Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory by Caitrin Lynch.

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Chris Wellin
Illinois State University

The recession of 2008 sharpened awareness of a long-developing trend: that the conventional "occupational life course" of the post-WWII period, characterized by stable employment followed by a scheduled, abrupt transition to retirement, is no longer relevant for a substantial segment of the older population. Whether by choice or necessity, a great many older people continue to work, at least part time, past traditional retirement age. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that, as of 2010, 30 percent of men and over 20 percent of women aged 65–74 continue to be employed. Our understanding of the experiences of such older workers within social research, however, is fragmentary at best. Media images of elders working as "greeters" at Wal-Mart, or as fast-food restaurant employees, convey a diminished version of work, one that reinforces negative stereotypes

of late life as a period bereft of growth, community, and, perhaps, dignity in employment.

Against this backdrop, Caitrin Lynch's superb ethnography, *Retirement on the Line* is especially welcome and provocative. A lofty ideal of ethnography is that a detailed, insightful study can illuminate not only the case at hand but also broader sociocultural and policy issues. In this book, Lynch, an associate professor of anthropology at Olin College, achieves this goal.

The research setting is the Vita Needle factory, in Needham, Massachusetts. A small, family-owned manufacturer of needles for a wide range of uses and clients in the United States and abroad, Vita long ago made a commitment to "eldersourcing." The firm has followed a conscious strategy of recruiting older workers. Lynch concedes that "a number of factors contribute to the success of this . . . model (at Vita Needle), including the nature of the product, the location of the business in a suburb in a high technology region of the country . . . the personalities of the employers, the goals of and dynamics among the employees, and the relatively high percentage of older adults living in the area" (p. 11). In part I of the book, the author provides a detailed and nuanced portrait of the labor process, culture, and experience of employment, drawing both on extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews. Though somewhat distinctive in a nation in which manufacturing jobs represent only about 15 percent of total employment, the case of Vita Needle has important implications for how we think about older workers. This is reflected in the stream of media attention the company has received since the late 1990s—including dozens of newspapers articles, a segment on *60 Minutes*, and a Dutch documentary film, *Age No Problem* (2003). In part II of the book, the author discusses how the case of Vita has resonated widely as a potential solution to the global problem of social and economic marginality among older adults.

So, what portrait does Lynch render? How did she gain the rich ethnographic knowledge of Vita and its workers? Over a five-year period (2006–11), she conducted fieldwork as a participant-observer—making, inspecting, and packing needles—and completed some eighty interviews, both with individual workers and focus groups. To these data, she added content analysis of media accounts of the firm, as noted above.

The hallmark of the best ethnographic research on workplaces is the thick description and integration of daily practice with accounts of the community's local culture and relationships. In the case of Vita, we find that employees appreciate many dimensions of the job and production process: the tangible sense of achievement in manufacturing; the flexible scheduling and cross-training that allow them to build skills and an holistic understanding of the process rather than be confined to a single station or monotonous routine; the acceptance and respect accorded to older workers, who fear a sense of isolation, among retirees, outside of the factory building; and a sense of small-scale capitalist prosperity in a global economy dominated by looming, impersonal firms. Though the employees have varied educational and social-class backgrounds, there appears to be little status consciousness or competition among them. Although the hourly wages are modest, workers receive a Christmas bonus (a form of profit sharing) that is substantial; meanwhile, from the employers' standpoint, labor costs are reduced by the fact that workers' healthcare costs are borne by Medicare.

An overarching theme throughout is the sense of community and interdependence that workers cultivate, abetted by the particular rhythms and division of labor at Vita: as Lynch writes, "there are myriad ways in which the social and economic value of their labor is visible daily in practices, discussions, and conflicts. It is through labor that these workers feel affirmed and valued, connected and needed" (pp. 35–36). In celebrating the value of friendship, immersion (or "flow") in one's chosen labors, and interdependence, Lynch confirms a tenet that I've always held in teaching about aging and later life: any significant finding about the quality of life for older people will apply equally to those across the age spectrum. For this reason, *Retirement on the Line* will be as valuable in courses on management and human resources as in those focusing on aging and retirement.

REFERENCE CITED

Shepens, Wim
2003 Age No Problem. 58 min. VPRO. The Netherlands.