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Intergenerational and community responsibility: Race uplift work in the retirement activities of professional African American women

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Abstract

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data with an overall sample of 50 retired African American professional women, this article examines their unpaid community work on behalf of disadvantaged Blacks. Using both feminist and life course perspectives, the article demonstrates how location and historical forces shaped their activities and their retirement scripts. Like educated women in previous generations, these Black retirees felt an obligation to do race uplift work and to give back to their communities, especially to Black youth. The resulting tension between retirement as a time of "freedom" and their sense of obligation to work on behalf of the needy contradicts middle-class male, white notions of retirement and highlights the need to recognize that there is not just one but multiple modes of retirement.

Keywords: Old; Black women; Race uplift; Volunteering; Retirement

1. Introduction

The institutionalization of retirement as an expected part of the life course in the U.S. is generally linked to the 1935 introduction of Social Security legislation establishing a right to financial protection

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in old age. Yet, notions of retirement as a time devoid of work amount to a myth for many in our society (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). For instance, many who are economically disadvantaged, such as working-class black men never withdraw from paid labor (Gibson, 1986); many who do retire are forced to re-enter the labor force in order to earn additional money or at least to maintain some elements of their previous lifestyle (Calasanti & Bonanno, 1992). Furthermore, because women have primary responsibility for household labor and for caring for others, they generally continue to work upon retirement—albeit not for pay.

However, most retirement research generally assumes a white, male, middle-class and heterosexual referent, which suggests a homogeneous retirement experience largely shaped by leisure and freedom from work (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Traditional retirement literature does not adequately acknowledge the "ambiguous meaning of retirement for a significant subset of older workers, particularly women and minorities" (Flippen & Tienda, 2000; S26). Hence, many critical gerontologists argue that we must begin to attend to the complexities of how the old live their lives and create meaning through various unpaid activities. We must recognize that there is not just one but multiple modes of retirement; we must acknowledge and explore different kinds and patterns of unpaid activities among the old and we must understand how the intersections of power relations including race, class, gender, sexual orientation and age shape these experiences and meanings (Stoller & Gibson, 2000; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001).

Research increasingly recognizes the many ways that productive work is not limited to work that is paid (Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000). Civic contributions by retirees, for instance, highlight that those who volunteer spend considerably more time in both formal and informal volunteering than volunteers who are still employed (Moen et al., 2000). Yet, quantitative studies on volunteer activities in general, and among the old in particular, are often constrained by issues of sampling and by the limits of how volunteering is defined and measured. As a result, much research on volunteerism captures only certain types of volunteer activity—particularly the types that Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton (1985) refer to as individualistic "habits of the heart." Contemporary focus on the individualistic roots and predominantly middle-class base of volunteerism often serves to obscure our understanding of how gender, race and ethnicity intersect with other locations to produce complicated patterns of unpaid community work that are often more collectivistic in nature (Eckstein, 2001). Indeed, as Musick et al. (2000) remind us, our understanding of how race specifically shapes volunteer work requires much more research.

2. This study

Drawing upon intensive interviews with a group of relatively privileged, old[1], African American[2] women who are retired after lifetimes of professional work, the central focus of this article is on their

[1] I use the term "old" here in an activist manner—to naturalize and neutralize it (See Calasanti & Slevin, 2001 for further discussion of ageism and language usage). "Young" and "middle aged" carry both positive and negative connotations; by using "old" (which carries a unique stigma), I attempt to both de-stigmatize the term as well as "... to underscore the valuable similarities and differences between the old and other age groups, as well as among the old, and to bring the positive connotations back into the word" (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, 10).

[2] Throughout this article I use the terms African American, black and black American interchangeably—as did the women who are the focus of the study.