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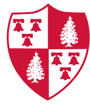

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Retired Women and Volunteering: The Good, the Bad, and the Unrecognized

Olena Nesteruk
Montclair State University, nesteruko@mail.montclair.edu

Christine A. Price
Montclair State University, pricech@mail.montclair.edu

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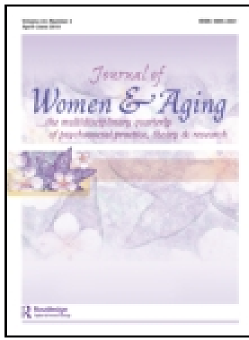

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Retired Women and Volunteering: The Good, the Bad, and the Unrecognized

OLENA NESTERUK and CHRISTINE A. PRICE
Family and Child Studies Department, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

In this article, we examine varied attitudes and practices toward volunteering in later life, as shared by a group of 40 retired women. We categorize women based on their engagement in retirement and label the categories according to societal expectations as follows: traditional volunteers as "good," nonvolunteers as "bad," and caregiving volunteers as "unrecognized." Using critical gerontology and a feminist framework, we juxtapose the lived experiences of retired women with a prevailing discourse on successful aging and civic engagement. We advocate for societal recognition of caregiving as a valuable form of volunteering, as well as the need to respect multiple ways in which older women experience and find meaning in later life.

KEYWORDS women, retirement, volunteering, civic engagement, caregiving

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there has been an inherent paradigm shift in our understanding of the lived experiences of older adults. Historical assumptions about the inevitable decline and dependence associated with aging have been replaced with expectations of civic engagement and productivity in later life. Based on the "successful aging" model developed by Rowe and Kahn (1998), the criteria for aging well includes avoiding disease and disability, maintaining cognitive and physical functioning, and being actively engaged in later life. This model provides important emphasis on health promotion and prevention; however, there is a lack of recognition of the

Address correspondence to Olena Nesteruk, Family and Child Studies Department, 4036 University Hall, One Normal Avenue, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043. E-mail: nesteruko@mail.montclair.edu

diverse experiences of older adults. While some seniors enjoy good health, financial security, and other forms of social capital, others do not enjoy these same advantages and therefore have less choice in how they live in retirement (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). More specifically, this emphasis on "productivity" and "active engagement" in later life fails to recognize or value the contributions of older women who " . . . cannot or choose not to engage in such activity" (Martinson & Minkler, 2006, p. 322). In the context of family responsibilities and friendship, women often spend their later years providing care and support to others. This care, whether it involves grandchildren, an ailing spouse, aging parents, or an isolated neighbor, is meaningful engagement, yet it is not socially recognized in current conceptualizations of successful aging. These cultural images of productive aging can further marginalize older women and lead to reduced self-esteem and problematic self-perceptions (Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

Rowe and Kahn's (1998) model of successful aging has become a central paradigm for how aging is portrayed in both academic settings and the popular media. Societal emphasis on remaining engaged in later life has emerged as a result of the rapid growth of the aging population, the rising income and educational levels of seniors, and increased time spent in retirement. Traditional retirement is no longer characterized entirely by recreation and leisure activities. Rather, retirement is viewed as a time in life represented by specific forms of engagement (Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008), such as, "civic engagement," "productive aging," and "volunteering." What remains unexplored, however, is how retired women view the current societal emphasis on active engagement in later life and whether they find meaning in volunteer activities.

The purpose of this study is to use qualitative methodology to examine how retired women approach retirement, with a specific emphasis on their interest and engagement in volunteer work. Considering the current societal emphasis on productive aging, combined with existing social and familial demands older women encounter, we use critical gerontology and a feminist framework to recognize the many ways women construct meaningful retirement experiences including, but not limited to, formal volunteering. Ultimately, we will present varied attitudes toward volunteering, as shared by a group of 40 retired women. We will also discuss how societal expectations surrounding women's activities in retirement influence their involvement in doing for others.

VOLUNTEERING IN RETIREMENT

Motivations to volunteer are both altruistic and egocentric (Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001). Individuals who volunteer want to help others, give back to the community, and make a difference; at the

same time, they want to feel useful, meet people, and give structure to their time. Volunteering can be beneficial to older adults by improving their psychological well-being and physical health, increasing life satisfaction, and decreasing mortality (Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006–07). As a result of the frequent role losses encountered in later life (e.g., employment, partner, and parenting roles) (Greenfield & Marks, 2004) volunteer activities are particularly suited to older adults. Further, the "secondary gains" associated with volunteering are found to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy, and socialization (Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009).

Historically, the terms "volunteering" and "civic engagement" were used interchangeably to represent assistance provided to the larger community. More recently, civic engagement is used in a broader context relating to social and political activities that benefit the public. Volunteering, defined as a form of civic engagement (Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006–07), consists of formal and informal activities. Commonly, formal volunteering pertains to time assisting community agencies and organizations, whereas informal volunteering is time spent assisting friends and neighbors who do not live in the same household (Rozario, 2006–07). In comparison, caregiving, caring for family members including parents, spouses, and grandchildren, is frequently neglected as a form of volunteering and instead viewed as a method of general engagement (Zedlewski & Schaner, 2005).

WOMEN'S RETIREMENT

Understanding women's retirement experiences requires a willingness to recognize the diverse employment histories of women, the family responsibilities that commonly affect their retirement plans, the longer duration of retirement for women, as well as the more complex social networks that support women in later life. Researchers studying women's retirement have primarily examined women's adjustment to the retirement transition and their satisfaction with this stage of life (Price & Balaswamy, 2009; Smith & Moen, 2004; Szinovacz & Washo, 1992). Factors found to influence women's retirement include their employment histories (Price & Dean, 2009), their marital status (Price & Nesteruk, 2009), their psychological health (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Solinge & Henkens, 2005), and their racial ethnic background (Gregoire, Kilty, & Richardson, 2002). Explorations into what women do in retirement have identified the importance of friendships, social activities, and social support to women's positive retirement experiences (Dykstra, 2006; Szinovacz & Washo, 1992; Wingrove & Slevin, 1991). Further, there is considerable diversity in the choices women make in retirement with regard to how they spend their time and what retirement paths they pursue. Specifically, issues

of personal control and the utilization of human and social capital can result in either a satisfied or disenchanted retirement experience (Price & Nesteruk, 2010).

As a culture, we expect retired women to volunteer, yet few researchers have explored why some women choose to volunteer and others do not. Limited studies pertaining to this topic have found those who do not volunteer are generally more disadvantaged in later life (e.g., less educated, poorer health, and financially insecure) (Kaskie et al., 2008). Other researchers have identified barriers associated with volunteering (limited mobility, financial need, and isolation) as well as the cost of a restricted time schedule as reasons why older adults do not volunteer their time (Warburton, et al., 2001). Despite the fact that women are more likely to volunteer in retirement than men (Manning, 2010), researchers have not explored retired women's perceptions of volunteering and how the volunteer role may or may not be incorporated into this stage of life. By examining the narratives of retired women, our goal is to understand how women react to volunteering in retirement and how they interpret societal assumptions about remaining civically engaged during the retirement years.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

We examined women's retirement using a combination of critical gerontology and feminist gerontology. Critical feminism in gerontology is described as "empowering research" because it "questions, challenges, contests, and resists the status quo" (Ray, 1999, p. 172). Intrinsic to this approach is the need to investigate and document the unique voices and experiences of women as well as explore how older women define themselves in a cultural context that has historically limited and devalued them (Garner, 1999). By listening to women, feminist scholars reveal the distortions and voids in existing traditional knowledge and create new epistemologies, which represent the diversity in women's lives (Thompson, 1992).

METHODS

This article draws on in-depth personal interviews, conducted with 40 retired women diverse in marital status, age, ethnicity, income, and employment history. These women were purposefully selected from a larger study of the predictors of retirement satisfaction among 330 retired women residing in a Midwestern state. In order to participate in the study, women had to have retired following a minimum of 10 years of employment. We define *retirement* as the termination of one's primary employment in order to address traditional retirement definitions that neglect women's varied work

experiences. Participants who returned to part-time employment or were active in volunteer activities were included in the sample. Using a broad retirement definition allowed us to include women who had approached the retirement transition in a variety of ways. A trained interviewer collected data using a semistructured interview guide with questions addressing a variety of topics (e.g., retirement planning and adjustment, retirement satisfaction, social support, depression, self-esteem, and volunteer activities). The participants were encouraged to also speak about topics relevant to their personal experiences. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and were transcribed verbatim.

Sample Description

The women who participated in the study ranged in age from 53 to 74 ($M = 62$); were retired between 1 and 7 years ($M = 3.5$); and were diverse in marital status: 12 married (two of them were lesbians with lifetime partners), 12 divorced, eight widowed, and eight never-married. The participants were predominately Caucasian ($N = 32$), with seven women identifying as African American and one as multiracial. The income levels varied: 12 women reported incomes of under $15,000 to $30,999; 19 women reported incomes of $31,000 to $60,999; and six women reported incomes of more than $61,000 annually. The sample was relatively well educated: 16 women had some graduate education and/or a doctoral degree, 18 women reported an associate's degree/a college degree/attending some college, and six women had completed high school.

The occupational histories of the women were divided among professional ($N = 20$), paraprofessional ($N = 17$), and nonprofessional ($N = 3$) backgrounds. The professional women included retired professors, social workers, teachers, administrators, and registered nurses who held college and/or graduate degrees. The paraprofessional women consisted of administrative assistants, secretaries, bank tellers, receptionists, and a U.S. postal clerk with some college education. Finally, the nonprofessional women had less formal education, less income, and less authority, with occupations consisting of a bus driver, a cashier, and a rectory cook.

Analysis

Consistent with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), each author performed open coding independently on an interview-by-interview basis. The first author coded by hand, identifying segments of text that correlated with specific codes, and made notes about potential categories and themes. The second author used the qualitative software *Ethnograph* (v. 5) to identify segments of text that correspond to each code and to develop theoretical memos. We practiced peer debriefing

and regularly met to discuss, compare, and contrast our open coding on a line-by-line, page-by-page basis, each of us leading discussions about specific coding terminology and definitions (Patton, 2002). This strategy contributed to a qualitative version of interrater reliability, where core codes and concepts were (a) identified by each researcher, (b) reoccurred across narratives, and (c) were significant to the experiences of retired women. We then used axial coding to identify relationships between categories and the properties of these categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Our discussions consisted of cooperative analysis between the authors. For example, following independent coding, each author brought individual ideas to negotiate theoretical meanings behind these coded categories and to identify core themes from the data. Finally, we used theoretical memos with ideas about coded categories and the relationships between categories to inform the data analysis process. These memos provided a valuable link between the analysis process and the writing of research results.

FINDINGS

The results of our analysis indicate that there are many ways of finding meaning in retirement, some of which have been largely neglected by the current emphasis on civic engagement and being productive in later life. The first category of retired women in the study is the traditional formal volunteers who donate their time to community agencies and organizations, both for personal meaning and to meet societal expectations to give back. By labelling this group of women as "good," we are not inferring judgement; rather, we are reflecting current values of successful aging. Our second category is comprised of retired women who expressed no interest in volunteer activities. Described as nonvolunteers, these women reject the idea of volunteer work for personal reasons related to time commitments, dissatisfaction with earlier experiences, or a lifetime of doing for others. By labelling these women as "bad," we are not evaluating their social value but again applying societal standards of what constitutes productive aging. They remind us that being productive by volunteering is not the only way of finding meaning in later life. Finally, our third category, the "unrecognized" volunteers, consists of women who spend extensive time caring for their families in retirement (e.g., aging parents, spouses, grandchildren, and children). Because women often provide indispensable family care that is not recognized by society as "volunteering," we believe these women represent a legion of informal volunteers that go unnoticed and unvalued. In response to cultural expectations for community engagement, the women in this study expressed a sense of guilt for not contributing in more formal ways.

Traditional Volunteers—The "Good"

Over half of the women in the study (24) belong to a category we describe as traditional volunteers. These women donate their time through formal volunteer work with local organizations, community agencies, and churches/synagogues, with some women volunteering informally "here and there" with limited time obligations. The women's formal volunteer roles involve donating their energy to a local literacy council, hospitals, and local food banks, whereas examples of informal volunteering include occasional assistance to others (e.g., providing meals to a neighbor in need, driving friends to appointments, and participating in the community welcome wagon). While the time committed to informal and formal volunteering varied, all of the women in this group describe the sense of purpose and fulfilment they gain from these activities. A majority of the women in this category express a need to give back and, at the same time, they describe how volunteering gives back to them in terms of social integration, structured time, and finding meaning in their lives. Kay, who volunteers her time giving tours at the statehouse in a capital city, looks forward to her volunteer work for the stimulation it provides and the opportunity to "dress up" and meet people:

> So I work down there one day a week and I really like that. I really enjoy being a tour guide there. It gets me out. . . . I've made a lot of friends down there and it's just fun. I really enjoy that. I get to dress up (laughter) and go there. I like that.

Women also turn to volunteer work as a way to find personal meaning and fulfilment in retirement. Irene, for example, prefers to stay away from stereotypically senior activities and instead volunteers for a local charity for children. She strongly believes that volunteering is a way to give back and do for others, especially in later life. Her involvement with the Make a Wish Foundation and Adventures for Wish Kids enables her to fulfill the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses. She explains:

> I could talk forever on volunteering—it brings you such fulfilment! Once you retire, I can't see any reason for the elderly to be lonesome. Caring for other people keeps you young because you don't have time to think about yourself. Get involved with something other than yourself. I always say, "God's gift to you is your talent and what you do with it is your gift back to God." And that's the way I feel about volunteering.

Four of the seven African American women in the sample spoke about their commitment to the African American community and the importance

of their church families. Frances emphasizes her commitment to giving back:

> It's the community volunteering activities that give me the most satisfaction. The only goal I have is to work in the community, I believe in giving back. God intended for us to live good and to help those who are less fortunate. And that is truly what I try to live by.

Retired women who give their time and energy to formal volunteering tend to have sufficient personal resources. Generally, they are in good health, have secure incomes, and are not burdened by extensive caregiving responsibilities. As a result, they express an interest and willingness to volunteer as opposed to the women described in the following section.

Nonvolunteers—The "Bad"

Of the 40 women in the study, 11 expressed a lack of desire to volunteer for a variety of reasons, some of which included lack of time, difficulty finding meaningful volunteer experiences, and weariness of caring for others. Some women wanted to keep their retirement schedules flexible or wanted to avoid being overloaded with volunteer obligations. Hobart explains:

> I thought about maybe volunteering at the hospital, but I just don't want to overload myself. I don't want to get that feeling that I felt the last 2 years before retirement. After being on a 9-to-5 job, I really want to stay loose and just do spur of the moment trips. Just enjoy it.

Other women described how attempts at formal volunteering resulted in disappointment; for example, making deliveries for Meals on Wheels when the recipients clearly were not in need of this assistance or having a graduate degree yet being delegated to sorting spoons. These unsatisfactory experiences left the women feeling their contributions had no meaning and these activities were a waste of their time. Barbara describes an experience with a community organization where the women appeared more interested in socialization than getting the work done:

> I like to go there for a reason—do what we have to do and leave. Some of the women don't know whether they want to do this or that—but I don't want to waste my time. So, one day I said, "If we do this, this is going to happen. If we do that, that's going to happen." And one gal says, "Oh, you're no fun. You want to make a decision."

Finally, two out of 11 women, who reported not doing any volunteer work, passionately rejected formal volunteering altogether after a lifetime of

caring for others. When asked about her volunteer activities, Jean replied, "Detest them with a passion." Jean came from a household with neglectful parents and was left to raise eight younger siblings. She elaborated:

> All I did was work. I started working when I was nine by staying with an elderly woman with dementia. Then I worked at other jobs for all my high school years and didn't go to games or dances or anything. I went from that household into a marriage where it was always other people. A husband, then children, and always responsibilities. Now I don't want responsibility for other people other than myself. I've never had enough to give to myself until now. It's always been for somebody else or something else. And I like [having time for myself]. It's a luxury for me. It truly is. And I grab it with both hands and say "Yes, I'll take it."

The women who did not participate in either formal or informal volunteering represent an important segment of the retirement community. The experiences of these retired women are not explained by the current model of successful aging that measures later life solely based on accomplishments and contributions. Frequently, there are societal assumptions that all retirees have the time and interest in volunteer work (Freedman, 2002), when, in actuality, older adults today have many interests and pursuits. Improved health in later life and more prospects for engagement can lead to volunteer opportunities; however, these improvements do not always result in civic participation among retirees. This may be especially true for women who reject the idea of doing more volunteer work and giving back in retirement after a lifetime of doing for others. This segment of women reminds us of the importance of recognizing earlier contributions of older women as well as respecting the individual choices older adults make in their pursuit of meaning in later life.

Caregiving Volunteers—The "Unrecognized"

Retired women often give to their families in multiple ways by performing essential caregiving tasks such as looking after aging parents, ill spouses, caring for grandchildren, or just being "one of those called on to help." These caregiving demands are placed on women at a time when they feel they must respond due to their retirement status. While some women have a manageable number of family responsibilities that enables them to volunteer, others focus their time entirely on being engaged with their families by providing various types of care. Hobart, a remarried woman with four grandchildren, talked about feeling needed by her family right now and doing a lot of family caregiving as opposed to formal volunteering. She is, however, aware that at some point her circumstances may change:

> I am mostly involved in family activities. My son and his family live a mile away. So, right now, we're involved with being supportive of them. I'm not as involved with volunteer work as I thought I would be, but I'm going to put that on hold. If something were to happen to Ron or the kids move out of town then I would need to look for volunteer work.

Unfortunately, the societal message that family caregiving is not a form of volunteering was reflected in the women's narratives, when they expressed feelings of guilt for "not volunteering" in a formal capacity, and felt a need to explain their lack of involvement. For example, Barbara shared her thoughts that caring for family members should be considered volunteer work:

> I have a daughter with four children, and I help her the most. This week I'm out there 3 days watching the children so my daughter can volunteer. In a way, I'm helping her volunteer. A friend of mine said, "You know, they should stress more that helping with family is volunteer work as well." So that relieved some of my [guilt].

While some retired women can choose whether to be involved with family caregiving and to what extent, it is important to recognize that many retired women do not have a choice in whether they provide care to family. They may be unable to decline this responsibility for a number of reasons (e.g., their spouse is ill, they are the closest female sibling, they are the only unmarried sibling without children, or they are retired while other siblings are still working). Monica, for example, took care of her sick mother in the first year of her retirement while her two brothers were still working and later cared for her father who had dementia. She felt the need to explain why she did not do much volunteer work:

> I've put volunteering on hold. I cared for my mother and am now caring for my father so I'm not real active in reaching out to other people. I feel places that call me to volunteer are like what I already do with my father, what I'm already doing for my family.

A minority of women described caring for family members and participating in community work. Cathy, who serves on a social justice committee at her synagogue, also spoke about providing care to her grandchildren, an ill spouse, and both her parents. She viewed the time and efforts she gave to her family as an indirect way of giving back:

> I've had 4 hard years; my husband was very disabled by an acute stroke, my daughter lives in town, and I spend a lot of time babysitting and having them over. There is a lot of giving on a fairly regular basis. While it's indirect, I am still giving to others.

Although a segment of the women interviewed did not volunteer in a formal capacity, they still contributed significantly to the health and well-being of their families, often neglecting their own needs. Regrettably, activities that involve caring for one's family frequently go unrecognized by society, and subsequently by retirees, as valuable contributions. A continued emphasis on productivity in retirement through civic engagement activities, such as formal volunteer work, disregards the indispensable family caregiving work provided by retired women.

DISCUSSION

The results of our analysis indicate that retired women have varying attitudes toward volunteering in retirement. Using societal standards, we labelled traditional volunteers as "good," nonvolunteers as "bad," and caregiving volunteers as "unrecognized." A sizeable number of women in our study prescribed to social values of productivity by being actively engaged in formal and informal volunteering. These women described the extensive benefits they received from these activities. In comparison, nonvolunteers defied social expectations and rejected the idea of volunteering. They described feeling "tapped out" when it came to doing for others, being unsuccessful in find meaningful activities, or not wanting to waste their time. Finally, caregiving volunteers consisted of women who had limited opportunity to volunteer as a result of caregiving demands or who purposefully chose to focus their time and energy on family-related obligations. It is the latter two segments of women that are frequently neglected in existing research on volunteering in later life.

Consistent with existing research on the benefits of volunteering (Hinterlong &Williamson, 2006–07; Morrow-Howell et al., 2009), women in the current sample also identified volunteering as a positive form of engagement. Similar to Manning (2010), these women described volunteering as providing them with an opportunity to give back to their communities, enabling them to socialize and to establish new relationships. As Warburton and McLaughlin (2006) found, volunteering can have a buffering effect in the face of role loss and other later-life challenges. For this group of women, volunteering helped to give meaning and purpose to their lives and was a way to implement personal agency. It is important to mention that this group of women enjoyed the advantages of good health, financial security, and relatively limited family obligations in retirement. Researchers have established that older adults who volunteer tend to be in better health, more educated, and more physically active than nonvolunteers (Kaskie et al., 2008). Because women are likely to experience chronic illness in later life, family caregiving demands, and financial insecurity, these traditional volunteers are not representative of the experiences of all retired women. This fact is further

established by the response to volunteering illustrated by the remaining women in our study.

In comparison to the traditional volunteers, the nonvolunteers communicated a clear lack of enthusiasm for volunteering. For some of these women, volunteer activities simply did not prove stimulating enough or required a greater time commitment than they were willing to make. For others, a message of feeling drained by the needs of family and friends was shared. Women often spend their adult lives providing multiple forms of care to children, partners, aging parents, and others in the community. As a result, retirement can be an opportunity for women to place their needs first, pursue personal interests, and enjoy some time for self-reflection. These retired women represent an important group that is currently neglected in the retirement research, due to the emphasis on civically engaged activities. Existing models of successful aging, based on assumptions of productivity, disregard the many ways seniors find meaning in later life that may not be associated with doing for others. By emphasizing only the value of engagement as we age, we risk marginalizing and disempowering those older adults who do not live up to these cultural expectations (Martinson & Minkler, 2006).

The final category, caregiving volunteers, consists of retired women who spend a majority of their time, whether by choice or not, caring for family members. Unfortunately, as many of these women recognize, unpaid caregiving tasks are not frequently included in descriptions of productive or successful aging. Rather, this work " . . . is seen as low status as it operates within the undervalued community sphere, and is associated with low levels of personal agency or choice" (Warburton & McLaughlin, 2006, p. 57). Although these women identified their caregiving responsibilities as fulfilling and as an indirect way of contributing, they also admitted to feelings of guilt or frustration with not being able to volunteer in more visible ways. What remains unfortunate, in this current climate of productive aging, is the lack of appreciation for the many ways in which retired women are actively engaged, simply because their efforts do not meet the criteria for civic engagement.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in the lived experiences of retired women, the present study illustrates divergent attitudes toward volunteering and thus contributes to the current discourse on engagement in retirement. Based on our analysis of retired women's narratives, we concur with the work of Holstein and Minkler (2003) and Martinson (2006–07), who advocate against assigning social value only to those elders who meet criteria for productivity. It is important that we recognize women's caregiving contributions and relinquish the assumption that older women are a continuously untapped resource. Limiting current

expectations for continued productivity of older adults will allow us to "embrace aging in all its forms, lives, abilities and meanings" (Martinson & Minkler, 2006, p. 323), and respect the multiple ways in which women experience later life.

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