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Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory

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Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory

Abstract

[Excerpt] The motivations for and experiences of working in retirement are varied and contradictory. This book explores what work means for people in the United States who are of conventional retirement age. To examine issues of aging, work, meaning, and purpose, I focus on Vita Needle Company, a family-owned factory that produces stainless steel needles in the Boston suburb of Needham. As of this writing, in May 2011, the median age of the roughly forty production floor employees is 74 and the eldest is Rosa Finnegan, a 99-year-old former waitress who joined the factory when she was 85.

As a cultural anthropologist, I immersed myself in life at Vita Needle for nearly five years (more intensively in some years than in others) in order to learn what, on top of a paycheck, Vita Needle provides its employees. The story I tell is based on interviews but also on my own work on the shop floor. The distinctive research method of cultural anthropology is "participant observation": we immerse ourselves in the societies we study in order to understand experiences and meaning-making from an insider's perspective. Sometimes we study our own societies, sometimes societies quite foreign to us, but even when we study our own, we remain outsiders and can never fully access an insider viewpoint. Though as anthropologists we can get quite close, and we use research methods and narrative techniques to bring out the insider perspectives, our stories always reflect our own priorities and perspectives that come from our personal biographies and professional positions. I was drawn into Vita Needle and became part of the story itself, and so these pages include my personal reflections on the complexity of a research design that required my own immersion in order to explore lives and dreams and situate them within the context of a broader analysis. It is my hope that readers will discover as much about their own views on aging and retirement as they do about people at Vita Needle.

Keywords

retirement, work, Vita Needle Company, aging, employment

Comments

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RETIREMENT ON THE LINE



Shop floor in the late afternoon. Photo by Caitrin Lynch.

RETIREMENT ON THE LINE

Age, Work, and Value in an
American Factory

Caitrin Lynch



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To my family (Nick, Cormac, Nicola) and to the Vita family

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Cast of Characters

Listed here (in alphabetical order by first name) are names, ages (in 2008, unless otherwise noted), and personal details for most people who appear more than once in the book. Except for those indicated with an asterisk, the names are pseudonyms, and identifying details are slightly altered.

Abigail White, 83: Bookkeeper at Vita; mother and grandmother.

Allen Lewis, 84: Worked for seventy years as a machinist; longtime Vita employee; left Vita at 84 for health reasons; widower.

Arthur Johnson, 72: Retired at 65 from job as a corporate accountant and started at Vita two months later; lives with wife and adult son.

Ben Freeman, 29: Compares older coworkers to his grandparents; jokes around with David Rivers about his “stupid old guy” music.

Brad Hill, 36: Supervisor; immediate boss is Michael La Rosa.

Carl Wilson, 79: Retired tool designer; lives with wife; grandfather of six; first employee to arrive at Vita each morning.

Charles Young, 72: Retired high-tech sales manager with a master’s degree in business; never married; father was a factory worker; refers to Vita as a “men’s club” and a “refuge for old people.”

Dan Jones, 44: Supervisor; immediate boss is Michael La Rosa.

David Rivers, 90: World War II navy veteran, served in the Pacific; joined Vita Needle in his sixties.

Donald Stephens, 75: Uses cane outside work; lost sense of purpose when wife passed away; lives in public housing; looking for a second job to cover basic expenses.

Ed Mitchell, 81: Retired middle-school English teacher; at Vita since age 74 to earn money needed because of “poor real-estate investments.”

Esther Martin, 85: Considers work “therapy” after husband passed away; works in packaging.

Flo Cronin, 82: Held part-time jobs as a secretary after children graduated from high school; considered the “den mother” for her efforts to do nice things for workers in need; known as a good “taper.”

***Fred Hartman, 56:** Vita Needle fourth-generation president.

***Frederick Hartman II, 26:** Son of Fred Hartman (fifth generation); director of marketing and engineering.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- Gertrude Baker, 90: Former employee often referred to in stories for sleeping on the job.
- Grace King, 94: At Vita since age 77 in order to “be busy”; urges coworkers to get to work when break ends.
- Grant Harvey, 68: Former automobile assembly-line worker; reflects on meaning of work; questions social ideal of idle retirement.
- Jeffrey Barfield, 74: Retired engineer; always tries to be more efficient and improve system when working.
- Jerry Reilly, 73: Retired unionized factory worker; considers Vita owner to be doing a “good service” by employing older adults.
- Jim Downey, 74: Retired architect; at Vita for nine years after thirty-year architecture career; is a father and grandfather; married forty-five years; considers Vita work like “vacation.”
- Larry Clifford, 77: Fended off *60 Minutes* with story about being an ex-convict; jokes around with coworkers.
- *Mason Hartman: Passed away at 81 in 2007; third-generation owner of Vita before his son, Fred, took over.
- *Michael (Mike) La Rosa, 50: Production manager.
- Pete Russell, 80: Likes to be productive and “make money for Fred”; revels in the freedom of work at this stage in life and clocks out if he does not feel like working.
- Ron Crowley, 64: Retired schoolteacher; learned of Vita by watching the *60 Minutes* story; believes retirement is a time for redefinition; unsure of future plans.
- *Rosa Finnegan, 99 (in 2011): Retired waitress; widowed and lives in Needham; joined Vita at 85; the eldest worker and focus of much of the media coverage.
- Ruth Kinney, 82: Longtime employee (came to Vita in her sixties); does multiple jobs (such as sandblasting, flaring, packing); has dinner out with coworkers on Friday nights.
- Sam Stewart, 74: Jokes around about work dynamics, such as about what it takes to make money for Fred; dedicated to woodworking hobby; took college course from anthropologist Margaret Mead and is reflective on position of older adults in society.
- Sophia Lenti, 78: Had recent knee surgery; decorates and domesticates work space.
- Steve Zanes, 19: Contrasts comfortable coworker interaction with awkward interaction with grandparents in nursing home, where he was “in their territory.”

RETIREMENT ON THE LINE



Weighing batches of needles. Photo by Caitrin Lynch.

INTRODUCTION

Making Needles, Making Lives

Legs kicking and fully awake at 3:15 in the morning, 79-year-old Carl Wilson figures he might as well go to work. Five mornings a week, Carl, who suffers from sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome, leaves the house well before dawn without waking his wife and sets off for Vita Needle, where he arrives in less than ten minutes and parks his car on the street out front. The parking meters do not need to be fed at 3:30 a.m., and he will make sure to move his car to a nearby parking lot before 8:00 a.m. A retired tool designer whose father was a local policeman, Carl has lived in this town for most of his life. Carl used to spend his early mornings at the Dunkin' Donuts socializing with his friends, who were mostly municipal workers—postal workers, police, firefighters, teachers. Carl says the police all recognize his car and know what he is doing, so his lone vehicle in front of the factory will not raise suspicion on the otherwise empty street.¹

Carl finds his Vita Needle key on the same keychain where he keeps those for his car and house, lets himself in, punches in on the time clock, and gets to work shipping needles. Shortly after he arrives, 83-year-old bookkeeper Abigail White arrives to sort through paperwork from the previous afternoon (she would have left work by 1:00 p.m. at the latest). Abigail works in the office and Carl on the main shop floor. Carl tells me he likes the two hours of work he does before anyone else arrives to join him in the shop; he can get a lot done when there are no distractions. But he also likes it when he has company—people with whom he can “shoot the breeze.” Coworkers start to arrive around 5:00 a.m., and by 6:00 there are a handful of people—long before any supervisors or managers arrive.

The right-hand row of time cards is for those who have punched in, and soon there will be ten or so cards in the "in" column.

By 7:00 a.m. the shop is busy. Within a few hours it will be full of all the sounds of a typical day at a needle factory. The loud hum of air compressors will be punctuated by the banging sound of needles being staked or stamped, and interrupted at times by the ear-splitting noises of saws or sandblasters or the more deeply resonant bursts from grinders, drills, and wire brushes. Whenever someone shows up, he or she will clock in, sometimes leave a snack at the counter (sweets go over best), and then stop to visit those already in the shop for a short conversation and update since they last saw each other. How was your grandson's violin concert? That pea soup was delicious! Did you see Ortiz sock it out of the park? How is the arthritis? I will be leaving early today to have that mole looked at.

Throughout the day the noise of the compressors, saws, sandblasters, and staking continues, stopping only at 10:00 for the coffee break and at noon for lunch. The most persistent sound, which becomes an ambient noise that you start to not even notice, is the pounding sound of the cannulas (needle shafts) as they are "staked"—that is, attached to their hubs (bases). Pch-chew. Pch-chew. A solid bang, followed by the release of air from the staker. Over and over again. This repetitive and consistent rhythm is occasionally interrupted by the loud, grinding sound of a chop saw biting through tubes of stainless steel, producing a grating noise reminiscent of fingernails scraping on a chalkboard (but longer and much louder). The machine called the "popcorn popper" makes the continuous bursting noises that earned it the nickname. But underneath the constant noise, it is, in a funny sort of way, tranquil here.

Conversations occur, not all work-related, and there are occasional sounds of laughter. Often someone is humming, and if Ed Mitchell is around, he is most likely singing. Ed assumes he is doing it quietly to himself, but the noise of the machine he often works makes him project his voice to hear himself, and he does not know that others in the shop catch every word. He is on a machine in the corner that flares open the tips of short tubes, a machine famous among the workers for making the operator feel as if the machine is working the operator rather than vice versa (picture Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times*).

I remember in particular one sultry summer Friday afternoon when there were only five of us left on the shop floor. Ed was off in the corner, on his machine, singing lines from "Old Man River": "You an' me, we sweat an' strain; Body all achin' and wracked with pain; Tote that barge! Lift that bale!" Seventy-six-year-old Maurice Kempton and I were staking needles (affixing shafts to bases) and we had been discussing whether this was a song from *Porgy and Bess* or *Show Boat* (it's the latter). After some time Ed got up for a break, came over to me, and sang, "Tote that barge! Lift that bale!" When I asked him why he was

singing that song, he said, "Because this is like you are stacking the hay and loading the bales." This coming from an 81-year-old man who joined Vita Needle when he was 74, and the last time he had worked a factory job—the last time he had even used a time card—was back in high school, from which he had graduated in 1944.²

After a long career as a middle school English teacher, Ed is spending his conventional retirement years far from retired. When he is not at Vita Needle, you might find him at the cash register at the Walgreens pharmacy in the next town over. He also enjoys his time with his wife of forty-eight years (when she is not working, as a grocery store cashier) and with his children and grandchildren when they come to town. Ed is working in his eighties because of (as he candidly puts it) "poor real estate investments in the 1980s." He states plainly that he is here for the money, but he also notes that he likes the interactions with his coworkers. But there are some aspects he does not care for, such as those that make him feel that he is merely "stacking the hay and loading the bales." His master's degree in education certainly did not lead him to anticipate doing unskilled manual labor well after he ended his teaching career.

The motivations for and experiences of working in retirement are varied and contradictory. This book explores what work means for people in the United States who are of conventional retirement age. To examine issues of aging, work, meaning, and purpose, I focus on Vita Needle Company, a family-owned factory that produces stainless steel needles in the Boston suburb of Needham. As of this writing, in May 2011, the median age of the roughly forty production floor employees is 74 and the eldest is Rosa Finnegan, a 99-year-old former waitress who joined the factory when she was 85.³

As a cultural anthropologist, I immersed myself in life at Vita Needle for nearly five years (more intensively in some years than in others) in order to learn what, on top of a paycheck, Vita Needle provides its employees. The story I tell is based on interviews but also on my own work on the shop floor. The distinctive research method of cultural anthropology is "participant observation": we immerse ourselves in the societies we study in order to understand experiences and meaning-making from an insider's perspective. Sometimes we study our own societies, sometimes societies quite foreign to us, but even when we study our own, we remain outsiders and can never fully access an insider viewpoint. Though as anthropologists we can get quite close, and we use research methods and narrative techniques to bring out the insider perspectives, our stories always reflect our own priorities and perspectives that come from our personal biographies and professional positions.⁴ I was drawn into Vita Needle and became part of the story itself, and so these pages include my personal reflections on the complexity of a research design that required my own immersion in order to explore lives and

dreams and situate them within the context of a broader analysis. It is my hope that readers will discover as much about their own views on aging and retirement as they do about people at Vita Needle.⁵

Vita Needle Company

Vita Needle is a family-owned company; the fourth generation is currently represented in the position of president, and members of the fifth generation occupy positions in management, marketing and sales, and engineering. It has been operating since 1932, first in the third-floor home attic, then a few years later in a building in the center of Needham, and then by roughly 1939 in its current spot a few doors down from there. The shop floor is a former dance hall that still contains a doorway with a peephole for entry inspection during Prohibition, and above the doorway into the production area is a posted "Public Hall License" (expiration date July 1, 1929) authorizing its use as a public hall and signed by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Safety. Vita Needle's forty or so production floor employees are from varied work backgrounds—retired engineers, schoolteachers, realtors, waitresses, and lifelong factory workers. At Vita Needle, these diverse workers design, construct, inspect, pack, and ship hollow needles in an assortment of diameters, lengths, and sharpness levels; the needles serve in a multitude of applications that include dispensing glue, inflating basketballs, and performing brain surgery.

A sign to the side of Vita's front entryway advertises job openings for "light machine operators/assembly." Boasting that there is "no suggested retirement age" and that it has "never had a layoff," it notes the prevalence of "senior citizens" and the flexible work schedule. With only a few exceptions, all Vita employees are white and nonimmigrants, and most are from Needham itself. There are many more men than women, though in its earlier history the gender ratio was inverted—during the Second World War rows of young women sat side by side making hypodermic needles for the Red Cross. Today the very same worktables used for the war effort are occupied by mostly older workers, though there are a few high school and college students (especially during the summer), and there are several people in their thirties, forties, and fifties. (Vita Needle actually has employees in every age decade from their teens through their nineties—talk about intergenerational contact!) This book is primarily a study of the retirement experiences of the men at Vita Needle and how these experiences match up with their own and society's ideals for men of retirement age.

These workers exemplify a range of personalities and backgrounds and a diversity of reasons for working. Even those who come out of financial need also

seek social engagement and purpose. The production workers are all part-time (up to thirty-four hours), and none receive medical or retirement benefits—the employer banks on the employees' eligibility for receipt of Medicare and Social Security.⁶ The pay rate generally starts at roughly nine dollars per hour, which is above the state's minimum wage of eight dollars per hour (in 2011). Workers typically set their own hours, and some are like Carl, who arrives for a seven-hour shift at 3:30 a.m.; others might start at a more conventional 9:00 a.m. and clock out by 2:00, and yet others show up for a four-hour shift at 3:00 p.m. Upstairs from the production floor is the sales office, where the eight or so employees are full-time salaried workers in their twenties through fifties, more characteristic of the age of office workers elsewhere in the United States.

For some of Vita Needle's older workers, the paycheck is mad money (a term some workers actually use). It may give them the chance to buy nice gifts for grandchildren or splurge on Brooks Brothers clothing. One man turns over his entire paycheck to his grandchildren. We will meet people like 74-year-old Jim Downey, who sweats through his factory work—with little time for idle chatter—before he clocks out to swim at a private pool club. Some people may be like Jim, who retired from a career job for which he collects a pension, lives with his wife in the same home they bought forty-five years ago and which has long since been paid for, and has adult children who have moved out but visit on holidays with grandchildren. Others may be of conventional retirement age but not technically retired because they lost their last job through a layoff. For some of these workers, the Vita paycheck goes to everyday expenses, including rent and heat, and perhaps helps to support an unemployed adult son who has moved in and is back to expecting meals on the table; these people survive paycheck to paycheck. One widower, Robert Benedict, supports three live-in young-adult grandchildren on his own. Yet others may have never stopped working. Allen Lewis had worked as a machinist for seventy years when he finally stopped working at Vita at age 84 because he was having trouble seeing the needles he was supposed to be sharpening—and a magnifying visor did not help. Rosa Finnegan took a short hiatus after a long waitressing career before she found work at Vita. The vast majority of the women at Vita are widowed or divorced, now living alone, sometimes in the same house in which they had raised their families.

How did Vita end up with this older workforce and what does it do to retain it? Vita Needle has received international attention for its elder-employment policy. Fred Hartman, the fourth-generation owner and president, has said in numerous media interviews that in the mid-1990s he began to notice that his long-standing employees who had grown old and stayed on were superior employees with a strong work ethic, reliability, discipline, and vast experience on which they could draw. He also realized that the only people willing to work part-time

were older adults, and so he began to target hiring older workers. In 1997 Fred (as he is known to everyone in the factory, including his own children) issued a press release announcing Vita's sixty-fifth anniversary and noting its employment of older workers. The press release led to national and international media coverage, which continues at the time of my writing in mid-2011. The summer of 2008—the summer I was working there—saw a burst of media interest, this time mostly from Europe. In a three-month period, Vita was visited by journalists from France, Germany, and Italy—for a documentary film, television news, and slick magazine coverage in two leading German magazines.⁷

Fred is attuned to the age-related social, health, and economic needs of his workforce, and the company accommodates this workforce in various ways. For example, managers work closely with shop workers to make an ideal flexible schedule that might accommodate grandchild care, medical appointments, volunteer work, and the early rising that is common among older adults (starting work at 3:30 a.m. is convenient for Carl, whose restless leg syndrome is a condition more common and severe among older people). Vita Needle's is a surprisingly flexible production system, in part because workers are trained on multiple jobs (someone is usually able to step in for a coworker who is absent or who clocks out early) but also because of the nature and size of its orders and the store of backup inventory. Managers communicate with families of their employees if there are health concerns such as memory lapses or narcolepsy. They have also been known to curtail a worker's hours at the end of the year at the worker's request if he or she is approaching the federally mandated "earnings limit"—a limit to how much money a person below full retirement age can earn before the amount of his or her Social Security benefit will be reduced.⁸

In media interviews, Fred explains that he employs older workers as a social good—to counter adverse health impacts of isolated old age. Yet he and observers invariably also note the success of this business model, with Fred leveraging his employment policy as an ethical business practice (for instance, the Vita website refers to the company's commitment to "quality and socially responsible business").⁹ Fred knows that this employment model is a selling point, and he has told me that his older workforce appears to help attract customers. He describes how customers choose Vita Needle over competitors because Vita Needle's story shows that it occupies the "moral high ground."

Fred claims that Vita Needle has become increasingly profitable since it first began employing older workers. Media coverage invariably notes this point. For instance, the German business magazine *Brand Eins* noted, "Sales have increased by 20 percent a year to about 10 million dollars, not in spite of, but because of, the advanced age of the employees."¹⁰ Media coverage only very rarely mentions that Fred's elder-employment policy is structurally in dialogue with government

support for older adults in the form of Medicare and Social Security. As the same German article notes, these employees were a windfall for the employers:

Not only was the quality of their work first-rate, they had fun on the job and they were motivated. They also exhibited a loyalty the employers had not known in younger workers. Sure, some of the seniors were drawn to the meager wages as a way to improve their retirements. But their main motivation in taking the positions was in almost every case the need to feel useful again and to get away from the monotony and loneliness of retirement. They saw the work not as any kind of burden, but as a great opportunity. For their part, the Hartmans had only to pay a minimum wage. They even saved on the employer's contribution to retirement and healthcare benefits because the elderly already had claims to those benefits through their earlier wage-earning years.¹¹

With low wages and no employer-provided health care and pension benefits for the part-time production workers, Vita Needle devised a profitable business model. In an economic context in which some U.S. employers have shifted operations abroad to reduce labor costs related to health care and pensions (often locating outsourcing operations in countries where governments bear the costs of those benefits), other employers have stayed in the United States but concentrated on employing part-time workers to whom they are not legally obligated to provide these benefits.¹² In Vita's case, the costs of these benefits are borne by the government in the form of the continual provision of welfare benefits to older adults through Social Security and Medicare, a guarantee that is not ensured as of this writing in May 2011, when both programs appear subject to radical revision.

The Vita Needle case offers us a window onto competing moral values in American society and often-unarticulated cultural assumptions. Economic decisions, policies, and conditions emerge from and also create cultural values (think of policies on child-care tax credits and the embedded assumptions about what makes for good parenting). The Vita Needle example raises ethical and cultural questions such as, Is employing older workers a social good? Is it exploitative? Should people be spending their golden years at a factory, in a rocking chair, on a golf course, or elsewhere? What is best for older adults themselves and for the society? What is appropriate, possible, and valuable for older adults? In what ways is it socially responsible to employ old people? The Vita Needle example also raises important larger questions about where we are headed: Why are there not more places where older adults can engage in meaningful work? Why is this internationally heralded example (which even appears in business school textbooks)¹³ one of *factory work*—work that is unskilled, low-paid, and

not particularly respected in American society? Is that the best we can do for older workers?

Vita Needle seems to raise a complex set of responses in those who hear about it, and many observers either have strong responses or do not know quite what to make of it. In October 2010, National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* aired a feature about the company that focused on two workers in their nineties. The NPR website reveals complex listener responses. We see obvious approval in posted comments: "My warmest admiration goes out to these gentle souls and the company that sees their worth." But we also see anxiety about the role of "greedy geezers" in perpetuating unemployment among younger people, reflected in this sarcastic comment: "Let's make retirees work hard and [keep] young people out of job[s]. New American dream."¹⁴ When I mention Vita Needle to friends and colleagues, I am met with questions that reveal attempts to reconcile cultural expectations and assumptions about age with the idea of people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties doing manual labor in a dusty, noisy, crowded factory: Are the workers being exploited? Do old people have the vision and dexterity for factory work? Are they working because they need the money? Do they like working there?

In the chapters that follow, I address these and the many other questions that are raised when demographic, economic, and social changes lead us to reassess what retirement, work, and growing older mean. While we may at first glance think it cannot possibly be positive to be 99 and working in a factory, Rosa and her colleagues challenge us to think through this assumption more carefully. Of course, there are examples of disputes, complaints, anxieties, ambivalences, problems, and misunderstandings within the Vita Needle experience—and we will read about these in this book. The Vita Needle case challenges us to consider critically questions in aging research and policy studies about what constitutes a successful or positive aging experience. Since the 1990s there has been an emphasis in the United States on social engagement and physical activity for positive aging experiences—symbolized in the rebranding of retirement communities as "active adult living" or "active lifestyle" communities.¹⁵ What makes for successful aging? How do we define success? Can factory work possibly fit into that definition? What contribution does Vita make to its own workers' positive aging experiences?¹⁶

Work and Retirement

There is more to work than the paycheck. Work can enable social engagement, provide a sense of contribution, and offer a respite from domestic troubles. In

American society, paid work is integral to one's sense of self-worth and value, and nonworking adults struggle to develop a sense of value that counters the cultural and economic norm. How does one respond to the common question "What do you do?" if you are a stay-at-home mom (perceived by many as nonworking), unemployed, or a retiree? One sign of how Americans measure themselves by work is that retirees often ask each other, "What did you do in real life?" The subjects of this book are older adults—past typical retirement age. They live at a confluence of contradictory social and economic values.

On one hand, many have long looked forward to and planned for a life stage called retirement, a phase of life in which one is no longer ruled by clocks, schedules, and bosses. This is especially true for the many people with alienating, demeaning, difficult, or unpleasant jobs that simply have not provided meaning for them—though even here, work can be an important aspect of identity, a point vividly made by the journalist Studs Terkel in his book *Working* and in the Broadway musical based on it.¹⁷ This retirement phase is idealized in American society in many ways, often through romanticized images of golfing, traveling, fishing, knitting, and relaxing in recliner chairs. (Have a look at the retirement greeting cards at your local pharmacy for relevant cultural images: fishing poles, torn-up or empty "to do" lists, numberless clocks.) The dominant U.S. norm is that as we age, we transition from a period of labor productivity to a period of nonproductivity, beginning in our sixties.

On the other hand, many American older adults want to be engaged in work well past traditional retirement age. If during the lengthy period of labor productivity, our value is measured by our ability to earn income, how do we measure our value when we are nonproductive? Many people want to remain busy and engaged throughout their lives, and they want to be recognized for the contributions they make. Retirement thus is a complicated ideal for people across social classes—not only because of the cultural connotations and experiences that accompany it but also because of the economic position in which retirees find themselves.¹⁸

Retirement has long been unattainable without middle-class financial security, but with that security eroding (stock portfolios and real estate decreasing in value, pensions disappearing, health-care costs rising), retirement is increasingly unattainable for the middle classes as well.¹⁹ The global financial crisis that began in roughly December 2007 has adversely affected many older adults in the United States and elsewhere. In publications including the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and the *AARP Bulletin*, stories abound about older Americans who have had to delay or come out of retirement. Some parents have interrupted retirement plans to support unemployed adult children, and there are reports that traditional teenager summer jobs have been filled by older adults.²⁰ Even those in

the upper middle class have been affected as many private retirement portfolios lost as much as 25 percent of their value during the financial crisis.²¹

Some companies have been targeting older adults since at least a decade before the crisis. The retailer CVS offers a “snowbird” program in which older adults may work summers up north and winters down south.²² The AARP national conventions include a job fair where numerous employers recruit older workers—Home Depot, Walgreens, and Walmart, to name a few.²³ In the first decade of the twenty-first century, politicians, policymakers, and employers scrambled to create employment programs for older workers. In 2006, the National Governors Association (NGA) Policy Academy (a policy arm of the association) developed a multiyear program to assist states in promoting civic engagement among older adults by providing more avenues for volunteering and employment. The program’s impetus is summarized in a 2008 NGA report: “The percentage of the U.S. population that is 65 years of age and older is expected to increase by nearly 60 percent during the next four decades. This demographic shift will have important implications for state action, including helping to ensure older adults remain healthy and active as they age.”²⁴

Even if retirement is financially feasible, it is no longer desirable for an increasing number of older adults in the United States. As a *New York Times* journalist explained in a 2008 article entitled “Whatever You Do, Call It Work,” “It is better now in retirement to be a consultant, an independent contractor, an owner of a business, a dedicated volunteer, a portfolio manager, a pro bono worker or any variety of self-employment, as long as it is perceived as work.”²⁵ There are a range of reasons for this desire to do something that is perceived as work, and my own interviews and discussions with workers from Vita Needle, Office Depot, CVS, and elsewhere reveal the diversity and complexity of people’s motivations to work in typical retirement years.

Older workers seek from work a paycheck but also a sense of belonging and friendship, as well the experience of productivity, purpose, and usefulness. Grace King, at 94, says she was “going crazy” in retirement: “Nothing to do all day long, and it drove me crazy. I wanted to be busy.” So Grace ended up at Vita Needle, starting a new job when she was 77. Grace and her peers subscribe to a “busy ethic” in their retirement years. This is a term used by sociologist David Ekerdt to describe a concept that has arisen in response to the leisure-filled stage of life called retirement. In a society that values productivity and a work ethic, retirement is “morally managed and legitimated on a day-to-day basis in part by an ethic that esteems leisure that is earnest, occupied, and filled with activity—a ‘busy ethic.’”²⁶ For the Vita Needle employees, the key to successful aging is not a busy *retired* life, a life of “busy leisure.” Rather, it is a busy *working* life where one contributes to the economy and participates in an interdependent production

process with peers. Earning money is important to these people—they are explicit that their sense of purpose and meaning comes in large part from the paycheck they earn. This is distinct from people who find purpose in volunteering. The sense of meaningful and collective contribution is reflected in Vita Needle workers' common deployment of the phrase "making money for Fred," the business owner. As I discuss in chapter 1, this is a phrase usually used positively (as they highlight the value of their labor), though sometimes critically (as they question who profits the most). Vita Needle employees, even those collecting pensions from career jobs, do not consider themselves retired; indeed, some openly scoff at the concept—and frequently at the concept of golfing as a middle-class retirement ideal in the United States. As one man explained, he prefers to do something "practical and productive."

Although journalists and policymakers from around the world have looked at Vita Needle as a model of elder employment, I make no claims for the replicability of this particular model. I know this is a small, quirky factory that happens to work well for the employer who seeks to employ older workers and for some older workers who seek meaning, purpose, productivity, and a paycheck in their retirement years. A number of factors contribute to the success of this "eldersourcing"²⁷ model, including the nature of the product, the location of the business in a suburb in a high-technology region of the country (particularly with a number of start-up medical device companies), 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.²⁸

Even though there are a number of aspects that make Vita Needle seem unique, there are lessons we can take from this example: lessons about what some Americans—and white American men in particular—seek in their retirement years; lessons about how older adults seek and create meaning in the world around them; lessons about the role of work in the creation of meaning, purpose, and life; and lessons about the need for government support of older adults (pensions and universal health care) to facilitate models such as this. My exploration of the specifics of this factory and its workers can be extended to a larger social and economic context. Sure, the Vita Needle case is unique, but I can situate its uniqueness in the forces that constitute it—forces that are not unique but that are deeply situated in American society and in its valuation of busy-ness, of mattering, and of work as an important route to meaning.²⁹

Finally, I do assert that this book can offer key insights in light of the anticipated near-term increase in labor force participation by older workers in the United States. As a 2009 study noted, "According to one government estimate, 93% of the growth in the U.S. labor force from 2006 to 2016 will be among workers ages 55 and older."³⁰ The forerunners in these demographic and social shifts

are the Vita Needle workers who have vibrant work lives well into their seventies, eighties, and nineties.

The Cultural Construction of Aging

"Are you old?" This is a question I have asked in many interviews. First replying "No" or "Well, I am old, but," often the respondent goes on to explain that there are some ways in which he or she is old (bodily decline often comes up) and some ways in which he or she is not (active lifestyles and outlooks are mentioned). In their at-times convoluted responses, we can see people trying to reconcile cultural expectations about a life stage with their own experiences. We can see how they are trying to live their lives in the face of this concept of old that carries with it numerous and mostly negative connotations, expectations, and images. A case in point: the anthropologist Jay Sokolovsky's edited collection *The Cultural Context of Aging* contains an evocative short discussion about "the dirty words for old age," which includes analysis of how Americans of different ages feel about words such as "geriatric," "geezer," "gramps," "codger," and "matron."³¹

In their responses to the question "Are you old?" we can also see how age is simultaneously important and unimportant, significant and insignificant, for this group. As the anthropologist Caroline Oliver has shown for her work among English retirees in Spain, for these older adults who live active lifestyles, a "paradox of aging" is that age does and does not matter. In the Spanish retirement communities where Oliver did fieldwork, the residents' lives defy old age stereotypes, and yet there is a constant underlying attention to age: peer-to-peer health monitoring and discussion, illness, death, and a discourse about its being "time to move on" (i.e., go to assisted living).³² Among the Vita Needle workers, too, the workers are both old and not old at the same time. As the anthropologist Sharon Kaufman notes, we must remember that just because people may look old (and may identify as old for Medicare, Social Security, and cheap movie tickets), we cannot assume they experience themselves as old—or that old is an ever-present category for them. My Vita Needle respondents show us that, as Kaufman explains, we cannot assume that the political and bureaucratic identity of old age (where one may embrace the category of "old" in order to receive benefits or assert solidarity) is the essence of a person's individual identity.³³

Of course, one might think that working at a place famous for employing old people makes Vita Needle's employees especially conscious of being old. They articulate a complex sense of what it means to be old. Indeed, despite the media coverage (and the journalists who seem to be interested in talking only to the gray-haired workers) some consider Vita Needle a place where they and their

coworkers are not old, where they ward off death, or where they drink from a fountain of youth. In these comments we can see how people work to reconfigure what old means in American society. Vita Needle's older workers are people who, despite their individual differences, are grouped by American society as old. They are members of a group for whom perception matters greatly in daily life. When they drive their cars, walk through the grocery store, or wait at a doctor's office, they are judged by others to be members of a category with which they may not self-identify. People interact with them by reference to cultural assumptions about what being old means. And these older workers make sense of their own individual aspirations, choices, and experiences in light of U.S. cultural norms for what being old should mean.

In the following interview exchange between me and 84-year-old Allen Lewis, Allen eloquently described the cultural construction of aging when he explained that the people he works with are not old because old is a way of thinking and acting that is not found at Vita Needle. In other words, rather than being determined by a particular number of chronological years, to Allen, old age is characterized by feeble bodies and particular attitudes and ways of being. His articulation of old age is entirely negative:

Caitrin: So, do you ever spend time at the senior center?

Allen: I've walked through there a couple of times to vote or something, but I wouldn't go near that place.

Caitrin: Why not?

Allen: It might catch.

Caitrin: It might catch? What does that mean?

Allen: Old age.... I can still remember walking down the street... and all of a sudden I said, "The hell it is, it's learned. Old age is something you learn." It's like a toy. Your little girl with her doll carriage and the dolls and she's learning... You're around old people... and you learn, this is how you get. [But] you don't have to get like that. So that's one reason I wouldn't want to work with a bunch of people like you find at the senior center....

Caitrin: But you do work with old people.

Allen: These aren't, they're not the same. Go up to the senior center, you'll find out the difference.

Allen then described the people at the senior center "walking and shuffling along" and sitting in chairs for hours, and he reiterated that being old is "all in your mind." Then he added, "If you start to think you're old, you're ancient, you're feeble, you can't move... You've probably said it to your children more than once: 'Act your age.' But all of a sudden you're 70. 'Act your age.'"

For emphasis, Allen repeats “Act your age”—a common expression replete with cultural assumptions. Allen perceptively notes that this expression has different meanings for a 5-year-old and a 70-year-old, and his commentary questions what it means as one ages. Why do we need to act our age? What if we don’t? Can we safely defy the cultural expectation? Allen would say we can, and we must if we are to authentically live our lives. Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson also mentions this same phrase in her book *Composing a Further Life* when she notes that in the process of aging, “Physiological changes are accompanied by social changes as one suddenly encounters a new set of attitudes and expectations and must grow into new roles.” As she says, “There was a time when our parents said to us, ‘Act your age.’ Now, shockingly, our children may begin to say it.”³⁴ Both Bateson and Vita Needle’s Allen Lewis point out the social pressures to live up to cultural expectations for age-appropriate behavior, and Allen is emphatic in his desire to chart his own path.

In Allen’s words we hear a man trying to reconcile cultural expectations about aging with his own experience. He and his coworkers are grappling with what it means to grow old. Being old is certainly important to them (and we will see this especially in chapter 2), but they do not want to be entirely defined by stereotypes of old age. Their dilemmas show us how aging is “culturally constructed.” That is, we do not act merely in response to a given social world. Rather, as people in society, we make sense of and create the world around us. When anthropologists refer to society as culturally constructed, they mean that social, economic, and political phenomena are created and made sense of through a cultural lens that also carries with it norms and expectations about what is right and possible.

The book is an extended examination of how age is culturally constructed in the United States. We make sense of bodily change and difference—we attribute meaning to the physical body and we continually reproduce our worlds through interpretation and attribution of value. Age is like race and gender in this way. Much of what we think about the categories of age, race, and gender is based on bodily attributes, but our understanding of these categories is not entirely grounded in biology. In terms of gender, our numerous assumptions about women’s and men’s differing abilities, proclivities, and interests do not all correspond to actual physical differences between men and women (think here of the pervasive and erroneous assumption that girls are not good at math). The ways in which we culturally construct age are not entirely grounded in the physical, and yet, in the United States, physical change and decline are important to our interpretations and experiences of aging; we try to extend life and conquer aging, which we consider a disease. In India, by contrast, one is old when one’s children marry, even if one would not be considered old by U.S. standards.³⁵

Although mine is a study of norms and expectations about aging among white nonimmigrant Americans, the global media coverage of Vita Needle and the responses to it show that the Vita story appears to resonate across a variety of cultural differences—though my discussion in chapter 4 of how the story plays out in France shows how we interpret experiences in our own socioeconomic context.

Though we culturally construct age, gender, and race, age is different from the other two cultural categories in one important way. With the exception of those who die early, everyone (regardless of gender or race) enters a period called “old.” Our lives are replete with negotiations about where that crossover point is and what it means. Whereas in the United States we seem to have normative agreement about what, biologically, constitutes racial and sexual difference, we do not agree about where to draw the line for old.

Grappling with these same notions of the cultural construction of aging in American society, gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term “ageism” in the late 1960s. He wrote,

Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills. . . . Ageism allows the younger generations to see old people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings.³⁶

I find it unsettling to realize that this concept was coined around the year of my birth, in 1967, and yet it appears to describe today’s attitudes toward older adults. But I hope that by focusing on the experiences and meanings of retirement, this book will contribute to a reevaluation of this long-ignored life stage. I seek to take up Butler’s own identification of retirement as a key node of cultural meaning-making in regard to aging and ageism. As he wrote in 1969,

Age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, “uselessness,” and death. Cultural attitudes in our society reinforce these feelings. We have chosen mandatory retirement from the work force and thus removed the elderly from the mainstream of life.³⁷

Not long after these words appeared, the anthropologist Ruth Landes also wrote insightfully about retirement. In 1971 she argued that since the 1930s, “retirement”