Cogitare Enfermagem

REFLEXION

Elderly, old, or senior worker: a reflection through Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma*

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Stigma hinders integration and learning between generations.
2. Pejorative terms reinforce prejudice against elderly workers.
3. Valuing experience promotes inclusion in the workplace.
4. Humanization is essential to combat occupational stigma.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand how Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma relates to the terms used to refer to elderly workers. **Method:** This is a theoretical-reflective essay, based on sociology and the perspectives of specialists in people management and occupational health. **Results:** Stigma related to aging negatively affects workers. Terms such as "old worker" reinforce prejudices that associate advanced age with declining productivity, devaluing accumulated professional experience. This prejudice impacts individuals' self-confidence and motivation, in addition to hindering intergenerational knowledge exchange. The search for appropriate terminology aims to promote more inclusive and humanized workplaces, recognizing the importance of acquired skills. **Final Considerations:** Combating stigmatization is essential to valuing workers. The study offers important contributions to the field of occupational health by proposing reflections that support confronting ageism and fostering more inclusive organizational practices.

DESCRIPTORS: Aging; Social Stigma; Ageism; Job Market; Occupational Health.

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INTRODUCTION

Population aging is a phenomenon associated with the demographic transition that has led workers to remain longer in the labor market, both to ensure subsistence and to reaffirm their autonomy. Intergenerational coexistence within organizations brings mutual benefits, allowing older workers to share experience and responsibility, while younger workers promote adaptation to digital technologies. However, the use of terms such as "elderly," "old," and "senior citizens" reflects social stigmas, often reinforcing prejudice about aging and contributing to ageism in the workplace[1-2].

To combat these stigmas, it is necessary to adopt respectful communication that values inclusion and the active participation of older workers. Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma provides a theoretical basis for understanding how labels and stereotypes are constructed and their impacts on social relations[3]. This study seeks to relate this theory to the labor context, highlighting the importance of rethinking terminology and organizational practices in order to mitigate ageism and promote inclusive and healthy work environments.

This study aims to understand how Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma relates to the terms used to refer to elderly workers. The reflection was developed in the second semester of 2024, in the state of Paraná.

METHOD

This is a theoretical-reflective essay, grounded in the sociological basis of Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma[4-5] and considering the authors' perspectives on the topic, as researchers in the fields of human resource management and occupational health. The guiding research question was: How does Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma relate to the terms used to refer to elderly workers?

The reflection sought to interpret scientific studies in the field of occupational health that addressed aging and its stigmas in the workplace, in addition to guidelines issued by governmental agencies. A systematic search was not conducted; rather, an intentional selection of studies and documents considered pertinent was performed, in order to provide greater robustness to the proposed reflection.

RESULTS

The theoretical assumptions of Goffman are first presented as the foundation for the proposed reflection. Subsequently, the terms used to refer to elderly workers and their implications in the workplace are discussed.

In the Theory of Stigma proposed by Erving Goffman, which underpins this reflection, the mechanisms that reinforce stigma occur when social interactions and cultural representations confirm and amplify negative stereotypes associated with a specific characteristic of an individual or group, such as aging and its consequences[4].

Goffman categorizes stigma into three types: physical deformities; perceived character flaws; and tribal stigmas linked to race, ethnicity, or religion. These categories help us understand how aging can be socially interpreted as a flaw or limitation, even when it is not[5].

In the current context, where workers age and remain active, reflection arises along two lines. The first is that the continued use of the term "old" reinforces the idea of something useless, deteriorated, or worn out, and thus efforts have been made to reduce the use of this word in a pejorative sense. The second is the recognition that, in fact, a person undergoing aging does become old, and that the term does not necessarily carry a negative meaning; rather, it is the product of a process inherent to life, suggesting that efforts should be directed toward changing perceptions of what it actually means to be old[6].

In Goffman's theory of stigma, society is responsible for constructing stigma by promoting categorization, in which positive or negative characteristics are attributed to the individual, potentially leading to a distortion of personal image. Furthermore, the theory proposes that the stigmatized person is perceived as lacking the qualities deemed necessary to belong to that social group, which consequently results in exclusion[4].

Reflections on the occupational health of aging workers arose from the need to discuss appropriate terms to refer to workers who are aging and the impacts of such labeling on their lives. The presence of older individuals in the workplace is an unavoidable reality and a right of citizenship. Therefore, it deserves the attention of occupational health professionals[4].

In the context of elderly workers, violent communication acts as a bridge to prejudice, the restriction of rights, and a source of occupational illness. Research has shown that the greater the pleasure derived from work, the more positive the communication channels are, underscoring the importance of managers (re)considering the means of communication employed in the workplace, with particular attention to groups of potentially vulnerable workers[6].

The term "retirees" refers to their situation with regard to the labor market, and should not be used as a personal designation. Sexagenarians, octogenarians, and similar labels refer to chronological parameters. Furthermore, it is recommended to avoid terms such as third age or golden age, as they may reinforce stereotypes and fail to reflect the diversity and complexity of aging, ignoring the multiple realities and individualities present in this stage of life[2].

Historically, the terms "old" and "old age" have been associated with a negative phase of life, marked by loneliness, sadness, and disease. This has led to the search for alternative terminology that values the experience of people who are aging[7]. Reflecting on this historical evolution and the reality of older individuals in the workplace, the question arises: should the path forward be precisely not to differentiate people by this criterion?

These considerations suggest that the focus should be on understanding the meaning of aging and being old in our society. Mitigating stigma and stereotypes can contribute to healthier workplaces for these workers. This is not a simple process, as it requires individual and collective reframing of entrenched conceptions, including within organizational contexts. To this end, we recommend that leaders be trained from a perspective of diversity and inclusion, so that they may foster more inclusive and diverse environments, explicitly encompassing older individuals.

In European and North American countries, it is common to use the term "older" to refer to workers aged over 45–50 years[9]. In Brazil, however, this term still generates some discomfort, prompting reflection that the stereotype of being old in our country is still perceived as something negative and undesirable. This reveals a knowledge gap that persists regarding this universal process of aging and remaining in the workforce. Learning from other contexts is important to create identity-based ways of positioning older individuals within the world of work.

In the context of aging, the exclusion of older adults may manifest in various ways, such as social isolation, labor market discrimination, or even the devaluation of accumulated experience and wisdom throughout life. According to the Theory, three types of stigma can be identified: physical deformities; personal and behavioral characteristics; and tribal stigmas, referring to race and religion[4]. Thus, in a work environment driven exclusively by productivity, the outcome tends to be particularly harsh when older individuals are perceived as less productive or slower. For this reason, it is essential that organizations recognize the need to redesign the roles of their human capital, adopting competency-based management.

This negative view of becoming old and experiencing old age results in losses for individuals undergoing this process, as they may face challenges in having their image, actions, and work valued[3]. For Goffman, negative conceptions of something or someone may be embedded in social norms, stereotypes, and cultural traditions that appear neutral or even benevolent but ultimately reinforce stigmatization. Such representations and behaviors are often disguised as concern or respect, yet perpetuate marginalization by indirectly reaffirming prejudice[4].

Currently, the pursuit of bodily and facial aesthetics that emphasize eternal youth is increasingly disseminated, demonstrating how aging has become inconceivable in society. Extensive experience, broad knowledge, advanced skills acquired through diverse life events, and the overcoming of numerous challenges are all undervalued, while emphasis is placed on how the body has deteriorated and no longer functions as it did in youth. This depreciative perspective hinders the social acceptance of older individuals[10].

Despite the relevance of the aesthetic dimension, this study chooses not to deepen that focus, centering instead on the sociolinguistic and organizational repercussions that influence the inclusion of older workers.

In the workplace context, older individuals are often perceived as unproductive and incapable with regard to ageism—someone who does not contribute novelty or knowledge, with no room to exercise their roles and functions[3]. The Theory of Stigma emphasizes that the stigmatized person is regarded as different within a social context that imposes homogeneity of being and acting; it is as if this person deviates from what is considered acceptable[4].

Stigma is connected to how identities are perceived, created, and managed in social interaction: if a person is linked to a stigmatizing attribute, they are socially categorized and labeled as discredited or discreditable. To be discredited means that the stigmatized individual perceives their difference as visible/known to others, whereas to be discreditable means that their difference remains unknown/invisible[4].

Another challenge relates to ageism, a term used to define prejudice based on age, which may generate a set of negative or positive attitudes toward aging, either facilitating or hindering the inclusion and retention of older adults in the labor market[11].

Older adults regularly face age prejudice in its various forms. According to Goffman, stigmas are attributes that place the individual at a "disadvantage" relative to others[4].

On the one hand, older individuals possess potential for work due to their accumulated experience, which should lead to greater recognition. On the other hand, there is a tendency toward the devaluation of older workers, under the assumption that they have diminished capacities for labor. Therefore, the adaptability of older adults in the workplace depends not only on individual characteristics but also on the conditions and organization of work[11].

It is noteworthy that Goffman does not focus directly on stigma itself; rather, his relevance lies in demonstrating how stigmatized individuals manage their identities and adopt strategies to cope with social rejection, to navigate relationships, to conceal stigma, to conform to imposed social norms, or even to seek greater acceptance of their stigmatized condition. In essence, he connects stigma to ideas of social deviance and contexts of social interaction. Therefore, it is possible to reflect that Goffman's assumptions, although formulated in the past century, remain applicable to contemporary society.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the reflection presented, it is believed that the use of a single term to designate the "old," "elderly," or "senior" worker should not be the main focus of organizations. Efforts should instead be directed toward reaffirming and valuing the experiences and skills of these workers, eliminating ageism and pejorative practices when referring to any individual.

In this regard, we align with the Theory of Stigma, which asserts that negative conceptions and stigmatization are reinforced by labels and social categorization. It is therefore crucial to recognize and value the experiences and skills acquired by individuals, while minimizing terms that may contribute to exclusion and stigmatization. The theory indicates that it is possible to combat stigma and promote more inclusive and respectful treatment, where people are seen and treated according to their qualities and competencies, regardless of their age. For this to occur, society's efforts must focus on avoiding the imposition of reductive and prejudiced labels.

The term "old" should indeed cease to be employed pejoratively and should instead be regarded as something inherent to the process of living. Thus, the issue is not whether to use the word, but rather how it is used. Likewise, older workers should not be discriminated against for this characteristic, nor treated with privileges, but their life experience should be recognized as an asset for organizations, which must remain attentive to the need for behavior that combats workplace ageism. Public policies aimed at assisting older adults must provide adequate support for those in situations of greater vulnerability, ensuring that formal support networks can offer timely assistance, thereby helping to reduce the stigma associated with old age.

This analysis contributes to the construction of more respectful work environments by stimulating debate on language, age prejudice, and the appreciation of the professional trajectory of older workers. It reinforces the need for organizational practices grounded in generational diversity and respect for differences.

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