

Editorial: Is Infantilization Ethical? An Ethical Question for Gerontologists

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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 makes 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? Send your thoughts to smarson@nc.rr.com. Please include a statement giving me permission to publish!

Reference

Salari, S. M. (2005). Infantilization as elder mistreatment: Evidence from five adult day centers. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 17(4), 53–91.