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# Experiences of Civic Participation Among Older African American and Latinx Immigrant Adults in the Context of an Ageist and Racist Society

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## Abstract

In the past 20 years, older adults' civic participation has received considerable attention. Current literature shows that rates of voting and volunteering have been consistently lower among African Americans and Latinx older adults compared to White older adults. However, little research has explored civic participation in the context of historical structures of inequality that influence how Black and Latinx populations participate in civic life. I draw from an intersectional life course perspective and phenomenological methods to examine experiences of civic participation through participants' lens. Findings draw our attention to how race/racism and age/ageism shape how, where, and with whom participants participate. Findings demonstrate how civic participation is embedded within systems of inequality that inform individual behavior as well as available opportunities for engagement. These findings call attention to the need to re-conceptualize and support civic participation that centers the experiences of historically ethnoracially oppressed populations.

## Introduction

In the past 20 years there has been growing national and international interest in civic participation in later life (Gonzales et al., 2015; Serrat et al., 2019; Tang, 2016; Torres & Serrat, 2019). In 2015, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) found that nearly a quarter of adults aged 65 and older volunteered, and on average volunteered more hours than any other age group. Research also finds that older adults tend to volunteer mostly as tutors, mentors, or friendly visitors (Morrow-Howell et al., 2017). Yet, the current literature indicates significant disparities in rates of civic participation between White older adults compared to historically oppressed ethnoracial older adults (Shores et al., 2019; Johnson and Lee, 2017; File, 2015; Tang et al., 2012).

Most empirical research and government reports find that White older adults are civically involved at higher rates than Black, Asians, and Latinx older adults (File, 2015; Johnson and Lee, 2017; Shores et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2012). Disparities are primarily reported for formal volunteerism and voting (File, 2015; Johnson and Lee, 2017; Shores et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2012). Recently a study by Shores et al. (2019) measured civic participation through four domains and found that older Americans are more engaged in all participation domains than younger Americans. In addition, results showed that across race Whites had greater rates of engagement in all dimensions than Blacks and Latinx older adults, irrespective of educational attainment and income (Shores et al., 2019). Similarly, Tang et al. (2012) also found that Black older adults were less likely to volunteer in formal organizations than White older adults. However, the study showed that when Black older adults did volunteer, they committed more hours and experienced more health benefits than White older adults.

The health benefits associated with formal volunteerism among older adults has been well documented (Boudiny, 2013; Gonzales et al., 2015; Serrat et al., 2019; Tang, 2016). Several studies find that civic participation is associated with better physical and mental health (Ali et al., 2016; Proulx et al., 2018; Varma et al., 2016) and decreased risk of mortality (Okun et al., 2013). In addition, some scholars have also found associations between civic participation and

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improved economic and educational opportunities (Benenson, 2017; Putnam, 2000).

Furthermore, there is ample research demonstrating how illness and disability, language barriers, and lower SES are deterrents of civic participation among this age group (Barnes et al., 2012; Camarota & Zeigler, 2016; Principi et al., 2012; Wanchai & Phrompayak, 2019). However, few studies have examined how systems of structural inequality shape experiences of civic participation among non-White older adults. A recent scoping review found that from 429 studies only 1.7% considered experiences of ethnoracial minorities, immigrants (1.1%), and none considered the intersectionality of multiple systems of inequality in the context of this phenomenon (Serrat et al., 2019). By focusing research on the experience of White Americans and colonial structures of civic participation, the literature has erased the civic contributions of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrants from the global south that occur outside of these formalized spaces (Torres, 2020).

Therefore, this research is particularly salient for expanding our understanding of disparities in civic participation between White older adults and historically oppressed ethnoracial older adults. In addition, this is pertinent today as population estimates show that Latinx and Black older adults will account for nearly a quarter of the total older adult U.S. population by 2030 (Schulz & Eden, 2016). Such research would allow us to examine the foundations of civic life that were historically developed for White Americans, and intentionally excluded immigrant, Black, and Indigenous people from formal civic activities such as voting and formal volunteerism (Hamler et al., 2018). Today, these structures continue to exclude these populations from full participation due to citizenship laws (Wilmoth, 2012), racial discrimination (Bryant-Davis, & Ocampo, 2005; Perilla et al., 2002), and other implicit ways that the current literature has not examined.

To address this gap in our empirical knowledge concerning experiences of civic participation in the context of systemic inequality, this study set out to examine the role of ageism and racism in African American and Latinx immigrant older adults' experiences of civic participation. This work is part of a larger project (Reyes, 2022). Drawing from a scoping review of the literature on older people's civic participation over the past 50 years (Serrat et al., 2019), I define civic participation through the following criteria: civic activities are voluntary; are social or political; carried out individually or collectively in formal or informal settings; and intend to effect positive change for the community, society, or individuals outside one's immediate family.

### Theoretical Framework

The intersectional life course perspective integrates the life course perspective and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Elder, 1998). This theory examines the interplay between systems of oppression and individuals' identity across time in the context of structural and systemic oppression and peoples' agency and resistance (Ferrer et al., 2017). This ability to situate civic participation within a larger sociopolitical struggle across the individual's life course and history is essential for developing a critical scholarship that considers what types of activities are labeled "civic," who can participate in formal civic life, and the contexts in which informal civic activities emerge. This perspective guided my inquiry, instrument development, and analysis to understand how participants' personal identity and systems of oppression interact to influence experiences of civic participation across the life course (Ferrer et al., 2017).

Ferrer et al. (2017) present four dimensions as a series of "steps" to guide the contextualization of participants experiences across the life course. The first dimension is the identification of key events and the timing of those events in the context of structural forces that contributed to the emergence of events. The second dimension suggests that the researcher examines locally and globally linked lives extending to generations, national, and international borders (Hopkins & Pain, 2007). The third dimension considers categories of difference, processes of differentiation, and systems of domination across the life-course in the context of historical structures and systems. Finally, the fourth dimension suggests a consideration of how broader systems of oppression and individuals' resistance and agency influence participants' experience.

Each of these dimensions offer an opportunity to develop a rich understanding of the experience of historically oppressed older adults highlighting nuances in their individual and collective experience. However, for the purposes of this paper I solely focus on the third dimension that highlights the intersections between categories of difference (e.g., age, race) the processes of differentiation (e.g., aging, racialization), and systems of domination (e.g., ageism, racism) across the life course and historical contexts (Dhamoon, 2011). This dimension asks that researchers consider identities that are socially determined as well as those that are perceived, and the ways these might shift throughout historical contexts and structural systems throughout the life course. Understanding these intersections allow us to understand how an individual's experience with a singular phenomenon may shift throughout the life course.

### Methods

This study adopted a phenomenological study design. This methodological approach was chosen because it focuses inquiry and analysis on participants lived experiences and allows the researcher and participant to co-interpret the meaning of those experiences (van Manen, 2016). In addition, this method is appropriate for marginalized populations, who historically have been stripped of their agency and voice. A phenomenological approach gives participants the space to be active participants in the construction of their own narratives (Reyes et al., 2022; Wertz, 2005). Finally,

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

| | African Americans (n = 10) | Latinx Immigrants (n = 7) |
|---|---|---|
| State of residence | | |
| New Jersey | 6 | 6 |
| New York | 4 | 1 |
| Age at time of immigration | | |
| 10–29 | — | 2 |
| 30–49 | — | 4 |
| 50+ | — | 1 |
| Age at time of interview | | |
| 60–69 | 4 | 5 |
| 70–79 | 4 | 2 |
| 80+ | 2 | — |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 3 | 4 |
| Female | 6 | 3 |
| non-binary | 1 | — |
| Education | | |
| High School grad or less | 2 | 5 |
| Some College | 3 | 1 |
| College degree or more | 5 | 1 |
| Employment status | | |
| Full/Part-time Work | — | 4 |
| Retired | 9 | 1 |
| On disability | 1 | 2 |
| Disability or chronic illness | 6 | 4 |
| Lives alone | 4 | 1 |
| Owns home | 5 | 1 |
| Drives | 5 | 5 |

phenomenology has been adopted by scholars seeking to study social, economic, and cultural interactions (Moustakas, 1994), topics that are salient to this study.

## Sampling

In phenomenology, a sample size between 5–25 individuals that all have experienced the phenomenon under inquiry is recommended (Polkinghorne, 1989; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, criterion sampling was utilized to ensure that all study participants have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In addition, snowball sampling was used to ensure saturation of civic activity experiences and to target the Latinx immigrant older adult population that was harder to reach. This prevented over sampling from the same groups and organizations, thereby increasing the diversity of civic participation experiences. The sampling criteria for participation in this study was African Americans and Latinx adults aged 60 and older living in New Jersey or New York who had been involved in at least one civic activity within the past 12-months. When participants contacted the researcher, a screening tool with a list of over 30 activities was applied to ensure eligibility (appendix 1). Recruitment began in June 2020, after

receiving IRB approval, and continued until September 2020. In previous research on civic participation, participants have described the concept as "helping others" and "contributing to the community" (Martinez et al., 2011). I created digital flyers using this lay language for recruitment.

## Study Sample

Results from this study provide insight into experiences of civic participation in the context of systemic ageism and racism across the life-course of 17 participants. Among African American participants four were born in the U.S. Northeast, three were born in the South, and one in the Midwest. All Latinx participants were foreign born, originating from South America, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Central America. Most Latinx participants immigrated in their 30s–40's, in the period of 1973–1995. The youngest age of arrival to the US was 15 in 1965 and the oldest was 52 in 2010. Citizenship status varied among participants, from undocumented, legal residents, naturalized citizenship, and Puerto Ricans whom are born with US citizenship.

As table one shows most participants were between the ages of 60–69 at the time of the interviews. Most identified as women (n = 9), and one identified as non-binary (Table 1). The

**Table 2.** Examples of Interview Questions.

Interview 1: In-depth interview of experiences of civic participation within the past 12 months
What does it mean to you to be able to contribute to your community?
Before Covid-19 where would you participate (i.e., church, community garden, organization)?
Probe: Can you describe one of your experiences participating there?
Probe: Can you describe who are the people you participated with?
In the past-12 months have you had any experiences when you were told or made to feel like you should not be participating because of your age or race?
Can you tell me about your most recent experience where you helped or made a difference in someone's life, a group, or community?
Probe: What motivated you to do that? (Probe for personal, political, and social motivators)
Probe: How did you feel doing that?
Interview 2: Civic participation oral history interview guide
I want you think a little bit about aspects of your identity such as your age, race/ethnicity nationality/citizenship, gender, language, health status (disability, illness),
Can you describe a time when you were participating in a civic activity and some aspects of your identity were highlighted?
Probe: What were some occasions when you felt called to or someone called on you to become involved that was related to your identity?
Continuing to think about your identity, was there ever a time when someone said or made you feel like you should not get involved because of some aspect of your identity (race, age, gender, etc.)?
Probe: Did these experiences affect your participation afterwards? If so, in what ways? If it didn't, how were you able to not let it affect you?
Can you tell me about an experience(s) in your life that changed your ideas about how you can contribute to the community or society? (i.e., immigration, disability/illness, change in work, losing someone important to you)

majority lived in New Jersey (*n* = 13) and had some college education or greater (*n* = 10), although a lower level of education was more common among Latinx participants (*n* = 5). Similarly, African Americans mostly reported being retired (*n* = 9) and most Latinx participants reported full/part-time work (*n* = 4) or being on disability (*n* = 2). Overall, most participants reported living with a disability or chronic illness (*n* = 10). In addition, all but one Latinx participant reported living with family members or a partner and renting or not paying rent (family subsidizes). On the other hand, half of African Americans reported owning their home and four reported living alone.

## Data Collection

This study employed three methods of data collection: first, a short demographic questionnaire, followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview inquiring about participants civic participation experiences in the past 12-months; and third an oral history interview on lifetime experiences of civic participation (Grant, 2018) (Table 2). In addition, public archival documents were used to situate participants' stories across developmental life stages, clarify names and dates of public figures and events, and quotes participants referred to. Interviews lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Interviews were conducted in participants preferred language (English or Spanish), and later transcribed and analyzed in its original language. Only quotes presented here were translated by the author who is a native bilingual speaker. Once interviews concluded, participants were asked to remain available to

revise their stories and make changes as they felt appropriate, this continued up to the analysis phase. Some participants added more information to their stories or sent new stories through e-mail.

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Nvivo12. The analytic strategy guiding this study was hermeneutic phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In phenomenological studies, researchers craft anecdotes from transcripts to create succinct and descriptive stories of participants' experiences with the phenomenon under inquiry (Caelli, 2001; Crowther et al., 2017; van Manen, 2016). This process entails several steps that required various readings of the transcripts and crafted narratives (Crowther et al., 2017). This is known as a "hermeneutic circle," moving between the transcripts and stories to interpret the data. In this study, this involved integrating data from two interviews to create cohesive narratives of participants' civic participation experiences. The process of crafting facilitated data analysis and allowed for a more nuanced and complex understanding of the phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a contemporary qualitative approach that facilitates the study of how individuals make meaning of their experiences. IPA prioritizes (a) diversity of lived experience, (b) context, and (c) relationship to life narratives (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). IPA expands on traditional phenomenology in several ways; first it seeks to develop description and engage in meaning making of the experience;

and two by examining similarities and differences of experiences and derived meaning across the sample (Smith et al., 2009). This study carried out IPA using crafted narratives that were reviewed by participants. Finlay (2011) provides a step by step guide of IPA analysis; 1.immersion in the original data; 2. (first order of analysis) focus on "chunks of the transcripts" (crafted stories) to develop emergent themes that provide rich information about how the phenomenon develops throughout the participants' lifetime and what matters to them, values, relationships (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).; 3. (second order of analysis) search for connections across themes, patterns and differences across cases, incorporating theories/lens that deepen the analysis.

In the first order of analysis in vivo coding was utilized to preserve participants' language and draw out key narratives. The intent was to capture one or more of the following: description of civic activities across the life-course (childhood, young adulthood, adulthood, and older age), meaning attributed to participation, national events that were relevant to their experience, and major life events related to their participation. This first part of the coding process was conducted in two separate Nvivo projects, separated by ethnoracial group. This was a bracketing strategy to ensure openness in the coding process, allowing codes to emerge for both groups. As themes began to emerge, the second order of analysis began, axial coding between cases. In the second-order analysis phase, the researcher compares across cases drawing out patterns between experiences and perceptions (meaning making). The two Nvivo projects were merged after open coding was completed, and further axial coding was conducted between groups. After this phase, I utilized the intersectional life course perspective to conduct selective coding. Relevant codes were grouped under the four specific dimensions of this perspective: historical time, categories of difference and systems of oppression, agency and resistance, and linked lives.

## Rigor

Multiple strategies were used to ensure rigor and stay close to the lived experience (Patton, 2015). First, before beginning anlysis I engaged in *epoche-reduction,* a process of reflection on assumptions about the phenomenon, to prevent a one-sided understanding of the experience (van Manen, 2016). In addition, I also reflected on my own sociocultural backgrounds, personal politics, beliefs and values, and biases/predispositions in the context of the study (Barush, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lietz et al., 2006). This was essential for minimizing bias and deriving authentic narratives and interpretations (van Manen, 2016). Throughout the study, I also employed the use of *memoing* to engage in reflexivity beginning with instrument development (Crowther et al., 2017). I discuss my positionality and reflections of conducting this research as a younger Latinx immigrant woman in another paper (Reyes et al., 2022).

I also conducted member checking to ensure that anecdotes and preliminary interpretations were not misrepresenting their experience (Zambas, 2016). All participants were mailed their life narratives, that I crafted from the raw data, for them to review, edit, make additions, or remove content. This method provides validity of the quality and accuracy of anecdotes as participants remember it (van Manen, 2016). After participants confirmed receipt of narratives, they were given the time they needed to review and make edits before a call was scheduled to make changes to the document. An incentive of $25 was provided for their time; only 12 participants chose to make edits which were mostly minor. Five participants added new stories or elaborated on their stories, and none chose to remove stories. This was also a strategy to demonstrate transparency and remain accountable to participants after data collection.

Triangulation was also used to increase understanding of phenomenon and build up evidence through data consensus and substantiation (Barush, 2011). This was achieved by using two in-depth interviews, additional public documents that provided context and clarification of participants' stories, and member checking. These strategies improved the quality and accuracy of data and helped to capture various dimensions of the phenomenon. Finally, reflexivity, bracketing, and negative case analysis were used to challenge dominant themes and analytically compare cases, demonstrating exceptions and defining limits (Barush, 2011; Shenton, 2004).

## Findings

Participants' stories reveal how civic participation in later life among Latinx immigrant and African American older adults is restricted due to systemic problems of ageism and racism. These oppressive systems limited how, where, when, and with whom participants could comfortably participate. Four themes emerged from the analysis describing the ways personal identity (race/age) and systems of the domination (racism/ageism) interact to limit and shape civic participation among this sample. A foundational theme was participants' awareness of belonging to an oppressed group, this informed who they chose to participate with and their sense of where they could contribute more effectively. The second theme, safety considerations, expands on the first as participants considered how systemic violence and oppression could harm them personally as members of these groups. The third theme, social expectations, focuses more closely on age-related expectations that are often internalized and attempt to reduce or devalue older adults' contributions. Finally, the fourth theme, demand for productivity, presents' participants considerations for how their participation is a tool for remaining viable. Given the use of the IPA, results demonstrate where experiences between groups overlap and the ways in which they diverge. Therefore, some themes are more salient to one ethnoracial group than the other.

Belonging to an Oppressed Group: "I'm helping my own people because I identify with them"

The choice of where to allocate one's time and resources, was highly influenced by participants' sense of belonging to a group that is economically, socially, and politically oppressed by a White supremacist capitalist society. Coupled with shared ethnoracial identity, language, and culture, most participants felt that it was in their own communities where they were welcomed and needed. One African American participant explained: "This is where I live, this is the demographic where I am. I probably wouldn't do community service if I was living in a different town, where the majority was White. They just wouldn't need me." She went on to tell a story from a civic participation experience where she felt compelled to participate for the benefit of Black and Latinx communities because these are the groups that "get the short end of the stick."

> "I'm helping my own people because I identify with them. I think, a lot of times, the people that I'm servicing get the short end of the stick, and I know that a lot of them cannot advocate for themselves…Like when I volunteered to be secretary of a group that provided advocacy for parents and students in dealing with the school teachers and administrators when there was a problem. The parents didn't know how to speak to the administrators at school, so we formed a group. We would go with the parents to talk to the administrators and sort of out the issues…they needed an advocate."

Similarly, one Latinx participant who described living in extreme poverty as a child in Ecuador, observed that the Latinx community suffered the greatest economic hardships. Therefore, it was there where she felt that she could make the greatest contribution and where she felt more comfortable given shared language and culture.

> "I participate more with Hispanics because they have the greatest need. There are also Hispanics that don't need, that have so much, but in the margin of poverty is the Hispanic…also with Hispanics I feel more comfortable, because I am Hispanic and because I speak Spanish. I have the greatest ease of communicating and I know the needs and everything, too. Also because of culture, it changes everything. I know my culture, I know how I speak, there's no fear because of culture."

Like this participant, many told stories of how in later life they had gained a greater sense of mastery, knowledge, and access to resources that facilitated their ability to contribute to their communities in ways they could not in earlier life stages. For example, one African American participant discussed that her legacy as she gets older is to protect and document the history of Black LGBT communities.

> "I would say in my later life I take leadership in what I do… I have a life of experience. I know what I'm capable of doing. If people say this is what we want to do, I can step up and I can be an active participant… I'm involved with some other projects… [one] project is organizing the archival records of Black LGBT organizations… All the people I'm working with have also made important contributions to the Black LGBT developing organizations like I have. My own legacy was to make a contribution here… As I get older, I'm very much aware of history and how history gets lost."

This participant made several comments about the erasure of contributions made by the Black community in the US. As a Black older person, she now assumes a position of leadership within her community where she can serve in both preserving the history and facilitating the organization and contributions of new civic groups. Various other participants shared a similar sentiment, demonstrating how they used the experience, knowledge, and networks cultivated across their lives to mobilize resources from within their communities. This commitment was driven by an awareness of the oppressive context in which their communities exist.

## Safety Considerations: "There are other risks here"

This theme expands on the previous theme, as participants considered their own safety and well-being when collaborating in groups where they were the only person of color and someone of older age. Tokenism, microaggressions, ethnoracial violence and considerations of limited time and physical vulnerability were discussed throughout participants' narratives as decisive factors in their participation. In these stories participants expressed caution when presented with opportunities or situations to collaborate with majority White groups. For example, one African American participant reflected on how the pandemic and police violence against Black people had made her reevaluate where she invested her time and energy. During this time, she had withdrawn from several civic activities and had been presented with a new opportunity to join the board of a local fundraising group. As she discussed her thought process, it became clear that a main concern was that she would be the only Black person in an all White community group.

> "The director [of a community org] called to check on me and asked if I would join the board of the community group. They're all White. I know the board members, but I don't want to join them because I wouldn't feel comfortable being part of that board. I might vote for all the Black or Hispanic organizations that apply for money… Somebody can't just say to me, "I want you to be on this board," and if I think it's not a good fit, I'm not going on that board."

Given her concerns of the lack of ethnoracial representation and her current reevaluation of where she spent her time and energy, she rejected the position. Ultimately, joining the board would have placed her in a vulnerable position where she would be tokenized and/or alone in advocating for the needs of the Black and Latinx community.

Latinx participants expressed similar reservations about collaborating with White American groups and organizations due to language barriers, racism, and fear of police violence. For example, one Latinx participant expressed how their fear of risking deportation hindered their civic participation. This participant told various stories of being highly involved in political actions in their community in Mexico, and described how citizenship prevented him from being civically involved in the U.S.

> "The differences I feel here is the fear of the police. Back in Mexico if the police caught me, I am in my village, here if I get caught by the police, they send me back to my town, it is a big difference… There's always more to lose here. If I were a citizen, it would be another song. There are other risks here…"

This speaks to the anti-immigrant context that disproportionately targets Latinx communities and erodes their sense of safety, which contributes to limiting civic participation among this population. While political participation was more common among African Americans, their stories also reflected similar fears pertaining to the intimidation and silencing that emerged from experiences of police violence. For example, an African American woman, discussed how a violent racist experience in her childhood informed her civic participation.

> "I was born in the South, in North Carolina. We didn't do certain things, as they are done now, and I don't understand it. I just hope we can make it, but that's the violence. I've never demonstrated, even though it started during the time when I was younger. I was at a church one time, and they were at a rally, and they were beginning to get a little violent. I was in the South, and that let me know then that I was not ready for that…That bothered me mentally, because I don't want to get hurt…"

This participants' early childhood experience created boundaries around the type of civic activities that were safe and allowed for her to participate in as a Black woman in a racist society. This experience carried over into later life, as her age became another aspect of vulnerability. Overall, for older adults in this sample participation was highly contextualized by the realities of their politicized and vulnerable identities as older adults in an anti-Black and anti-immigrant society. This context made it necessary for Latinx and Black older adults in this sample to negotiate their participation with their need for safety.

## Social Expectations: "We're Not Supposed to be Loud and Boisterous."

A common experience of civic participation among older adults in this sample was serving their communities as advice givers and mentors. From a cultural perspective, both African Americans and Latinx participants discussed this type of participation as one of great honor and respect in their communities. As, one participant expressed "In African traditions, the elder is revered. That's the person that people go to. That's the minister. That's the sage. That's the repository of wisdom. So that's an honor. I've lived long enough to be it." However, other times preconceived notions of the appropriate ways for older adults to participate circumscribed their participation. For example, one African American participant said,

> "I didn't stay on this Earth all these years by not knowing how to mind my business a little bit. This is not my time to do anything. I got a little bit of experience. I wouldn't be out there with that Black Lives Matter… I'm an older person and my body isn't that strong. I have no right being out there trying to deal with that…My role in the community is to give as much wisdom as I can give and try to talk to people. In other words, we're not supposed to be loud and boisterous. We're just supposed to know how to sit down and mind our business."

This story touches upon the experience of civic participation through race, disability, and age. First, this participant is alluding to strategies for survival that she discussed in a story in the previous theme pertaining to growing up in the South and learning how to remain safe as a Black woman in a racist society. Furthermore, this story demonstrates how constraints of physical limitations coupled with ageist expectations confine how she, as an older adult, can and should civically participate. Other participants made similar references to older adults' contribution being primarily advice givers, and while sometimes this was linked with health limitations, it persisted among participants who identified as being "healthy."

However, several participants also discussed the ways they learned to adapt their participation in the context of limited physical capacity and during quarantine, when everyone was homebound. Many participants discussed moving their participation to zoom and other digital platforms, and others who had already been limited from leaving their homes described their use of blogging or networking over the phone. For example, one Latinx participant born in Chile who was disabled and physically unable to leave their home on their own described the ways his participation changed.

> "I'm disabled, I can't go out anymore… I no longer participate in the community, because of an amputation on my foot. I used to bring clothes, shoes and donate it to institutions…Now I say, "Whoever wants something, he has to come to my house to look for it."…I've often gotten jobs for other people, through word of

mouth as they say. That's what they call me, "Hey look, if there's anyone." Two months ago, it happened, I was lying here when they called. I helped him out all the same, through contacts."

This participants' story demonstrates the ways civic participation can shift according to one's capacity and ability, without being limited by ageist ideals of the "right" way older adults should participate. Furthermore, it shows how older adults in tight knit communities, prominent among Latinx and Black communities, leverage the social networks built across their lives and continue to be sought out even from their homes.

*Demand for productivity: "Since they see me active, they like me"*

In this study, Latinx immigrant and African American participants experienced societal and internalized ageism that influenced their experience of civic participation in detrimental ways. A common theme throughout narratives was the sense that older adults' value and acceptance in society depended on their ability to remain "util" (useful) or active. This ageist notion was internalized by most Latinx participants and a few African American participants in this sample. Many used words such as active, productive, viable, or *util* throughout their narratives. One Latinx participant said "uno tiene que ser útil." (One must be useful). They discussed feeling good, satisfied, and protected by meeting this expectation and avoiding the stigma attached to older adults as being "not good for anything."

For example, a 73-year-old Latinx participant who works in an older adult center described how the term "senior" had more to do with health status than age and described the difference between what he has classified as two types of older adults "Those who are elderly, but they look healthy, these people are worthy of admiration… Now, there's the other kind of senior, who is incapacitated…" This participant remarked on society's attitudes towards him as an "active" older adult, and the ripple effect it has had for him in other categories of marginalization. He said:

"Thank God I have never been rejected, I have never been belittled, nor have I been made to feel that I didn't belong. It's because my custom is always, "How can I help you? What can I do for you?" Here it is, you can help us." Me, "That's good." No, I've never been rejected for being Hispanic, because I'm of older age, or for being an immigrant. Since they see me active, they like me."

This participants' experience demonstrates how the notion of productivity in older age is also found throughout other categories of marginalization, such as ethnicity/race, citizenship status, illness/disability, where the individual must prove their worth to be accepted in society. Their stories demonstrate a fear of being put away and ostracized by a society that deems people disposable once they cannot contribute in economic/material ways.

One Latinx participant from Ecuador, age 62, expanded on this by describing the reality they perceive for older adults who can no longer contribute in "active" ways in comparison to "passive" ways such as advice giving.

"I believe that the elders are those of age 85 and up and they don't contribute much, because they mostly need to be cared for. I mean to say that they don't do anything anymore. Advice they can always give, but today no one wants to listen to the elders' counsel."

Yet, one African American participant clearly described the importance of acknowledging the worthiness and dignity of people regardless of what they do. "This society, it doesn't validate people, unless you do something. I validate you just because you exist, but thank you for what you're doing…" As a Black queer gender-non-conforming older adult who has been living with HIV for 34 years, this participant experienced his existence in this White cis-gendered able-bodied male dominated society, as a contribution in and of itself.

"I free other people to realize that they also can have the freedom to be themselves authentically. A lot of people don't realize that they have the choice of being themselves or being what somebody told them that they're supposed to be. By me living in my authenticity, I free other people to be able to do that…my being free gives them permission to be as free as they want to be. That's my contribution."

Like many other older adults in this sample, whose social position intersected several marginalized identities, their participation is an embodied contribution to our society that challenges oppressive structures designed to erase and disempower these populations. As the popular chant goes "Existence is Resistance," claiming ones worth and belonging beyond material contributions is a direct challenge to an ageist and racist society that demands productivity in exchange for sparing an assumed disposability.

## Discussion and Implications

To my knowledge, this is the first study applying an intersectional life course perspective to examine structural and systemic barriers in experiences of civic participation among Latinx immigrant and African American older adults. The lack of attention to these groups and use of critical race theoretical frameworks has seriously hindered our ability to understand experiences of civic participation in later life through the lens of those who have been historically oppressed in our society (Chambré & Netting, 2018; Martinez et al., 2011; Torres & Serrat, 2019).

Results from this study show, that older Latinx immigrant and African American older adults continue be civically active despite individual level barriers such as illness and disability, language barriers, and SES which have been previously

identified in the literature as deterrents of civic participation (Barnes et al., 2012; Camarota & Zeigler, 2016; Principi et al., 2012; Wanchai & Phrompayak, 2019). However, unlike prior literature, results from this study draw our attention to how systemic racism and ageism influences civic participation. Participants in this sample negotiate their participation while considering socio-economic inequality among their respective ethnoracial groups, safety considerations as members of historically oppressed groups, restrictive social expectations, and demand for productivity.

The first two themes are more relevant to ethnoracial experiences that examine the intersections of race and racism. While weaving in age as participants discuss a greater sense of mastery and awareness in later life that reinforce their confidence in their contribution and focus their participation as they consider limits of time, energy, and physical capacity. These findings speak to both the sense of belonging they feel within their communities that makes it possible and enjoyable to contribute, while also demonstrating the risks associated with belonging to an ethnoracially historically oppressed group in a racist society. The literature has documented the importance of ethnoracially congruent communities for social connectedness and participation (Musick & Wilson, 2007; Plascencia, 2022).

Prior research finds that Black older adults were more likely to volunteer in groups of their dominant race (Musick & Wilson, 2007), and Latinx and Blacks foster kinship and community relationships as a way to cope with discrimination (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Yet, current policies and gerontological frameworks that aim to increase formal opportunities for volunteerism among BIPOC older adults fail to address the root causes of disparity in access in formal participation and further contribute to the erasure of the ongoing contributions of these communities (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020). Future research examining the inclusion of BIPOC older adults must employ a critical perspective that situates inclusion under a framework of power dynamics that potentially places those being included as secondary and may contribute to further erasure and marginalization (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020).

The last two themes have a greater focus on the intersections of age and ageism but contextualize these experiences within race and ethnicity that inform social roles and racism which reinforces the culture of disposability highlighted in later life. These two themes present the juxtaposition of an ageist society that at one spectrum deems older adults' participation as limited or passive, and at the other spectrum demands a demonstration of utility/productivity to counteract that bias (Morrow-Howell & Gonzales, 2020). Yet both achieve a constriction of participation that devalue the many ways older adults contribute to our society within their varied capacities and interests. It also perpetuates racist ideology that deem people expendable once they are unable to produce in material or economic ways (Minkler & Estes, 2020; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). This paper calls attention to the limitations and harm of gerontological literature and aging policy that

employs the framework of "productive aging" that discusses older adults as a "resource" to be harnessed, rather than centering the dignity and agency of older adults (Belgrave & Sayed, 2013; Estes et al., 2001; Minkler & Estes, 2020). A new framework grounded in critical race theory is needed for developing policies and programs that attend to the effects of systemic oppression on civic participation in later life.

Finally, results from this study also lend evidence to contextualize prior findings that show that older adults mostly volunteer as tutors, mentors, or friendly visitors (Morrow-Howell et al., 2017) under the framework of ageism. While participants in this sample also identified mentorship roles as common and comfortable ways of participating, their stories shine light on how these "age appropriate" activities also emerge from ageist ideals that ultimately restrict the ways older adults think they can participate civically (Martinson et al., 2013). This has implications for the ways older adults are invited to participate/volunteer (Greenfield & Reyes, 2019). Creating opportunities for leadership and allocating resources to support the current initiatives led by Black and Latinx older adults within their communities are some ways in which practice can shift to honor and center the contributions and expertise of these communities.

## Limitations

The current study presents several limitations. First, the COVID-19 pandemic limited participants' recruitment in New York City because the author did not have pre-established relationships in the region and was physically unable to conduct outreach and recruitment in person. This contributed to a small and highly diverse Latinx sample, which limited in-depth understanding for this group. Future research on civic participation with Latinx older adults would benefit from selecting a few groups from specific nationalities. In addition, because this study was only carried out in two states and primarily in urban and suburban regions that had high percentage of Latinx and African American populations, and with socio economic status (SES) that are not reflective of the national average, transferability of findings may be limited. Future research should examine if civic participation experiences among these groups differ by geographic regions, considering accessibility, SES, ethnic density, and community culture.

## Conclusion

This study examined the effects of ageism and racism on experiences of civic participation among older Latinx immigrants and African American adults. Findings suggest that beyond individual level barriers previously presented in the literature as deterrents of civic participation among these ethnoracial groups, structures of systemic inequality and oppression restricts participation. Furthermore, findings show the ways Latinx and African American older adults organize

and contribute in the context of structural barriers, in ways that have not been previously recognized in the literature. Finally, this study has strong implications for examining current approaches that aim to increase civic participation. Current academic, government and national foundations measure participation through formal activities that have been historically inaccessible to these populations and continue to be so. In addition, it describes civic participation through a lens of "joiners" that is, how to increase the engagement of older adults in already established programs and organizations. However, a broader conceptualization of civic participation would allow national health and aging initiatives to capture the various ways older adults participate civically, while providing effective resources and opportunities to support their ongoing engagement. Policies and initiatives that directly support the contributions and efforts of older Black, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities is needed to ameliorate the growing racial and economic inequalities in later life.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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