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ABSTRACT

Individuals may be stigmatized (discredited) if their attributes make them less than what is expected for the social categories into which they are placed. A tentative typology of situations can be developed, based on their potential for producing the stigmatization of old age. In daily situations that do not demand excessive physical or mental capabilities, those who decline to perform without legitimate excuses may be stigmatized. In physically or mentally demanding situations where adverse effects on one's physical or mental state are more likely to occur, stigmatization is likely. In situations where people have enough time to rest, take medications, or cover potential age stigma signs, potentially discrediting attributes are not revealed and individuals are not stigmatized. Finally, in situations where chronological age is used for administrative decision making, individuals are reclassified rather than stigmatized. Other factors which influence the possibility of age stigmatization are commitment, generational contacts, performance norms, and gender. In conclusion, old age is an attribute with variable meaning within our society and is best understood within the specific situations in which its meaning and relevance are determined. (NRB)

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# A SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING OLD AGE STIGMA

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It is often asserted in the social gerontological literature that the social status of the elderly is stigmatized because of (a) physical or mental disabilities associated with advanced chronological age and (b) social policies and programs which characterize the elderly as a homogeneous and "needy" social category. Previous research has sufficiently debunked the notion of simple direct relationships between increasing age and physical and mental functional impairment and has also shown the elderly to be a most heterogeneous social category. But the idea that old age constitutes a stigmatized social status still persists; and as Ward (1984) has recently argued, this leaves us with a dilemma. Stigmatized social status should have an adverse effect on the everyday lives and well-being of old people, but this doesn't seem to be the case for most elders. I believe that the problem is inherent in the dominant conceptualizations of old age in social gerontology and that a different conceptualization (to be proposed here) can eliminate Ward's paradox. First, let us clarify and specify what is meant by the concept of social stigma.

## Social Stigma

Since the significance of social stigma was popularized in the work of Erving Goffman (1963), I'll begin with his conceptions. According to Goffman (1963: 3), a social stigma "...constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity." Individuals are discreditable (potentially stigmatized) if their attributes make them less than what is expected for the social categories into which they are placed. The categories, the means of categorizing, and the anticipated attributes of the members of the categories exist a priori. The anticipated attributes are normative expectations -- demands made upon the members of the categories. A stigma is an attribute which violates normative expectations yet does not cause the individual possessing the attribute (or believed to possess it) to be elevated in our estimation or to be reclassified. For example, upon learning that one's physician is a graduate of a prestigious medical school, it is likely that the physician's social identity would be enhanced. The physician would still be regarded as a physician, and possibly a very good one. However, upon learning that one's physician actually had no medical training, the physician would become identified as a quack, i.e., reclassified or removed from the category of physician.

Since the stigmatized are not reclassified, they are required to perform normal roles in a deformed or incomplete manner. Identity is "spoiled" and interaction is strained. The stigmatized, like the ill, are not held responsible for their condition; nonetheless, people are embarrassed or dis-

turbed by it. Furthermore, it is expected that the stigmatized will organize their lives to ease interaction with others and to protect them from embarrassment (Freidson, 1970: 234-36).

But why are some individuals stigmatized on the basis of a discrediting attribute while others are reclassified? Lofland (1969) has argued that all people "cluster" social categories in an attempt to simplify (or make sense of) the world in which they live. On the basis of these clusters it is assumed, for example, that people of a certain race should have a specific amount of education, practice certain religions, occupy a separate territory, engage in particular occupations, and so on. Furthermore, "for public purposes and on occasion of face-to-face engagement, one of the clustered categories is singled out and treated as the most important and significant feature of the person or persons being dealt with" (1969: 124). Lofland (1969: 124) refers to this important category as "a pivotal category that defines 'who this person is' or 'who those people are.'" I suggest that if a discrediting attribute which is incongruent with expectations is also a pivotal category, then the individuals who possess it will be reclassified into the pivotal category. If a discrediting attribute which is incongruent with expectations is not a pivotal category, then the individuals who possess it will become stigmatized, but not reclassified. For example, a dinner companion who coughs repeatedly is likely to be discredited; however, upon perceiving that the individual is choking on food, the disturbing person will be

reclassified due to the peril of death, i.e., the coughing behavior becomes pivotal.

The Stigma of Old Age

Regarding old age, let us briefly note that in America concern for aging has been related primarily to issues of the usefulness and efficiency of the aging; and, with the industrialization of the work force and the privatization of family life, the aged were increasingly characterized as senile, inefficient, and frail (Achenbaum, 1978; Hareven, 1976). Rosenfelt (1965) argues that social changes have led to the development of an "elderly mystique" characterized by losses of health and vigor, sense acuity, memory, education and learning, normal sexual capacity and desires, senses of adventure and creativity, work skills, and companionship. To this array of negative qualities, one positive aspect of old age is frequently cited -- the wisdom that comes from experience. According to G. Stanley Hall (quoted in Hareven, 1976: 13): "There is a certain maturity of judgment about men, things, causes and life generally, that nothing in this world but years can bring, a real wisdom that only age can teach." Thus, old age has qualities which are likely to be viewed both positively and negatively.

The knowledge of this array of meanings associated with old age, at least the negative ones, makes possible the stigmatization of the elderly. It does not stigmatize the elderly as a social category, however, for stigma is not inherent in the attribute of old. The determination that an

attribute is discrediting, non-pivotal, and incongruous with expectations -- stigmatized -- is an emergent definitional process which occurs within socially defined situations. Stigma is an aberration of one's social identity.

To clarify this further let us consider the notion of identity. In the words of Gregory Stone (Gross and Stone, 1970: 177): "Almost all writers using the term imply that identity establishes what and where a person is in social terms. It is not a substitute word for 'self.' Instead, when one has identity, he is situated -- that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgment of his participation or membership in social relations." Social identity is inextricably tied to situations since attributes, paraphrasing Stone and Farberman (1970: 149), must be given meaning or interpreted in transactive situations. Additionally, as Alonzo (1983) notes: "Within daily social situations the individual experiences his biological nature, the normative constraints of social structure, the imperatives of culture, the impact of physical reality, and the perception of his psychological perspective." Since all of these factors converge as elements of social situations, social identities must be considered within the social situations in which they emerge.

Stigmatization can be viewed as a type of situational response or social product that is "...formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer, 1969: 5). What is negotiated in the case of the stigma of old age is not the range of permissible behaviors of older

people; rather, it is one's social identity. While the processes of the negotiation of one's social identity can be fruitfully examined through the social phenomenological analysis of people's talk (cf. Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1977), negotiations occur in normatively bounded situations and my concern is primarily with the normative situational factors which influence the determination of social identity. Further, while recognizing the uniqueness of each situation (Gonos, 1977), we must also be cognizant that negotiations are constrained by factors (Hall and Spencer-Hall, 1982) which frequently make the definition of the situation "preordained." All aspects of social situations are not created by social actors. According to Goffman (1974: 1): "a `definition of the situation' is almost always to be found." Thus, a tentative typology of situations can be developed based on their potential for producing the stigmatization of old age identity. (The typology to be presented is derived from Alonzo, 1979.)

The first type (Type I) is comprised of daily situations that do not demand excessive physical or mental capabilities. Examples of Type I situations are cooking, light cleaning, bathing, dining, reading, walking, watching television, etc. Barring other physical or mental handicaps, individuals are not apt to "fail" in these activities, and it is not expected that they will be stigmatized. However, within certain communities the expectations to perform apparently simple activities is demanded of the members. Those who decline to

perform without legitimate excuses are apt to be stigmatized. Hochschild, in The Unexpected Community, provides an example of such a case: Daisy, the reclusive widow who refused to dine with the other members of Merrill Court (1973: 33-36).

The second type of situations (Type II) involves activities which are demanding of the participants either physically or mentally. Examples of the former are athletic competitions, shoveling snow, and strenuous exercise; and instances of the latter would include playing chess, driving a car in heavy traffic, and preparing one's own income tax return. In these situations where "failure" or adverse impact on one's physical or mental state are more likely to occur, stigmatization is likely. Matthews (1977) provides several examples of elderly widows who were stigmatized on the basis of their apparent difficulties driving at night, washing windows, and taking care of large households. Also in cases where individuals have "tight" (Goffman, 1966: 198-215) social lives -- ones filled with numerous obligations and constraints -- that do not provide them with adequate respite to tend to basic physical and mental needs, stigmatization is likely. Of course, those who adequately perform exacting activities are apt to have their identities enhanced.

A third type of situations (Type III) implies that for some people social life is not tight and that people have time alotted to tend to physical and mental needs. It also provides them with opportunities to cover potential age stigma signs (Goffman, 1963: 43-104), such as wrinkles or grey

hair, by surgical intervention or hair dyes. By providing breaks in everyday situations, individuals can momentarily leave the situations -- to rest, take medications, stretch, meditate, and so on -- and return to active participation in the situation. Thus, potentially discrediting attributes are not revealed and individuals are not stigmatized.

In contrast consider situations of the fourth type (Type IV) in which age is a pivotal category. This commonly occurs when chronological age is used for administrative decision making. Examples of Type IV situations are eligibility for participation in retirement and Medicare programs, reduced rates for utilizing public transportation or attending movies, tuition-free education, and ineligibility for employment or private insurance programs. Thus, people can be discriminated against on the basis of chronological age though <u>not</u> stigmatized for they are reclassified.

Other factors which influence the possibility of age stigmatizaton are commitment, generational contacts, performance norms, and gender. Let us first consider commitment. According to Becker (1970: 591):

> we say a person is committed when we observe him pursuing a consistent line of activity in a series of varied situations. Consistent activity persists over time. Further, even though the actor may engage in a variety of disparate acts, he sees them as essentially consistent; from his point of view they serve him in pursuit of the same goal.

Commitment to old age is one tactic that individuals can employ to reduce the likelihood of age stigmatization. By becoming "professionally elders" individuals cease to be

representative of old people. As Goffman (1963: 27) states: "Instead of leaning on their crutch, they get to play golf with it,..." However, this does involve an organization of one's life around issues related to old age. Claude Pepper, Maggie Kuhn, and Florida Scott-Maxwell are examples of individuals who are professionally elders and it is suggested that it is unlikely that they would be stigmatized as old, regardless of the potentially discreditable attributes that they may possess, by those who are aware of their special status.

It is also suggested that interaction between people who share characteristics is more likely to result in the formation of affective bonds than is interaction between people who have different attributes. If the shared characteristic is old age, it is unlikely that it will be regarded as a discreditable attribute. This would reduce the possiblility of stigmatization. Hochschild (1973: 72) comments, "...with no young people around, they (the widows of Merrill Court) can dance and sing without fear of seeming 'silly.'" They could also freely joke about old age. During my own observation at a senior center, I noticed that the people never referred to themselves as "old" or "elderly." At an administrative meeting related to the center's activities, an official even stated "There are no old people at ----- Center." However, once during a travelogue presentation on China, the commentator did refer to an "old Chinaman." While this statement was not derogatory, it suggests that age was a relevant attribute to the center's members and that it could be used safely in

this situation because of the social distance between the Chinese and the Americans at the senior center. Except in cases of interaction with "the wise" (Goffman, 1963: 28), intergenerational contacts may not provide the protections of social identity of the elderly as is found in intragenerational contacts.

An immediate consequence of stigmatization is its felt experience -- embarrassment -- an infectious emotion which may even render others in the situation ill-at-ease. The embarrassment may be slight and ignored, or it can be so severe that role performance is terminated. Gross and Stone (1970: 186-187) argue that the recognition of the dangers of spoiled identity and embarrassment leads to the creation of "performance norms" to reduce this possibility. These performance norms include allowance "for flexibility and tolerance" and giving "the benefit of the doubt."

Allowing for flexibility and tolerance is more likely to occur among those who share a discreditable attribute and among the "wise." Thus, in the case of old age, situations are apt to be staged (cf. Stone and Farberman, 1970: 149-151) by elderly individuals and those who are aware of the discreditable attribute in such a manner as to reduce the likelihood that stigma signs will be revealed. Momentary "failures" are apt to be overlooked, and there may be considerable assistance in role performance.

Giving the benefit of the doubt incorporates notions of freedom and fair play, that is, people should be allowed to

select the roles they wish to play and be given a fair chance in role performance. It recognizes the interdependence of actors in situations and the necessity of avoiding embarrassment if interaction is to continue smoothly. For example, the dominant party in an athletic competition may "hold back" to allow the weaker participant to save face and participate more fully in the game.

Gender is also a significant factor in the the evaluation of others' performances and appearances. Sontag (1978) has argued that growing older affects women and men differently for (among other things) women are valued for their physical attractiveness while men are valued for what they can do. It is more permissible fc an old man to reveal his physical appearance than it is for an old woman. Sontag (1978: 140) states: "Society allows no place in our imagination for a beautiful old woman who does look like an old woman -- a woman who might be like Picasso at the age of ninety, being photographed outdoors on his estate in the south of France, wearing only shorts and sandals. No one imagines such a woman exists." Thus, it is permissible for an elderly man who "looks his age" to sunbathe, scantily clad, on a public beach; whereas, an elderly woman who "looks her age" in the same situation will likely be stigmatized. What is most interesting about this situation is that one's capacity to act is irrelevant. Old women who reveal in public the fact that their bodies actually look like the bodies of old women are stigmatized. For women in American society, social identity is not readily divorced from physi-

cal appearance.

A different pattern is evident when one considers courtship and marriage in old age. As Sontag points out, old men can take brides who are decades younger than themselves. This may actually enhance their social status since it would indicate their virility and attractiveness to women. For an old woman to act similarly is taboo. Old women are generally not classified as suitable marriage or sexual partners for younger men. Known exceptions to this rule "have all belonged to that category of people, creative artists and entertainers, who have special license from society to behave scandalously" (Sontag, 1978: 143).

Conclusions

This inquiry into the interrelationships of those identified as old and the others with whom they have social contact has focused on aspects of social situations which effect that identity. It has been argued that the attribute of old is a discreditable characteristic in American society and that some situations are more likely to make old age actually discrediting than are other situations. The social identity of old people is a variable social product reflected in everyday negotiations. The tentative typology of situations which was presented implies: "There is no role ... without reference to the situation in which that role is to be performed" (Stone and Farberman, 1970: 151). Additionally, a situational approach allows for the investigation of the social lives of elderly people without making the unten-

able assumption that the elderly are "an autonomous social category" (cf. Diamond, 1983), a reality which exists in the minds of those in the mass media and, of course, many social theorists of aging.

In the dominant theoretical orientations of social gerontology -- age stratification (cf. Riley, 1971), the modernization approach of Cowgill and Holmes (Cowgill, 1972; 1981), the functionalism of Rosow (1974), and the interactionism of Marshall (1981) -- we find that old age is conceptualized as a social status. The situational approach presented here offers another alternative, i.e., that old age is an attribute with variable meaning within our society and that it is best understood within the specific situations in which its meaning and relevance are determined. To proceed otherwise is too fall prey to what Douglas (1971: 11) calls the fallacy of abstractionism -- "the fallacy of believing that you can know in an abstract form what you do not know in a particular form."

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