

Book review for the *American Anthropologist*  
***Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory***

By Caitrin Lynch

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The deep recession of 2008 sharpened awareness of a long-developing trend involving older adults: 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 at fast-food restaurants, convey a diminished version of work, one which reinforces negative stereotypes of late life as a period bereft of growth, community or, 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 socio-cultural 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 U.S. and abroad, Vita long ago made a commitment to *eldersourcing*. The firm has followed a conscious strategy of recruiting older workers. Contextualizing the case, 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” (2012:11). 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*. Thus, in Part II of the book, the author is able to interpret and discuss how the case of Vita has resonated widely, among nations that are aging even more rapidly than is the U.S., as a potential solution to the problem of social and economic marginality among older adults.

So, what portrait does Lynch render? And 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 80 interviews, both with individual workers and focus groups. To this data she added content analysis of media accounts of the firm, as noted above, which, taken together, serve as an exemplar of rich, multi-perspectival, case-study research. 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 also a sense of small-scale capitalist prosperity in a global economy which seems to them dominated by looming, impersonal firms. This image of entrepreneurial capitalism is one which these workers, coming of age during and after WWII, associate with the nation's prosperity during the longest economic expansion in U.S. history. Though the employees have varied educational and social class backgrounds, there appears to be little status consciousness or competition among them. And though the hourly wages are modest, workers receive a Christmas Bonus (a form of profit-sharing) that's substantial and, from the employers' standpoint, labor costs are reduced by the fact that workers' healthcare costs are borne by Medicare.

An over-arching theme that is illustrated throughout is the sense of community and interdependence that workers cultivate, abetted by the particular rhythms and division of labor at Vita: "...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..." (2012: 35-36). In celebrating the value of friendship, immersion (or *flow*) in one's chosen labors, and interdependence, Caitrin 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.

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