende politieke implicaties in de zin dat het een ver-
andering teweeg wil brengen in de manier waarop wij denken
over vrouwen van middelbare leeftijd en ouder. Zoals één van
mijn respondenten het verwoordt: "ondanks dat de Red Hats
helemaal geen politieke kleur hebben, en wij het nooit over
politiek hebben, maar het heeft wel de power." De Red Hat
Society levert dus een kritiek op de hedendaagse cultuur, met
potentiële gevolgen, die wordt bereikt door een extravagante
performance van vrouwelijkheid door de Red Hatters. Daarom
is het voor mij een bewuste keuze om het 'radicale' hier van
nieuwe betekenis te voorzien door middel van de term 'radi-
cale vrouwelijkheid'.

Vanuit de voorgaande hoofdstukken mag het misschien zo
lijken dat de Red Hatters een uniforme groep vormen. Echter,
tijdens mijn veldwerk bleek al snel dat er veel verschillen be-
staan tussen de Red Hatters onderling, en dan met name in de
kleding en rode hoeden die gedragen worden. Waar een grote
groep Red Hatters elegante en dure hoeden draagt met modi-
euze paarse kleding, zijn er ook Hatters die extravagante en
zelf versierde hoeden en kleren dragen. In *hoofdstuk 5* traceer
ik de achtergrond van deze twee stijlen vanuit een historisch
perspectief en kijk ik naar hoe de Red Hatters die ze dragen
zich tot elkaar verhouden. Dit is tevens de derde onderzoeks-

vraag van deze studie: Hoe verhouden de Red Hatters zich tot elkaar? Ik laat zien dat beide kledingstijlen uitingen zijn van klassengebonden ideeën over vrouwelijkheid, waarbij de elegante stijl een middenklasse vrouwelijkheid representeert terwijl de extravagante en zelfgemaakte stijl verbonden is met vrouwelijkheid in de arbeidersklasse.

De dure en elegante hoeden die sommige Red Hatters dragen staan voor een deftigheid die historisch gezien verbonden is met de opkomst van de middenklasse. Deze kwam op in de negentiende eeuw en wist zich in die tijd te onderscheiden van zowel de onderklasse als de elite, door een nieuwe moraliteit waarin fatsoenlijkheid centraal stond. Daarin waren het vooral de vrouwen die publiekelijk de nieuwe standaarden hoog moesten houden, wat leidde tot een verknoping van vrouwelijkheid en deftigheid die vooral tot uiting kwam in het uiterlijk van de vrouwen. Volgens Thorstein Veblen (1953[1899]) gaven korsetten, hoge hakken en ook hoeden uitdrukking aan het feit dat deze vrouwen onmogelijk instaat waren om fysieke arbeid te verrichtten, waarmee ze aan de wereld lieten zien te behoren tot de gegoede klasse: met daarin mannen die het zich konden veroorloven om een vrouw te hebben die niet hoefde te werken. Vrouwen uit de arbeidersklasse hadden vaak niet de middelen om hun kleren te kopen zoals de vrouwen uit de middenklasse dat wel deden. Als gevolg waren ze op hun creativiteit aangewezen voor het zelf maken van kleren voor henzelf en andere familieleden. Ik beargumenteer dat de groep Red Hatters die zelf hoeden maakt deze creativiteit gebruikt om zich te verzetten tegen de middenklasse waarden van deftigheid en fatsoenlijkheid.

Het is in de academische literatuur een bekend idee dat vrouwen uit de arbeidersklasse kunnen proberen 'door te gaan' voor middenklasse door zichzelf deftig te kleden. Dit valt onder het idee dat mensen vanuit de arbeidersklasse status proberen te verwerven door de stijl van de middenklasse te kopiëren. We vinden dit idee onder meer terug bij Veblen, maar ook bij Simmel (1957[1904]) die stelt dat dit de drijvende kracht is achter mode: met de middenklasse die zich

probeert te onderscheiden van de arbeidersklasse door middel van stijl, waarop de arbeidersklasse de stijl van de middenklasse kopieert, waarop de middenklasse zichzelf weer een nieuwe stijl aanmeet; en zo is het dat mode zich steeds blijft vernieuwen. Hoewel er ook in deze studie enig bewijs voor dit idee dat mode zich beweegt van de boven- naar de onderklasse gevonden kan worden, omdat er inderdaad vrouwen zijn die uit de arbeidersklasse komen en proberen door te gaan voor middenklasse, lijkt het omgekeerde ook waar te zijn. Niet alle Red Hatters uit de arbeidersklasse proberen een middenklasse vrouwelijkheid te kopiëren. Sommige van hen zetten hun eigen creativiteit in om zelf nieuwe stijlen te creëren, waarmee ze zich tevens van anderen proberen te onderscheiden. Zodoende is 'distinctie' niet alleen iets wat wordt gedaan door de hogere klassen ten opzichte van de lagere klassen, maar ook van die lagere klassen ten opzichte van hogere klassen: en hieruit kunnen ook weer nieuwe stijlen voortkomen.

Met dit idee sluit ik de analyse van de *performances* van identiteit die in de Red Hat Society gevonden kunnen worden af. In *hoofdstuk 6*, wat tevens het laatste empirische hoofdstuk is, richt ik me op het publiek van de Red Hat Society: Hoe denken mensen van buiten de Red Hat Society over de Red Hat Society? Ik bestudeer deze vraag voor twee voor Red Hatters relevante publieken: echtgenoten en kranten. De eersten zijn natuurlijk belangrijk omdat zij een grote rol hebben in het privéleven van de Hatters. De kranten daarentegen vormen de schakel tussen de Red Hat Society en het algemene publiek, waarbij ze ook belangrijk zijn voor het mobiliseren van 'nieuwe' vrouwen om zich bij de organisatie aan te sluiten. In dit hoofdstuk bekijk ik welke interpretatiekaders mannen en kranten gebruiken om de Red Hat Society en de Hatters te beschrijven. Al snel blijkt dat één interpretatiekader dominant is ten opzichte van andere mogelijke typeringen van de Red Hat Society. Centraal in dit kader staat de nauwe definitie van spel zoals we die onder andere terugvinden in het werk van Huizinga. De kranten en de mannen zien de Red Hat Society als een spel dat de Red Hatters de ruimte geeft om even uit

het alledaagse leven te treden en eens iets 'leuks' en sociaals te doen. Deze beschrijving van de Red Hat Society overlapt deels met de beschrijvingen van de Red Hatters zelf. Waarin het interpretatiekader van de mannen en kranten afwijkt, is dat zij nagenoeg geen ruimte laat voor de ambiguïteit van de Red Hat Society.

De focus in dit kader ligt op het plezierige van de Red Hat Society: op het feit dat de Hatters 'leuke' dingen doen, 'lachen' en 'samenkomen', zonder te 'zeuren' of een 'goed doel' te steunen. Waar ik in de andere hoofdstukken van dit boek heb laten zien dat de Red Hat Society hiernaast ook allerlei serieuze aspecten heeft, worden deze praktisch niet genoemd, en is het zelfs zo dat in een aantal gevallen expliciet wordt gezegd dat de Red Hat Society 'niet serieus' is; wat haar dan ook weer 'leuk' maakt. Soms wordt nog wel kort verwezen naar de zorgrol van vrouwen en dat de Red Hat Society zich daarvan onderscheidt, maar dit wordt niet gekoppeld aan een idee van cultureel verzet. In plaats daarvan dient de zorgrol als een legitimatie voor waarom 'wij' het de Red Hatters ook moeten gunnen dat ze nu eens in de maand eens iets 'geks' of 'leuks' willen doen, iets wat voor de verandering 'niet serieus' is. Het serieuze van spel verdwijnt binnen deze interpretatie dus naar de achtergrond, waardoor ook de ambiguïteit van het spel uit beeld verdwijnt.

In de *conclusie* vat ik de resultaten samen en kom ik nog eenmaal op deze ambiguïteit terug. Ik richt me dan vooral op de verklarende onderzoeksvraag: Hoe kunnen we de uitkomsten van dit onderzoek begrijpen vanuit het perspectief van spel? Ik stel dat de twee benaderingen van spel waarmee ik dit onderzoek ben begonnen, afzonderlijk van elkaar, niet toereikend zijn om de resultaten van het onderzoek te verklaren. De benadering zoals we die vinden in het werk van Huizinga en Caillois van spel als een speciale praktijk waarmee mensen tijdelijk buiten het alledaagse leven treden, heeft als beperking dat het een te rigide onderscheid maakt tussen spel en diens sociale context. Dit zorgt voor problemen wanneer we kijken naar de 'betekenis' van de Red Hat Society, want, zo toont deze

studie, die betekenis is zeer nauw verbonden met de sociale context waarin het spel wordt gespeeld. De tweede benadering van spel, afkomstig uit sociaal constructivistische theorieën ten aanzien van *performance*, heeft een omgekeerde beperking: zij beschouwt spel en sociale context namelijk te veel als hetzelfde. Dit zorgt voor problemen vooral als we kijken naar de 'functie' van de Red Hat Society. De Red Hat Society creëert namelijk een relatief veilige ruimte waarin geëxperimenteerd kan worden met cultuur en identiteit, zoals de Red Hatters dat laten zien. Deze veilige ruimte komt voort uit het feit dat mensen zelf een onderscheid maken tussen spel en diens sociale context. Afwijkingen van culturele normen worden zo veel makkelijker geaccepteerd wanneer ze plaatsvinden binnen de symbolische grenzen van het spel, als iets wat in zichzelf toch al 'anders' is dan het alledaagse leven. Gegeven de beperkingen van de twee eerder genoemde perspectieven op spel sluit ik het boek af met een nieuw perspectief, welke wel in staat is om de ambigue relatie die bestaat tussen de Red Hat Society en diens sociale context te verklaren.

About the author

Samira van Bohemen studied sociology at the Erasmus University Rotterdam, where she graduated in 2010 from the research master 'Sociology of Culture, Media and the Arts' (cum laude). During her PhD-research she was a member of the editorial board of *Sociologie Magazine* (2011-2014) and of *Sociologie* (2014-today). She has acted as reviewer for both national and international peer-review journals. Samira is primarily interested in the cultural performance of identity and play, about which she wrote the current thesis about the Red Hat Society. Several articles about this research have appeared in international and national journals. However, together with colleagues, Samira has also published work about other topics in the sociology of culture, such as religion and environmental concern, and cultural tolerance and the emergence of new-right political sentiments. From October 2013 till January 2014 Samira was a visiting PhD-student at Nottingham Trent University, for which she received a *talent grant* (Cultuur-fondsbeurs) from Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds. For the past three years she has taught an undergraduate course in cultural sociology, about modernisation and cultural change.

A full CV of her education, awards, academic and professional publications can be found on her website www.samiravanbohemen.com.