

## Civic Engagement and Older Adults: A Critical Perspective

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The aging of the baby boom generation, together with research that links volunteerism and positive health outcomes in later life, has contributed to a burgeoning of interest in initiatives and programs promoting civic engagement among older adults. Although useful in potentially expanding role options in later life, this growing attention also underscores the importance of stepping back to critically examine frequently overlooked questions concerning the framing and potential consequences of the new emphasis on civic engagement. Following a brief review of semantics and definitional issues in this area, we use a critical gerontology framework, emphasizing both political economy analysis and perspectives from the humanities, to explore underlying questions such as these: What roles are older adults being encouraged to play in civic life? What meanings are implied by these roles? What political and economic forces underlie these roles? What types of civic engagement are left out of the conversation? Our goal is to encourage a broadening of the dialogue to include potentially problematic normative

and political economic dimensions of civic engagement, particularly volunteerism, as they pertain to older adults.

*Key Words:* Civic engagement, Volunteerism, Health outcomes

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The emergent discourse on civic engagement and older adults among gerontologists, policy makers, and other stakeholders signifies another marker in the transformation of how aging is conceptualized and perceived. As the oldest members of the country's 78-million-strong baby boom generation approach retirement, the public and private sectors, and the larger society, are pondering the social, political, and economic impacts that the graying of the boomers may portend. In contrast to the "apocalyptic demography" scenario (Robertson, 1990) often favored by the mass media, proponents of a civic engagement perspective offer a far more positive assessment. These analysts argue that, with increased life expectancies and more education than their parents, "boomers will enter later life with many healthy, productive years ahead" and "have the potential to become a social resource of unprecedented proportions by contributing to the civic life of their communities" (Harvard School of Public Health/MetLife Foundation, 2004, p. 8).

In 2004, the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and the American Society on Aging (ASA) each independently launched initiatives to examine and promote civic engagement among older adults. The GSA's Initiative on Civic Engagement in an Older America is a 5-year project supporting "the study of civic engagement by experts in the field of aging." This initiative encourages "research on programs and public

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policies likely to increase civic participation among older adults” (GSA, 2004). Echoing similar themes but focused more on practice dimensions, the ASA’s Civic Engagement Project is a 3-year initiative to recognize the aging population as “a vast, untapped social resource” and “to support and encourage civic engagement by elders” (ASA, 2005).

The burgeoning interest in civic engagement and older adults underscores the importance of critically exploring fundamental questions regarding why and how civic engagement is being promoted, and what this signifies about perceptions of aging. We begin this article with a brief review of the semantics of civic engagement and provide some historical background on older adult volunteerism. We then demonstrate the utility of a critical gerontology framework, which brings together political economy and humanities perspectives to explore several unaddressed questions regarding civic engagement and older adults. As gerontologists and engaged scholars who are deeply involved in the conduct and study of an intervention supporting civic engagement in older Californians, we approach this task as loving critics. Our goal is to broaden the dialogue to include the problematic normative and political economic dimensions of the civic engagement discourse and, more specifically, the promotion of volunteerism for older adults. Only by asking difficult questions can we expand and improve the options for those who take a civic engagement path in later life, while supporting those who do not.

### *Defining Civic Engagement*

The term *civic engagement* has been used in reference to a wide variety of activities, including voting, being involved in political campaigns, participating in paid and unpaid community work, staying up to date on news and public affairs, and helping one’s neighbor. Capturing some of this breadth, political scientists Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004, p. v) define civic engagement as “both political participation and civic volunteerism.” In the influential report promoting civic engagement among older adults, *Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement*, the Harvard School of Public Health/MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement defines civic engagement as the process in which individuals are “actively participating in the life of their communities” through voting, joining community groups, and volunteering (2004, p.3). However, in operationalizing civic engagement with regard to older adults, the authors focus solely on the activity of volunteering rather than offer a more extensive and multifaceted treatment of the concept. Like many scholars in this emerging field, these authors use the terms *volunteerism* and *civic engagement* interchangeably. When civic engagement is reduced to the act of formal volunteering, other activities associated with civic life, including voting, engaging in community activism, staying informed about current events, caregiving, and having informal connections, are notably ignored. Because this article focuses primarily on civic engagement as the term is being used in the

contemporary discourse on older adults (that is, in terms of formal volunteering), we are unable to do justice to the broader concept here. The semantic issue becomes important, however, as we explore the roles older adults are now being encouraged to play in civic life as community volunteers, the political and economic forces that underlie these roles, and the types of civic engagement that often are left out of the conversation.

### *Historical Context*

Although the promotion of civic engagement in older adults has achieved considerable attention in the first years of the 21st century, efforts to institutionalize such engagement through volunteer programs may be traced to the early 1960s. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy proposed the development of a National Service Corps to provide service opportunities for youth and older persons. At the time, just 1 in 10 individuals was engaged in volunteer service (Freedman, 1999). The National Service Corps was to have served as a “domestic Peace Corps,” involving full-time service for at least 1 year and providing living expenses for participants, and aimed at addressing poverty. As Freedman explains, it was the latter provision that ultimately led to the program’s defeat in Congress, where segregationists characterized it as “a back door to racial integration in the South” (p. 84).

Growing pressure to address poverty in the elderly population, however, and the realization that involvement of low-income elders in stipendiary service could help overcome conservative opposition to “another government handout” led to the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity’s Foster Grandparents Program in 1965. Originally designed to provide minimum wage to low-income seniors working 20 hr a week with children in settings such as orphanages and hospitals, the program today involves seniors of all income levels who provide mentoring, tutoring, and emotional support to at-risk youth (see <http://www.seniorcorps.org/about/sc/index.asp>).

Two other federal programs fostering volunteerism in older adults also trace their lineage to the 1960s: the Senior Companionship Program, which gives financial support to low-income adults aged 60 years and older who provide in-person services to other seniors in need; and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, which connects volunteers aged 55 years and older with a range of service opportunities in their communities. In addition to these three national Senior Corps programs, through which approximately half a million seniors volunteer (see <http://www.seniorcorps.org/about/sc/index.asp>), a number of other entities have played an important role in promoting volunteering among older adults. Organizations such as the Executive Service Corps (<http://www.escus.org>), the Experience Corps (<http://www.experiencecorps.org>), and the National Retiree Volunteer Coalition (<http://www.nrv.org>) have helped connect substantial numbers of seniors to volunteer opportunities in their communities.

Seldom mentioned in the literature on civic engagement and older adults, however, is another type of

organization through which many older Americans work to foster social change and promote social justice. Organizations such as the Gray Panthers (<http://www.graypanthers.org>), founded in 1972 to fight all forms of age discrimination and other social injustices, and the Older Women's League (<http://www.owl-national.org>) work to change the systems that foster inequities in society. The Older Women's League's motto, "Don't agonize—Organize!," indeed resonates with many midlife and older Americans for whom civic engagement means first and foremost building grassroots efforts, coalitions, and broad social movements to create a more just nation and world. As we suggest in the pages that follow, in ignoring or discounting the history and contemporary manifestations of such activities, proponents of civic engagement in older adults tend to wittingly or unwittingly feed into a historically conservative vision of volunteerism as an alternative to welfare-state programs.

### *Civic Engagement and Baby Boomers: A Critical Gerontology Perspective*

Older adults are being encouraged to become civically engaged by volunteering in their communities in part because of the believed benefits of such service to their health and well-being. Three decades of research on health and formal volunteer activity have indeed suggested, as Musick and Wilson (2003, p. 260) point out, "a positive, if modest, relationship between the two" (see Chappell, 1999, and Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003, for helpful reviews of this literature). As these and other analysts note (cf. Musick & Wilson; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), however, with a few exceptions, problematic research designs and the lack of information about diverse populations make it difficult to ascertain how volunteering is experienced by different individuals and communities. Further research clearly is needed to examine interactions between race, gender, class, and volunteering; how volunteering is defined and counted; the differential distribution of benefits; and the causal pathways between volunteering and health. At the same time, as we already noted, far more attention also must be paid to broader questions concerning the political economy context within which the new emphasis on volunteerism and civic engagement is taking place, the potential impact of this burgeoning movement on the perceived meanings of aging and later life, and the ways in which the civic engagement movement, like the productive aging movement (Holstein, 1999), may unwittingly devalue those older adults for whom such engagement is either not possible or not chosen. It is to these broader and frequently ignored questions that we now turn.

To broaden the dialogue about these larger questions, we employ a critical gerontology framework, described by Baars (1991) as "a collection of questions, problems, and analyses that have been excluded from the established mainstream" (p. 220). As Chris Phillipson and Alan Walker (1987) suggest, what is proposed in critical gerontology is "a more value committed approach to social gerontology—a commit-

ment not just to understand the social construction of ageing but to change it" (p. 12). Critical gerontology has been characterized as evolving along two paths that sometimes intersect but tend to remain distinct (Minkler, 1996). The political economy path views aging in broad structural terms and considers how political and economic contexts and factors such as race, class, and gender interact to help shape and determine the experience of aging and growing old (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Quadagno & Reid, 1999). The humanities path, in contrast, is more concerned with putting "a human face—and a human body and spirit—on ageing and growing old" (Minkler, p. 470). It focuses on the meaning of aging as understood from the inside out (Cole, 1992; Holstein, 1999; Moody 1988). Both paths offer useful insights into the rationale for, and potential pitfalls of, the new emphasis on civic engagement and volunteerism in later life.

Traveling critical gerontology's political economy path, we begin by situating the new push for civic engagement and volunteerism among older Americans within its broader sociopolitical context: the politics of retrenchment that have been a central feature of American political and economic life over the past three decades. From this perspective, it is no accident that the view of older Americans as "a growing yet largely untapped civic resource for responding to community needs through both paid and unpaid work" (GSA, 2004) has emerged with the decline of the welfare state. The federal government's diminished funding for many social services and public programs places greater responsibilities on already deficit-ridden states and municipalities, which in turn often call on individuals, families, and volunteerism to help take up the slack. The renewed call for older adult volunteers has emerged in part from this devolution, and it suggests a new twist on productive aging models that have become increasingly popular in gerontology. As Holstein (1999) suggests, "In a society witnessing a shift in both political and moral economics, the productive aging scenario can become the unintended handmaiden for a political agenda that delegitimizes old age benefits" (p. 366). This too can be said for the civic engagement scenario as older adults are called on to be *useful* and to counter budgetary shortfalls through volunteering while their own safety nets are disintegrating.

The economic and political imperative behind the new emphasis on civic engagement and older volunteerism is acknowledged in a number of key writings in this field in the United States (Freedman, 2002; Jirovec & Hyduk, 1998), Canada (Chappell, 1999), and the United Kingdom (Anheier & Salamon, 2001; Biggs, 2001) that note the desperate economic need to fill gaps in services and systems now vacated or severely underfunded by government. For example, Chappell's assessment of the impact of changing fiscal policies on volunteerism rings as true in the United States as it does in her native Canada:

The devolution of service programs, previously provided by government to the voluntary sector, has enormously increased pressure and opportunities

for the voluntary sector. The partial withdrawal of government responsibility has meant that administrative and financial responsibility for the social safety net for vulnerable persons and groups now falls to the community. (p. 8)

In the United States, Jirovec and Hyduk (1998) similarly assert that we are “in an era of diminishing governmental responsibility for the human services,” raising concerns among social welfare professionals who are “likely to have more involvement with non-profit, voluntary agencies, and more duties related to the development and evaluation of volunteer programs and services” (p. 29). Morrow-Howell (2000) suggests that older adults may have to take the responsibility for filling these service needs, stating, “Growing social problems and reduced public expenditures will demand increased volunteerism. . . . Thus, our society may require the productive engagement of older adults” (p. 1).

Civic Ventures founder and president Marc Freedman (2002), one of the most visible champions of civic engagement for older adults in the United States, offers a more positive perspective on the “daunting human-resource shortages that exist all across the nonprofit and public-service sector.” He suggests that older volunteers “might well produce a windfall for American communities in the 21st century . . . [and] along the way bring opportunities for greater fulfillment and purpose in later years” (p. 86).

There is indeed recognition among scholars in the field of civic engagement and volunteerism that the economic imperative serves as a powerful motivator for the current promotion of volunteering in later life. However, for many proponents of initiatives promoting civic engagement and older volunteerism, this recognition is not followed by a deeper look at what the economic imperative suggests. Do the politics of retrenchment and devolution, and the resulting cutbacks in health and human services, mean that older people now have a responsibility to be *productive* and to *give back* to the community through civic engagement and volunteering? Who is being served by recruiting older adults in large numbers to fill these service needs? If federal and state governments are taking away resources that support the community good, is the answer to have older people—many of whom have already been negatively and disproportionately affected by these cutbacks—step in to fill those unmet needs, thereby releasing government of long-term responsibility? Does such a substitution of resources even accomplish what it is being set up to do?

Among the few American scholars who have critically examined such questions, political scientists Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2004) argue that “Volunteering in a soup kitchen will help hungry individuals in a town but will do nothing to address broader problems of homelessness and poverty” (pp. 237–238). These analysts assert that a narrow focus on volunteering, viewed by many as a helping activity and not a political activity, serves to devalue and detract from the necessity of other types of civic engagement, such as

political involvement to promote increased governmental responsibility and action to address basic human needs. As social historian Theodore Roszak (2001) further points out,

[V]olunteerism is not politically neutral; it has always been closely linked to conservative values as the glowing alternative to mandatory government programs. Voluntary service is the rich man’s substitute for the welfare state and is often falsely opposed to government, as if the two must be at odds. (p. 125)

From this perspective, presenting older volunteers as a primary resource for addressing fundamental social and economic problems is misleading and dangerous, letting government off the hook in the provision of basic goods and services for the community and, in particular, for its most vulnerable members.

In his critical look at the emergence of social policies and public discourse promoting volunteerism and productive or positive aging in Britain, Biggs (2001) offers a similar analysis. Utilizing a critical narrativity framework, he asks, “How does social policy, and the stories it tells, influence the spaces in which we might grow old?” (p. 303). Bringing to bear both political economy and humanities perspectives, he examines why and how “the British Government has embarked upon a large, if not to say baffling, array of initiatives to promote positive aging” (p. 307). Similar to the productive aging discourse in the United States, the positive aging perspective in Britain evolved in part as images of aging as frailty and dependence on the welfare state gave way in the 1990s to new perceptions of the elderly as a potent “grey market” with “the capacity to participate much more effectively in a variety of social arenas than we previously thought possible” (p. 307). In Britain, as in other parts of Western Europe and the United States, the “aging population is being redefined as a social, political and economic opportunity” (p. 310), with older citizens valued for their ability to contribute to the market economy through paid or unpaid workforce participation. The emerging social policies promoting paid work and volunteer opportunities for older adults both create and reflect a new public discourse on what it means to be old. In Biggs’ words,

We are told a story of autonomous older people, actively involved in their communities, achieving joy through the return of work and voluntary activities. It also appears that later life is being defined as a relatively homogeneous part of the life course, beginning at approximately age 50. Work-like activities are presented as a sort of social therapy that capitalizes on postmodern aging and simultaneously draws older people back into the social mainstream. Another marginalized group is saved! (p. 311)

The danger of this story is that it ignores the diversity of the aging population, the ways in which society’s structural and social forces advance opportunities for some and limit them for others, and the

economic and political incentives for utilizing older volunteers. Further, it ignores the effects of this social construction of aging, as defined by one's productivity, on the lives of those who are growing old. By putting forth a view of volunteerism and lifelong labor as normative ideals to which older people should aspire, society tacitly devalues the worth of those older people who cannot or choose not to engage in such activity. It is in the latter regard that the humanities path in critical gerontology offers useful insights, attending as it does to questions of how we value aging and raising questions of the meaning of later life from the perspective of those who live it.

Such questions were cast in stark relief by "Mary," an older woman who called in to a radio talk show featuring civic engagement proponent and scholar Marc Freedman (2002). As he tells the story, Mary disagreed with his perspective on the healthiness and desirability of being productive in late life. In Freedman's words, "She was someone who had worked hard since age 16, for more than 40 years functioning as a paragon of productivity, only opting to put on the brakes when her boss persisted in heaping greater and greater responsibility on her. Finally, she said, 'That's it,' and retired" (p. 87). Freedman explained that Mary was exhausted and "was offended by what sounded like my exhortation to take on more duties, make contributions, do more work" (p. 87). He acknowledged the validity of this woman's concern, and explained that his intention is to "expand opportunities and options, not obligations . . . [to] widen the range of compelling pathways available to individuals in later life" (p. 87).

Freedman's response to Mary is commendable in suggesting that volunteerism and civic engagement should be viewed as opening new opportunities, not an admonition to follow a particular path. However, the questions of how this promotion of productivity may be read as expectations and how this may then affect the lives of older adults like Mary remain unaddressed. Furthermore, the issue is oversimplified, and therefore missed, when it is reduced to being a matter of choice. Freedman suggests, "Not everyone will want to pursue public service in later life. Some will prefer to hit the [golf] links, while others will choose to do nothing at all. It is their privilege" (p. 87). This assertion that "it is their privilege" not to volunteer misses the fact that some older people do not have a choice due in part to their *lack* of privilege in a market economy that discriminates against people by class, race, gender, age, and health status (Estes et al., 2003; Quadagno & Reid, 1999). For many, having to serve as a full-time caregiver for a partner or parent with Alzheimer's disease, unexpectedly being called upon to raise one's grandchildren, or having to work in a minimum-wage job simply to make ends meet may sharply constrain choice in relation to valued volunteer activities.

In their recent study, *The Ties that Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California*, Ramakrishnan and Baldassare (2004) explore the differential involvement of diverse communities in civic

volunteerism and political activities. In examining the issue of choice, they give this explanation:

[A]lthough civic engagement may involve acts of individual choice, these choices are often structured by various social, economic, and institutional factors. Thus, for instance, poverty and lack of education mean fewer skills that are relevant to political participation and fewer opportunities to be mobilized into participation in political activities and volunteerism. (p. 1)

A critical gerontology framework enables us to raise important questions about how the burgeoning movement for late-life volunteerism sits within a political and historical context, and to consider the ways in which social and structural factors influence one's choice or ability to volunteer or be productive in a socially valued manner. Within a humanities context, we also must ask how the emphasis on volunteering as a desirable, or even required, activity to achieve a more meaningful later life may affect the self-images of older people and society's images of what aging should look like. In his critique of Britain's policy narrative that emphasizes civic engagement and active aging as the means by which an older life has social value, Biggs (2001) points out that other meaningful and very personal experiences of late life are thereby devalued and even contradicted:

Interpretations of the life tasks of maturity that emphasize other potentialities surrounding aging—spirituality (Howse, 1999), gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 1996), "the well-earned rest" and contemplation through "coming to terms with oneself"—may not be compatible with an active/positive narrative of productive aging. (p. 313)

Similarly, Holstein (1999) points to research in cultural psychology, anthropology, and philosophy that suggests "cultural messages which elevate an ideal of productive aging can easily subvert—or, at a minimum, complicate—an older person's ability to find coherence and purpose in the face of frailty and disability" (p. 367). In addition to preventing individuals from embracing all the possibilities of the aging process, notions like productive aging and civic engagement in later life may limit what gerontologists and society can learn about aging and may contribute to a less respectful view of older persons. In Holstein's words,

By assuming the desirability of productivity and reducing the vision of an aging society to it, advocates bypass a critical task—to understand aging in all its manifestations and to respect elders not only when they are contributing in any way elucidated to date, but also when they become more dependent. (p. 367)

The growing movement to institutionalize volunteering and civic engagement among older Americans must be approached with thoughtfulness and a critical eye for whether such efforts are as healthy and empowering as current promotions suggest. The authors of *Reinventing Aging* engage in some reflection on the dangers of the active aging paradigm, stating that, in an attempt to counter previous decline and loss

images of late life, “society may have too willingly embraced the contrasting image of the ‘active senior’—indefatigable, healthy, usually wealthy, and eternally young” (Harvard School of Public Health/MetLife Foundation, 2004, p. 5). However, the authors do not retreat from their presumption of productive aging as being desirable, good, and empowering. As they assert,

Productive aging will require careful planning by individual boomers. An organized effort could help boomers envision, and plan for, a life that achieves meaning in their later years by connecting in new ways to the larger community around them. (p. 5)

The implication here is that, without a plan for productivity, one cannot have “a life that achieves meaning in their later years.” Again, this paradigm ignores other ways of achieving meaning, fulfillment, and peace as one ages.

Without underplaying the value of civic engagement and volunteerism for those who choose such a path in later life, and the value of efforts such as the GSA’s recent initiative to expand options for such engagement, we caution that an overemphasis on civic engagement and volunteerism in later life, like the earlier emphasis on productive aging, can contribute to the stigmatization and disempowerment of those elders who fail to meet our criteria for “a good old age” (Cruikshank, 2003; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Katz, 2000). Such stigmatization and disempowerment may negatively impact the well-being of individuals and communities, as it implicitly suggests that older people may be of lesser value if they are not able to contribute, whether in paid or unpaid capacities, in the market economy.

### Summary and Conclusion

From our stance as loving critics, we have used a critical gerontology framework to highlight some of the less frequently asked questions regarding the meaning and significance of the new emphasis on civic engagement and older adults. Although we did not intend this discussion as a detailed treatment of these issues, we offered it as an attempt to broaden the dialogue on civic engagement and older adults and to move it into some largely uncharted terrain.

Although this conversation remains in its infancy, several initial recommendations may be offered. First, although volunteerism and other forms of civic engagement should not be required of older adults, those who are interested in participating should be encouraged and enabled to do so. For low-income individuals who wish to volunteer but for whom there may be economic impediments, the provision of government stipends to make such participation possible should be expanded. At minimum, reimbursement for transportation and other volunteer-related expenses should be provided to those for whom desired participation might otherwise be a hardship.

Second, and at the same time, we should be critically aware of how programs stressing civic engagement and volunteerism in older adults may impact and reflect the social significance of later life. In the words of

ter Meulen and colleagues (1994), “The societal role assigned to the elderly and the public programs developed on their behalf, will not only influence the self-perception of the aged, but will also project a picture of the value placed on them by society” (p. S10). To help foster such critical awareness, the forums in which the virtues of civic engagement and older adults increasingly are being discussed should be expanded to include frank discussions of the potential pitfalls and limitations of this approach, and how these may be addressed.

Third, we must consciously expand conventional notions of civic engagement to include the work of organizations such as the Gray Panthers and other grassroots movements led by older adults that focus on broad social change objectives. As Gray Panthers founder Maggie Kuhn (1991) asserted, “The old, having the benefit of life experience, the time to get things done, and the least to lose by sticking their necks out, [are] in a perfect position to serve as advocates for the larger public good” (p. 38). All too often, such efforts are left out of the discourse on civic engagement, whose political roots have favored individually focused social betterment over broader institutional and policy-level change initiatives.

Finally, the creation of an environment honoring and enabling diverse civic engagement opportunities must be broadened still further to respect those elders who do not volunteer, for whatever reasons, in order that we may embrace aging in all its forms, lives, abilities, and meanings. For in last analysis, a real commitment to a good and satisfying later life would mean “recognizing and reinforcing the essential meaning of old age,” which transcends things such as whether or not people volunteer and involves more fundamentally the right to flourish and grow and “live a good old age” in whatever ways are possible and desired (Minkler, 2000, p. 454). Part of creating an honoring environment means involving older people, in all their diversity, in determining how our social institutions and ways of living can reflect a broader appreciation for all older adults, regardless of whether or not they are civically engaged.

As gerontologists, we must continue to advocate for and develop programs and policies that promote an environment respectful of older people for who they are, not simply for what they can contribute. Such an environment would enable older people to live with dignity and to create their own meanings for later life. For some, that will include volunteer work and other forms of civic engagement. For others, it will not.

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