Editorial: Is Infantilization Ethical? An Ethical Question for Gerontologists

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Senior Editor


This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB

Since 1982 I have been observing health-care professionals, including social workers, interact with elderly residents in a syrupy and infantile manner. As a supervisor I never felt comfortable with this type of interaction—but at the time—I did not have the skills to wrap coherent words around the behavior. As a doctoral student and a practicing social worker I made a Herculean effort to conceptualize the interaction within a theoretical framework. I thought that if I had a theory I would have the effective words to modify the interaction I was observing in nursing homes.

My first effort was to employ Goffman’s Dramaturgical and Framework Analysis. Yes, indeed, as a doctoral student I wrote a research paper on this subject. I recently reread this paper I wrote in 1982 through my hopefully now more objective eyes and I can honestly admit it was a grossly inadequate work. I understand why my professor did not like the paper. As a consequence I gave up on the idea until the paper resurfaced in the fall of 2012. I still believe the idea of conceptualizing infantilization is an important practice concept and decided to rewrite the paper with the help of a colleague. This updated paper was accepted as a presentation at a gerontology conference.

In the process of writing the paper I came across the brilliant work of Salari (2005). She make a profoundly convincing argument that infantilization of the elderly constitutes elder abuse. The critical issues are threefold: 1) professionals are currently interacting with elderly persons in an infantile manner; 2) professionals do not believe this style is harmful, but rather a demonstration of warmth; and 3) infantilization is harmful whether it is intentional or unintentional. I have been asking policymakers in my state, “Does infantilization of elderly persons constitute elder abuse?” The reply: “This is a difficult question to answer.”

The bottom line is this: Professionals who are interacting with elderly persons in a syrupy and infantile manner have good intentions. On a practical level, identifying this style of interaction as elder abuse becomes problematic. However, the taxonomy of elder abuse that I learned included the concept of “unintentional psychological abuse.” I personally believe that infantilization fits well with the concept of unintentional psychological abuse. What do you think? Is infantilization elder abuse and therefore unethical? Please include a statement giving me permission to publish!

Reference