AGE, GENDER AND DAILY LIFE: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INVOLVEMENTS* **

(Received December 12, 1989)

ABSTRACT. Variety of role involvements based on the allocation of time is an alternative indicator of multiple roles. The measure of variety developed by Altergott (1982) is analyzed for a sample of U.S. adults, aged 18—88. The multivariate analysis of the structural and personal factors that account for the level of variety is presented. Age is negatively associated with variety. Women have lower levels of variety than men. While the amount of variety in men’s daily life is influenced by family, health and preference, the amount of variety in women’s daily life is affected by work and education. Opportunity structures and individual propensities affect levels of variety. The conclusions support the development of the behavioral measurement of multiple roles. Variety of role involvement in daily life provides a sensitive indicator that varies with age, gender and personal resources.

Age differences in the amount and nature of social involvement are commonly assumed to exist. It is not clear why or under what conditions these differences emerge. This study examines one aspect of social involvement, the variety of role relationships maintained in daily life, for a national sample of American adults. People of a wide range of ages are compared in this cross-sectional study to determine whether older people experience significantly less variety in their routine social involvements than younger people. In addition, other conditions that may increase or decrease levels of variety for people of all ages will be examined.

Variety, or multiple role involvements, was selected as the focus of this study since maintaining a diverse set of roles contributes to individual adaptability and well-being (Lopata, 1975; Marks, 1977; Spreitzer et al., 1979; Verbrugge, 1983) as well as to social integration (Blau, 1977). The weight of empirical evidence suggests that a wide variety of role involvements is a significant and advantageous feature of social life, rather than causing role strain (Goode, 1960) or other
harmful effects as had been hypothesized. Consider an elderly man who interacts only with his spouse. Even if he spends a great deal of time with her, he would experience a low amount of role relationship variety. Another man who interacts with his wife, a friend, an organizational member and service-provider would experience a great deal of variety, even if each interaction was brief. Information and other resources, role support, alternative sources of satisfying interactions and connections to society are expanded through maintaining such a variety of relationships. “Variety”, then, is defined as the extent to which an individual is involved in different types of relationships. Isolation is the rare and extreme case of low variety. A more common example of low variety would be specialization, or spending all or most of one’s social time with a single type of role-partner such as a husband or wife.

Existing research describes levels of involvement of older persons (Shanas, 1979), age differences in specific types of social involvement (Fischer, 1982), decline in involvement over time (Olbrich and Lehr, 1976) and shifts from involvement with friends and neighbors to relatives and offspring as one ages (Palmore, 1981). Age alters the nature of social involvement according to these studies.

What social factors, besides age, might be expected to affect the variety of relationships maintained in daily life? First, age is not the only social characteristic that influences a person’s access to social settings, opportunities to interact, social value and availability for interaction. Gender, marital status and parental status influence the pattern of interpersonal relationships in society through structuring opportunity. Women have been found to have more confidants (Blau, 1973), different patterns of contact with friends and kin (Babchuk, 1978; Hess, 1979). Marital and parental status are also expected to influence the amount of variety in an individual’s daily life, but it is not clear from the literature whether these primary roles are privatizing and limit the individuals wide ranging social involvement (Zaretsky, 1976) or whether having a spouse and a child is integrating and even necessary to draw the individual into a diverse social life (Stueve and Gerson, 1977).

Second, temporal constraints influence variety. Obligatory care to self and time spent working may reduce time available for diverse social involvements. The subjective sense of having too little time is also