



Ethical implications of the promotion of elder volunteerism: A critical perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 December 2010

Received in revised form 8 April 2011

Accepted 14 April 2011

Keywords:

Ethics

Critical gerontology

Volunteerism

Social norms of aging

Political economy

Healthy aging

ABSTRACT

This critical inquiry explores the question: What are the ethical implications of promoting normative ideals for healthy aging, such as volunteerism and civic engagement, that specifically emphasize productivity and contribution? In this paper, we identify the values and ethical standpoints embedded in the discourse promoting volunteerism and productive aging and then describe what this suggests about how older adults are viewed, valued and judged. More specifically, we argue that older adult volunteering has at times been framed in a manner that dually suggests: a) lifelong productivity is a necessary condition to be a *good old person*; and b) lifelong productivity is a necessary condition to be a *good old citizen*. We then demonstrate that the current promotion of older adult volunteerism and productive aging is ethically troubling because: 1) it fails to capture the full potential of the self – and in particular, the aging self; and 2) it grounds justice in a narrowly defined and unfair distributive scheme. An alternative model of aging is then presented based on *equal regard for all persons* insofar as this approach is inclusive of the diversity of older adults and aging processes, and policy implications are discussed.

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Introduction

A dynamic and sometimes contentious discourse has emerged in the United States as Americans ponder the opportunities and threats posed to society by the unprecedented size of the aging Baby Boomer population. In some policy and media circles, we hear about what Ann Robertson (1990) critically named the “apocalyptic demography” scenario which portends economic and social catastrophe as the growing older population, with its ailing, retired bodies and high health care costs, drains the larger society of its limited resources. At the same time, and in response to these negative images of aging, we see increased attention paid to a series of

“positive aging” models in gerontology and public health that emphasize activity, mobility, and productivity as healthy and desirable ways of aging. In contrast to the images of decline and loss that previously dominated medical and public images of old age, these more optimistic models, including *active aging* (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1968), *successful aging* (Rowe & Kahn, 1998), and *productive aging* (Caro, Bass, & Chen, 1993), represent a notable shift in how aging is perceived by health professionals and the larger society.

Each of these models stems from activity theory – introduced by Havighurst et al. (1968) and later articulated in more formalized ways by Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972) – which asserts that optimal aging occurs when elders remain active and engaged rather than withdrawn and disengaged. Rowe and Kahn’s (1998) successful aging model asserts that optimal aging occurs when one avoids disease and disability, maintains cognitive abilities, and remains actively engaged with life. Similarly, the normative model of productive aging presents old age as a potentially healthy, vibrant, and engaged time of life during which one can make

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valuable contributions by staying involved in activities that contribute to the production of goods or services (Caro et al., 1993). As Harry Moody (2001) has described, models of productive aging aim to “convert our aging population from a burden to an asset” (p. 176). Together, active aging, successful aging, and productive aging are variations on a theme that holds activity, mobility, and independence as ideals in old age.

Healthy aging programs that are based on these positive aging models have been instituted across the U.S. in community-based organizations, health clinics, senior centers, and recreation facilities. These programs promote “healthy aging lifestyles” that include exercise, healthy eating, social engagement and brain fitness games to help aging Americans live healthier and longer. Furthermore, we see popular images of “positive aging” everywhere – in AARP advertisements featuring the tanned, 70-something year old *actively aging* surfer with a board tucked under his arm and ocean water in his hair, in Viagra commercials with silver haired heterosexual couples promoting lifelong sexual activity as an extension of *successful aging* (Calasanti & King, 2005), and in the accolades placed on Home Depot for their promotion of *productive aging* in their hiring of older workers (although, as McMullin and Berger (2006) note, they are offered low pay and little job security for that productive work). *Volunteerism* has recently been added to the list of activities promoted as being good for seniors’ health. Often referred to more broadly as *civic engagement*, volunteerism is presented as a productive activity that benefits older adults themselves and the community at large. As such, volunteerism is fast becoming a favored component of the normative ideal of what it means to age well.

Volunteering at the local Red Cross or elementary school can indeed be a meaningful experience for older adults while helping to meet local needs and build community ties. In addition, volunteering and other activities within the productive aging umbrella may also help improve health and well-being outcomes for some elders as these activities can involve varying degrees of physical effort, social engagement or personal fulfillment. Overall, models of positive and productive aging – including images of the older volunteer – appear to be welcome alternatives to representations of older adults as burdensome, decrepit, or, as Fairlie (1988, March) labeled them, “greedy geezers.” However, the enthusiastic acceptance and promotion of volunteerism and the normative ideal of productivity have also inspired calls for critical evaluation and caution.

Critiques of these positive aging models (e.g., active aging, successful aging, productive aging) over the past two decades have come from varied and overlapping critical frameworks such as narrative gerontology, political and moral economy, feminism, disability studies, and critical narrativity (Cole, 1992; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Gullette, 2004; Holstein, 1999; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Katz, 2000; Minkler & Fadem, 2002). These critical perspectives have in common a concern for the ways in which normative ideals of positive aging serve to differentiate between those who fulfill some definition of “healthy, successful, and productive agers” and those who do not.

More specifically, these definitions of healthy aging suggest that it is possible – and undesirable – to age *unsuccessfully* or *unproductively*. As Holstein and Minkler (2003) articulated, this dichotomous language for healthy aging has powerful ethical

implications as it, perhaps inadvertently, excludes and imposes negative judgment upon those elders who do not fit neatly into the prescribed healthy aging models and therefore “may further harm older people, particularly older women, the poor, and people of color who are already marginalized” (p. 787).

More recently, this critical discourse on positive aging models has focused its attention on the enthusiastic promotion of older adult civic engagement and, more specifically, volunteerism, as an extension of the productive aging paradigm of healthy aging (Holstein, 2006; Martinson, 2007; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Minkler & Holstein, 2008). In this paper, we address the question: what are the *ethical* implications of promoting normative ideals for healthy aging such as volunteerism and civic engagement that specifically emphasize productivity and contribution? This question will be explored by identifying the values and ethical standpoints embedded in the discourse promoting volunteerism and productive aging. We consider what such judgments suggest about how older adults are viewed, valued and judged, and we recommend alternative models of healthy aging that better support and promote the health and well-being of our diverse and rapidly growing population of elders.

This inquiry into the ethical issues related to promoting normative ideals of the productive older volunteer is triggered by the long expressed concern that such exclusive ideals can foster a broader stigma of old age, including an internalized ageism among already marginalized older adults that leaves them feeling obligated, burdened, or “not good enough.” As Holstein (1999) noted 20 years ago in her critical exploration of normative ideals of productive aging, this cultural ideal that “elevate[s] productivity as a ruling metaphor for a ‘good’ old age” (p. 359) is a dangerous vision that can “become coercive and reinforce patterns of domination and oppression” (p. 361) that particularly penalize women, people of color, and elders with disabilities.

This newest ideal of the elder volunteer raises another round of red flags about whom such a vision serves and whom it penalizes. Certainly, both productivity and volunteerism are important and valuable components of our society. The sustainability of our economy and communities depends upon varying levels of productive engagement. Volunteerism represents one way in which people of all ages engage in efforts to help each other, build connections, and provide needed support for others within and outside of their immediate communities. Nevertheless, there are aspects of the current promotion of the older volunteer which raise ethical issues. These issues become apparent when we look at the value standpoints – expressed by some of the most visible and ardent promoters of older adult civic engagement – that underlie the normative ideal of the older volunteer. As we will illustrate in this paper, older adult volunteering – as a component of the productive aging ideal – is again being presented as a model for how to live a “good’ old age” (Holstein, 1999). The recent promotion of volunteerism – notably labeled “civic engagement” – has at times been framed in a manner that dually suggests: a) productivity is a necessary condition to be a *good old person*; and, b) productivity is a necessary condition to be a *good old citizen*. Each of these messages raises serious ethical concerns not only because of how elders may then be viewed by younger generations, but also because of how elders are encouraged to view (and judge) themselves.

We argue here that the current promotion of older adult volunteerism is ethically troubling because: 1) it fails to capture the full potential of the self — and in particular, the aging self; and 2) it grounds justice in a narrowly defined, unfair distributive scheme. In doing so, this normative model for aging inadvertently co-opts existing ageist social norms by turning the stereotypic frail or burdensome elder inside out into a kind of super citizen.

The final section of this paper presents an alternative model of aging based on *equal regard for all persons*. We show how this approach respects the diverse values held by elders and discuss policy implications.

Volunteerism and the good old person

From the perspective of volunteer advocates, the promotion of volunteerism serves the aging population well. Proponents of volunteerism cite the research suggesting a positive association between volunteering and older adult health and well-being (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Van Willigen, 2000). While it has been noted that much of this research does not establish *causal* relationships between volunteering and improved health (Chappell, 1999; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003), the associations between volunteering and health are often touted by promoters of older adult volunteering. Furthermore, promoters often give particular attention to one specific finding from the research — the *sense of meaning and purpose* associated with older adults who volunteer. The attention given to this correlation reveals a notable underlying ethical standpoint of the narrative promoting older volunteerism. Through volunteering, it has been asserted, older adults can demonstrate or discover their meaning and purpose in life.

Civic engagement proponents have used this correlation between volunteering and a sense of purpose as a social marketing tool to encourage aging Boomers and pre-Boomers to get involved in volunteer activities. The “Purpose Prize” is given annually to outstanding older volunteers across the country (<http://www.encore.org/prize>) and websites of several prominent volunteer organizations describe volunteer activities that support “purposeful lives,” e.g., AARP, Volunteer Match, and United Way. Similarly, high-profile champions of older adult volunteerism, like Civic Ventures’ founder Marc Freedman, assert that volunteer programs will “bring opportunities for greater fulfillment and purpose to the later years” (Freedman, 2002, p. 86).

Certainly, the human desire to search for meaning and purpose at different times throughout one’s life has been acknowledged by philosophers, scientists, religious scholars and others. As Harry Moody (1994) has noted, “Awareness of something transcending the individual life is a universal human capacity” (p. 395). However, the purpose-focused narrative put forth by so many promoters of older adult volunteerism suggests that volunteer activities will create purpose and meaningfulness — *as if purpose and meaning do not otherwise exist for older adults*. A related troubling interpretation is that volunteering provides a way for elders to prove their worth or purpose to the larger society. Overall, this purpose-focused narrative suggests that volunteer work

in one’s community is a necessary condition for an elder’s life to have meaning and value in the eyes of oneself and in the eyes of the society. That is to say, such productive engagement is a necessary condition to be a *good old person*.

Truncating the aging self

While creating this limited view of a meaningful life in old age is surely not the intention of promoters of civic engagement and volunteerism, it nevertheless is a potential and serious consequence of promoting such activities as normative components of “purposeful lives.” Through such language, the elder is primarily defined by what she/he does, rather than by who she/he is as a whole human being. Measuring a person’s value based on *doing* rather than *being* locks the older person into a continuous effort to prove her or his value and worthiness through prescribed public service activities, and thereby encourages a truncated sense of the aging self that ignores other integral components of that person’s identity.

This limited view of the aging self stands in stark contrast to a range of perspectives presented by philosophers, developmental psychologists, sociologists, and feminist scholars. While different from each other, these perspectives have in common an understanding that late life presents particular opportunities, perspectives, and experiences unique to old age that involve movement *away from* or *different than* the midlife focus on productive, work-like activities (Cole & Gadow, 1987; Erikson, 1982; Jung, 1953; Ruddick, 1999; Tornstam, 2005; Walker, 1999). This is not to say that productive activities are not a part of life for many older adults, but they are not necessarily the anchor of one’s identity as they tend to be when one is younger. Many scholars have also argued that inhibiting the unique opportunities that come with aging can negatively affect a person’s development late in life. For example, in psychologist Carl Jung’s 1930 lecture on aging, Jung asserted that old age presents an opportunity for meanings and activities that are different than those reflected in mid-life (Jung, 1930, as paraphrased in Tornstam, 2005). Jung noted that this opportunity often goes unrealized as elders tend to “lead our lives with the erroneous apprehension that continuing with the tasks of the first half of life is all there is. As a consequence, many of us meet our death as only half-developed individuals” (p. 38). Similarly, developmental theorist Erik Erikson proposed that while forty to sixty-four year olds live life primarily focused on work and parenting and seek satisfaction primarily through socially-valued work activities, adults in their late sixties and older shift away from a sole focus on productivity and experience a broader review of their entire lives along with a new consciousness of their mortality (Erikson, 1982).

Social gerontologist Lars Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence posits that old age is marked by particular developmental changes that signify a potential “shift in metaperspective from a materialistic and rational perspective to a more cosmic and transcendent one” (Tornstam, 2005, p. 41). Western society, with its emphasis on productivity, efficiency, and independence tends not to support such a shift in perspective. Yet Tornstam argues that old people will experience greater life satisfaction if they can let go of some of these mid-life values as they age. Tornstam’s empirical studies show that this change in perspective, if allowed

to flourish, can involve shifting ideas about self and others, time and space, life and death. It can also involve an increased appreciation of “positive solitude” (p. 70) — time spent with oneself reading, listening to music, watching a sunset, or simply sitting in contemplative silence. Agreeing with Tornstam’s view that aging involves a shift in perspective, Joan Erikson (1997) published an extended version of her late husband Erik Erikson’s work on the eight stages of psychosocial development, adding a ninth and tenth stage that integrated ideas of gerotranscendence.

Philosopher and feminist scholar Margaret Urban Walker also addresses the importance of recognizing other contemplative ways of aging that extend beyond the productive aging paradigm. Walker (1999) argues that productive aging is part of a broader exclusive and problematic ideal of “the career self” which embraces “the image of the fit, energetic, and productive individual who sets himself a course of progressive achievement within the boundaries of the society’s rules and institutions” (p. 102). In reality, rather than spending their later years continuing to prove their productivity, many elders look to other sources of meaning and connection in life including meditative, spiritual, religious, mystical or holistic sources. These are the “diverse ways people *in fact* continue to find value, interest, and sense in and between their own and others’ lives in their later years” (p. 107, author’s emphasis). Walker thereby suggests we reject lifelong ideals of the career self with their “unfulfillable demand for achievement or progress” and instead consider a philosophical ideal of the self that embodies “only normal awareness, capacities for feeling, and opportunities to belong to or with something other than or larger than oneself” (p. 108).

These models of aging presented by Jung, the Eriksons, Tornstam, and Walker, while each different in their specifics, all speak to the possibility of change in later life in what is meaningful and important. These shifting perspectives embrace the meaningfulness of work and play, activity and stillness, engagement and disengagement, and productivity and silent solitude. Yet, as noted earlier, proponents of older adult volunteerism often present a very different story of late life that emphasizes the demonstration and attainment of one’s purpose and meaning through productivity and volunteer engagement. This approach to aging that glorifies productivity distorts the complexity of the aging process and risks limiting the potential of the aging self. By presenting productive work as the ideal in old age, other definitions of meaning and purpose that may be explored as one grows old are stifled. As Tornstam (2005) argues, we impede the possibility of embracing ways of aging *outside* of this dominant aging paradigm of productivity and independence “by making people feel guilty about his/her developmental change” (p. 43). Similarly, gerontologist Simon Biggs (2001) notes that “this ideal of productive aging has little place for dissident or alternative pathways for self and social development other than through work” (p. 314). Martha Holstein has long shared the perspective that such models limit our understanding of the possibilities in aging. As she warned decades ago, if we hold productivity as the normative model for aging well, “U.S. society will have lost an opportunity for a vigorous engagement with questions about meaning and purpose” (Holstein, 1999, p. 369).

Certainly, there are many older adults who are active and seek enjoyment and meaningfulness in their lives in part through volunteer and other productive activities. This critique does not suggest that such activity in and of itself is

in any way undesirable. Rather, the concern here is with putting forth a monolithic and prescriptive view of purpose and meaning in later life. The questions that need to be addressed include: Are those elders who are unable to or not likely to volunteer or participate in productive activities at risk of being viewed as purposeless and undignified by the larger society? Equally importantly, for those who *are* productively engaged, is that engagement so highly valued and rewarded that other aspects of their lives are lost, undervalued or made invisible?

Productivity in later life makes for a good old citizen

Not only have the narratives of older adult volunteerism, civic engagement and the broader notion of productive aging at times implied that such activity is a necessary condition to be a *good old person*, they also have suggested that such activity is a necessary condition to be a *good old citizen*. Perhaps the most conspicuous clue of this is the recent emergence within U.S. gerontological circles of the particular term — *civic engagement* — to describe the act of older adult volunteering. The civic label associates volunteer work with one’s role as an older citizen. As Martinson and Minkler critically noted (2006), advocates for older adult civic engagement have repeatedly and enthusiastically referred to the unique roles older Americans might play in addressing the social and service program needs created by large cuts in federal and state funding over the past few decades of retrenchment politics. In addition, these advocates have asserted that the large numbers of healthy Baby Boomers entering retirement make the potential for older adult civic involvement all that much more valuable. As noted in the Harvard School of Public Health/MetLife Foundation’s, 2004 report on older adult civic engagement:

[B]oomers will enter later life with many relatively healthy, productive years ahead. As some of the demands of work and family that have commanded their attention in mid-life recede, they have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by contributing to the civic life of their communities. (p. 8)

Similarly, Civic Ventures’ Marc Freedman heralded the important roles older volunteers might play in addressing the large scale social needs presented by underfunded services and anticipated labor shortages. “Given the daunting human resource shortages, engaging these [older volunteers] to fill critical gaps in our workforce might well produce a windfall for American communities” (Freedman, 2002, p. 86).

Others have predicted that changing social conditions may mean that productive work becomes not just a good idea, but possibly an expectation for older adults. As Nancy Morrow-Howell (2000) noted:

Older adults engaged in these productive activities are performing valued functions to society. In fact, it is argued that there will be increased demand for elders in these roles in future years. The labor market will demand longer work lives, and growing social problems and reduced public expenditures will demand increased volunteerism....Thus, our society may *require* the productive engagement of older adults. (p. 2, emphasis added)

Sabrina Reilly (2006), another advocate of older volunteerism, sees such a mandate as part of an emerging “civic engagement movement.” As she explains, “What we need is a national vision for aging that fosters productive engagement as *an expectation in later life*” (p. 7, emphasis added). As reflected in these statements, older adult volunteerism and other productive activities are being infused into a socially constructed definition of what it means to be a responsible older person, a respectable member of society, and a good old citizen. It is what an older person should do – “an expectation in later life” – in order to fulfill some civic duty that fulfills this “national vision for aging.”

Certainly, the value placed on certain forms of volunteerism and other contributions to the community reflects an ethic of reciprocity embraced in the United States. Without examining the many philosophical analyses of reciprocity, e.g., Becker (1990), Gouldner (1960), and Rawls (2001), we acknowledge that an ethic of reciprocity can encourage a sense of shared responsibility, mutual respect, trust, and even security between individuals and communities. The critical question here, however, concerns the particular forms an ethic of reciprocity takes in the discourse on older adult civic engagement and volunteerism. Is there anything problematic about suggesting that older adults might be expected to contribute in these prescribed ways in order to fulfill their roles in the civic environment? We assert that the trouble begins when this ethic of reciprocity is presented in a manner that suggests certain kinds of contribution are *obligatory or expected* rather than optional for older adults. When elders are told that they ought to volunteer or be engaged in productive work, and that doing so will make them more highly valued by proving to the larger society that older Americans are indeed contributing (read: good) citizens, then ethical concerns arise. Presenting productive work as an obligation has led some to equate elders' deservingness of social resources to their productivity.

Justice as reciprocity

As previously described, the discourse on civic engagement and volunteerism emerged in response to ageist stereotypes of older adults as useless, burdensome, and greedy people. The civic engagement discourse seeks to counter these stereotypes by asserting that older adults are in fact people who *are* valuable and worthy because they *do* contribute to the society through this productive volunteer work. While well-intentioned, this argument connecting a person's worthiness to one's level of contribution is ethically problematic. Embedded in this argument is a sometimes subtle, sometimes not-so-subtle suggestion that moral status and distributive justice for older adults are dependent upon reciprocity as measured through their productive contributions.

Allen Buchanan (1990) has labeled this ethical perspective “justice as reciprocity,” and identified its key component as “the *reciprocity thesis*: the claim that only those who do (or at least can) make a contribution to the cooperative surplus have rights to social resources” (p. 230). While this perspective has been equated with such historical figures as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and 18th century philosopher David Hume, it has emerged more recently “as a disturbing challenge to orthodox thinking and practice concerning justice” (Buchanan, 1990, p. 227). Most notably, philosopher David Gauthier (1986)

embraced justice as reciprocity in his influential book, *Morals by Agreement*, where he asserted relations of distributive justice as well as moral relations ought to be contingent upon one's contributions to society's cooperative enterprise, i.e., the productive economy. From Gauthier's perspective, distributive and moral justice are coupled with the previously described ethic of reciprocity in a manner that requires each person to be involved in the production of goods and services in order to access social resources and basic moral rights. In stark contrast to an ethical perspective that presumes *equal regard for all persons* (a perspective that will be discussed later in this paper), this justice as reciprocity framework makes regard contingent upon a person's ability and willingness to contribute productively to the society. Those who do not contribute, it follows, do not deserve resources or respect as equal persons because fairness in society is grounded in such reciprocity.

While Gauthier's view that only those who contribute to the productive economy should receive social resources may at first appear extreme, Gauthier's perspective is not far from the very thinking that many U.S. policymakers and much of the American public espouse today. For example, current discourses regarding immigration, Social Security, health care, welfare reform, and public employee pensions reflect a growing determination to define who is “deserving” and who is “undeserving” of resources. Similarly, this notion of justice as reciprocity, with its emphasis on each individual being owed something “but only insofar as that individual is a contributor” (Buchanan, 1990, p. 229), has periodically appeared in the current promotions of older adult volunteerism and productive aging. As Martinson and Minkler (2006) noted, some proponents of older adult civic engagement have presented the challenges placed on society, both by underfunded social programs and by the high costs of health care and Social Security for older Americans, as justification for encouraging elders to take on unpaid or underpaid work as a means of giving back to society or pulling their own weight. For example, in an article featured on Civic Ventures' *Encore* website, Terry Nagel highlights the justice as reciprocity perspective spoken by Andrew Yarrow, author of the forthcoming book, *Forgive Us Our Debts*:

Retiring when you're still in good health isn't just wrong, it's 'profoundly selfish and unpatriotic,' according to Andrew L. Yarrow in the March 26 edition of *The Baltimore Sun*. He writes, 'Dropping out of the workforce while still in one's prime means ending one's contributions to America's strength, mortgaging our children's and grandchildren's future, and leeching trillions of taxpayer dollars from the economy.' Yarrow points out that 'seasoned citizens' could serve communities by filling the need for teachers, social service workers and public servants, an idea popularized by Marc Freedman of Civic Ventures, to whom he also gives a nod. (Nagel, 2008)

The alliance between Civic Ventures, a high profile promoter of older adult civic engagement, with Yarrow's perspective of justice as reciprocity, implies that older adults can and *should* age productively in order to ensure a fair exchange of social resources and to earn social regard. While many supporters of productive aging and older adult civic engagement would not consider themselves disciples of either Gauthier or Yarrow,

statements like the one noted above come dangerously close to this position that justice for older adults is dependent upon this obligatory reciprocity as expressed through productive contributions. In presuming that respect and resources are bestowed upon those who remain within some narrowly defined mainstream productive sphere, elders who live outside of that mainstream are thereby devalued, marginalized and deemed undeserving of social acceptance and resources.

An unfair distributive scheme

What makes this aspect of the productive aging narrative's alliance with justice as reciprocity even more troubling is that this view of justice is grounded in a definition of contribution and productivity that already *systematically excludes* specific groups of people from having equal opportunities to be "contributors" in the first place. Structural inequities position certain people to be more "productive" than others. People of color, poor people, people with disabilities, women, and elders have historically been systematically excluded from equal access and equal participation in the dominant and socially valued contributory system – the market economy. Linking justice to a person's contributions at *any* age fails to address the reality that there is unequal access to contributory roles and a limited range of what "counts" as a contribution in the first place. Further, this disadvantage accrues throughout the life course and is often magnified and perpetuated in old age.

The market economy both reflects and reproduces the inequities that exist in the society. Structural barriers – erected and experienced over lifetimes through racist, classist, sexist, and other discriminatory policies and workplace practices – lead to dramatic differences in the life chances and opportunities for productive engagement afforded to different groups of people. Those who are white, wealthy, male and able-bodied dominate the market and thereby are deemed the most productive. At the same time, those who are born into poor families with limited access to education, health care, job opportunities and market connections are far less likely to flourish in the productive economy. Poor people are thereby more likely to be deemed unproductive or less productive than their wealthier counterparts, with all the societal judgment that is embedded in such labeling. People of color, immigrants, women, older people, and people with disabilities also face structural hurdles that keep them from having fair and equal access to the kinds of productive work and accomplishments that earn a person respect and allow them to fit easily into the society's normative ideals.

As these marginalized groups grow old, they continue to experience the effects of a life of unequal access to prescribed modes of productive activity, including those under the umbrella of "civic engagement." In contrast to what many proponents of older adult volunteer work suggest, volunteering is not simply a matter of *choice*. Structural barriers create unequal chances for such involvement. In a study of demographics and civic engagement in California, political scientists Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004) found that a person's "choice" to be involved in civic activities such as volunteer work is largely influenced by social, economic and institutional factors. For example, "poverty and lack of education mean fewer skills...and fewer opportunities to be mobilized into participation in political activities and volun-

teerism" (p. 1). Therefore, presenting these civic activities as integral components of what it means to be a responsible older citizen is systematically exclusionary. Those elders who experienced unequal access to valued modes of productivity earlier in life will not have equal chances to achieve this normative ideal of aging either.

Not only is the socially sanctioned productive scheme systematically exclusionary in terms of access, but also is exclusionary in that it only acknowledges a limited range of productive work. Certain kinds of productive work are valued, while other kinds are devalued and thereby deemed invisible (Estes et al., 2003; Holstein, 1999; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). For example, caregiving work, a productive activity that falls primarily on women, is often unpaid or underpaid and remains invisible and undervalued in the market economy. Family caregiving keeps millions of women out of the paid fulltime workforce, thereby compromising their earning abilities and subsequently their Social Security benefits in later life. While family caregiving in the U.S. – provided 75% of the time by women – is estimated to be worth at least \$375 billion annually (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2009), this "women's work" is systematically unacknowledged in the market economy.

The presumption that all elders move predictably and willingly from the paid labor force into retirement, and that retirement can then be enhanced through unpaid civic engagement, conceals the reality of many women's lives that involves unpaid caregiving work throughout their younger and older years. Such concealment, even when not deliberate, serves an ideological function – to maintain the devaluation and invisibility of the caregiving work done primarily by women (Walker, 1999).

Overall, the narrative of older adult volunteerism reflects and perpetuates the unequal power relations of gender, class, race, ability, and age. By combining an expectation of productive engagement – and, in particular, unpaid formal volunteer work – with what it means to be a "good old citizen," those elders who are already marginalized are particularly burdened with the continued expectation for unpaid civic work. As older women carry the disproportionate load of caregiving for partners, parents and grandchildren, the ideal of the civically engaged volunteer saddles them with an added expectation that they must also take up a more public type of civic activity in order to help address social problems. Similarly, the many elders who are currently engaged in community activities that are not "counted" within the civic engagement tent of formal volunteer work face judgment through this dominant cultural paradigm that suggests they ought to do more. Further, working class men and women may or may not have a "choice" about their retirement – many are forced out of the workforce, while others remain within it out of economic necessity. Through it all, volunteer work is presented as a way for elders to "give back" – as if these elders owe more to the society than they have already given. Rather than civic activity being something in which elders *might* engage in their later years, narrowly defined and formal types of civic activity are being promoted as something in which elders *should* engage to prove themselves worthy to society.

A theory of equal regard

Cultural norms and ideals, including societal judgments of deservingness of resources, not only influence how society

defines a “good” old citizen and a “good” old person, but also affect how elders construct their own identities. Philosopher John Rawls (1999) described self-respect as a primary good – something we all need – and he noted it is intricately connected with being respected by others. Keeping this in mind, normative ideals for aging that dictate what kinds of behaviors and activities are deemed respectable (or not respectable) can thereby affect an individual’s perception of herself or himself as a moral, valued (or devalued) person.

Given the interactive nature of social and individual constructions of aging, the ideal of the civically engaged elder leaves those who do not fit the ideal with the task of making sense of what it means to be outside the ideal. Am I bad? Am I wrong? Have I somehow failed? Am I undeserving and burdensome to my family, my community and the rest of society? The normative ideal of the older volunteer – and, more broadly, the productive elder – constructs binary images of the productive and unproductive, the healthy and unhealthy, the givers and the needy, and perhaps most dangerously, the deserving and the undeserving. Such binaries force older adults to place themselves either within or outside of these categories and then face the repercussions of that placement both from others and from within themselves. By emphasizing productivity as the singular basis for *regard* for persons, productive aging in effect elides the very possibility of defending non-market values, including rich values that emerge in new ways in later life such as solitude, reflection, care, resistance, negotiation, or spiritual development. Thus the paradigms of older volunteerism and productive aging become a sorting mechanism to delineate who among the aging population is deserving of respect (the productive), and who is not (the unproductive) as they deny other important values that can emerge with age.

In contrast, an approach to aging that reflects equal regard for all persons expands the meaning of “a ‘good’ old age” (Holstein, 1999) in a manner that embraces and respects the dependency and interdependency, frailty and strength, disability and loss, freedom, creativity and changing perspectives that can come with being old. A good life is determined by what the older person herself or himself defines as pleasure, fulfillment, and well-being in later life. That may include solitude and introspection, relations with others, community service, activism, caring for others, or being cared for by a nurse, family member, or neighbor. Equal regard supports everyone in maintaining a sense of dignity and purpose in all their diverse contexts and orientations to the world. This, we assert, creates an environment for healthy aging.

Specifically, an inclusive model of aging centered on equal regard for all persons counters productive aging on two major points: First, subjective values – including solitude, creativity, spirituality, emotional growth, and relationships beyond their productive functions – are fundamental human goods. People differ in how they prioritize each of these goods, and how much they value productivity. We honor a multitude of ways of knowing, being, *and* doing that are not necessarily valued by the market or sortable into a binary evaluation of contribution and non-contribution. This emphasis on subjectivity and diversity counters productive aging’s truncation of the aging self.

The second major point of the equal regard approach is to directly address the injustice of basing deservingness for resources on visible productivity as an elder. Gender, race,

class, age, and other factors influence people’s opportunities for productivity. Also, the current models of productivity fail to value caregiving, educating children, and other socially valuable forms of labor appropriately. Even the very conditions for healthy functioning as an elder are unjustly withheld from many. There is indeed no fair basis for evaluating deservingness for resources based on observing an elder’s productivity. An equal regard approach requires that “life be treated as an end in itself, and not primarily as an instrument for others” (Cooper, 1998, p. 480). It takes productivity out of the equation of what is required to be deserving of respect as an old person in society.

Rather than promoting an ideal of aging that suggests a person’s value is dependent upon participation in a system that is by definition inequitable and exclusive, we in public health and gerontology ought to embrace regard for persons as persons and to uncouple images of living well from those of productivity. This is crucial for non-elders to value older adults for all of who they are and what they bring to the community, for elders to thrive, and for social policies to avoid further marginalizing those people who have already been unfairly and systematically marginalized.

Aging policy based on equal regard for all persons

What would it look like to move toward a policy based on *equal regard for all persons*? To begin, a model of equal regard would require that the distribution of resources be based on a realistic measure of need within diverse environments and not on some narrow evaluation of who is a good citizen “deserving” of resources. Economic policies would be keenly attentive to the ways in which the market has disadvantaged older adults and differentially disadvantaged certain subpopulations of older as well as younger adults based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. More specifically, *aging* policy based on equal regard would imagine ways of reinforcing equal regard for all elders regardless of their relationship to the productive economy. For example, women who have not been “contributors” in the formal sense of the marketplace would be entitled to more equitable Social Security benefits that secure an adequate standard of living rather than being penalized for the years they spent out of the marketplace while they took care of children or parents. Medicare would provide ample and appropriate benefits for all elders rather than supporting the inequities that arise from privatization which privileges those who can pay for added benefits. Universal access to long term care would be provided through Medicare or some other federal or state program, allowing people to access in-home care as well as skilled nursing care without having to drain their financial resources to qualify for public assistance. Funding would be dramatically increased for the successful – though severely underfunded – Senior Community Service and Employment Program that provides life saving opportunities for community engagement and paid job training for poor and near poor elders who have been isolated or excluded from the community or work force.

Policy based on equal regard would also call for replacing inaccurate measures of “poverty,” such as the Federal Poverty Level, with measures of “economic security” that more accurately reflect the resources needed for elders to cover basic expenses in different counties and with different living conditions, e.g. renting or owning a home, living with others

or living alone, out-of-pocket medical expenses and other essential spending. This more accurate measure of economic security would help local, state, and federal governments better plan for the rising numbers of elders and better identify the resources necessary to support “healthy aging” among a diverse elder population. An economic security standard has indeed been developed in several states in the U.S. including California where the Elder Economic Security Standard Index has revealed that over a half million elders living alone in the state currently are unable to cover their basic expenses (Wallace & Smith, 2009). Despite these sobering statistics, a bill ensuring statewide implementation of the California standard was vetoed in 2009 by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

These distributive policies based on equal regard have direct implications for self respect and dignity among elders. There would be an explicit goal to create inclusive social conditions that promote self-respect, rather than the current pressures to truncate the self to be a “good” old person. To avoid the pitfalls of policy limited by binary judgments regarding productivity and contribution, aging policy would need to imagine ways of valuing dependence and interdependence rather than glorifying independence. It would construct supports for an aging society that values all elders in their diverse ways of being and living, rather than continuing the process of “splitting images of a ‘good’ old age of health, virtue, self-reliance and salvation from a ‘bad’ old age of sickness, sin, dependency, premature death, and damnation” (Cole, 1992, p. 230). If we approached aging policy through an ethical foundation of equal regard for all persons, we would effectively expand our consideration and acceptance of the diversity of what aging looks like, feels like, and behaves like.

In a policy environment of equal regard, the many formal and informal configurations of caregiving would be valued and supported through policies and programs that ensure dignity, security, and respect for all of those involved in the care relationship. Within equal regard, same sex couples and unmarried heterosexual domestic partners would have access to the same federal benefits that currently make it possible for heterosexual married couples to care for each other with a sense of security and dignity in old age. In addition, elders experiencing disability or frailty would feel supported as equal and valuable members of rich, intergenerational communities that embrace the interdependence of all people throughout the life course rather than separating out the “dependent” and the “independent” in late life.

Policy based on equal regard would also respect older adults’ psychological development, subjective meanings of aging, and spiritual or existential processes in late life. For example, health promotion interventions would expand their focus beyond the values of staying physically fit and mentally sharp by giving equal attention to the values of contemplating, reminiscing, or intergenerational story telling. Rather than healthy aging campaigns being aimed primarily at individual longevity through physical fitness plans and brain fitness computer programs, funds and interventions for health in late life would be directed toward supporting intergenerational, interdependent communities through, for example, the building of parks and other accessible spaces for leisurely recreation, being in nature, and being with others or alone in a safe, supportive environment.

Equal regard for persons emphasizes social inclusion as a very high priority, and this might even change how we spend public dollars on medical care versus health promotion and social services. In the United States, we spend a bulk of our health care dollars on medical care technologies while spending little on programs to support home health care, family caregiving, and other community health supports. In contrast, in Holland, a national bioethics commission explicitly prioritized social inclusion over extending life. In the Government Committee on Choices in Health Care Report (Dunning Commission, 1992), the commission argued that the most important goal of health care was social solidarity, and thus that the social supports necessary for an inclusive society were more important than building more emergency rooms to save lives. The argument was that the very worst thing was for people to be alive yet socially isolated and devalued. While this poses a number of challenging questions, and we in the United States will likely always value physical survival too much to go this far, we might temper the emphasis on longevity with the additional observation that there is little value in living long without the supports necessary for social regard and self-respect.

In summary, policy based on equal regard would promote more equitable access to those environmental and social conditions that support health, dignity, and fulfillment in later life. These conditions include health care, long term care, safety, decent housing, and economic security. Such policy would support regard for all persons, while paying special attention to those for whom such regard is at risk. It would allow those who want to or need to work to do so, while honoring and even encouraging a way of aging that respects changing life conditions, authenticity, and the need for subjectivity in light of what such qualities bring to the uniqueness of old age.

Conclusion

This paper identified some of the problematic ethical implications of normative ideals for healthy aging that emphasize productivity and contribution. It then presented an alternative model of aging that centers on equal regard for all persons. Perhaps what can be concluded is that rather than present externally imposed and limiting ideals, including such seemingly innocuous ideals as “healthy” or “productive” aging, we need to pay more careful attention to the diverse and variegated ways of aging well from the experiences of elders themselves. Narrative gerontology, which examines the construction of meanings in late life by eliciting elders’ stories with attention to the “social contexts in which the stories are told” (Ray, 2007, p. 64), provides a critical strategy for understanding how elders understand, define, and negotiate aging. As Ruth Ray (2007) asserts, “Gerontologists gain a much better understanding of the meaning of old age by understanding the meanings [elders] themselves make of their lives as a whole” (p. 66).

Simultaneously, narrative gerontology can help us gain critical awareness of the influence of cultural messages and public discourse in shaping people’s beliefs, judgments, values, and expectations about their own and others’ aging. As such, it can be utilized to give voice and attention to the counter narratives in public discourse as a way of “changing the public’s mind about ageing and old age” (Ray, 2007, p. 60). At the same time, narrative gerontology allows us to explore the negotiations that elders engage in with regard to public discourse as

they make meaning of their own lives and identities. As Jaber Gubrium (1993) notes, “public markers, resources, and available categories of everyday life” (p. 62) shape and press upon the meanings elders’ give to their lives.

This understanding of the interactions between elders’ experiences and public and professional discourses point to the care with which gerontologists and others working with and on behalf of elders must take as we construct and promote messages about healthy aging. As argued in this paper, these messages often serve as *public markers* for what it means to be a “good” old person, they influence the perceived deservingness of and allocation of *resources*, and they define (and delimit) *available categories of everyday life*. Rather than imposing public markers that marginalize subgroups of elders, we need instead to formulate accessible, just, and respectful campaigns that support and inspire each and every elder in living her or his vision of a fulfilling old age.

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