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# Older Women, Younger Men: Self and Stigma in Age-Discrepant Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

This study, based on intensive interviews with married, cohabiting and divorced older women and younger men, explores the impact of this type of age discrepancy on relationships and selves. Both the women and the men were aware of the stigmatizing potential of their relationships, in particular that the woman might be mistaken for the man's mother (which indeed sometimes happened). Although the couples' fear of audience response lessened over time, the impact of stigma on their sense of self remained. For the woman, her embodied self—body and face—was most problematic, and increasingly so as she aged. For the man, it was the cohort self: his lack of shared history with his wife, distance from his age peers, and precipitation into other age-discrepant roles, such as grandfather. Both men and women developed techniques of neutralization to counter stigma, techniques which were challenged only under conditions of divorce or marital problems and clinical intervention.

This paper is concerned with the meaning of age-discrepant relationships between older women and younger men, and with the reflexive relationship between cultural and clinical interpretations of age discrepancy. The cultural background for the assessment of age discrepancy in intimate relationships is the clear cultural preference for youthfulness over agedness, taken for granted by all the interviewees in this

study. My focus is on the stigma of age (Goffman 1961), and its impact on self-definitions and relationships with others. I propose that married or cohabiting older women and younger men see themselves as stigmatized, and engage in techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) as part of their joint construction of marital meanings (Berger and Kellner 1970). This foundational assumption of stigma has important implications for clinical practice, should the older woman and younger man seek relationship counseling.

Studies of contemporary demographic patterns indicate that marital age discrepancy is related to gender, divorce, remarriage and lifespan. A study of marriage in England and Wales showed that the tendency to marry a younger person peaks for both sexes at 30 to 34 years old, and falls to its lowest point at 50 to 54. Unmarried people in their 50s are more likely to marry someone younger (Bytheway 1981), although there are many more unmarried women than men at this age and upward. Remarriages are more likely than first marriages to involve an age discrepancy (Veevers 1984); women who were married previously are more likely to marry younger men who are marrying for the first time, and vice versa (Presser 1975).

Age-discrepant intimate relationships are part of Western history, and have had different historical meanings over time (Banner 1992). What has remained fairly constant is the institutionalized power relation between the genders which fosters resource inequalities between men and women, and which, at its worst, frames women as men's resources. Throughout Western history, women have been traded in marriage by fathers and brothers, to cement aristocratic alliances, to end wars, or settle disputes (Banner 1992). A woman's dowry or bride-price, lineage, virginity, appearance and age were all bargaining chips in the marriage market; older women (even widows) were sometimes "married off" to younger men who could not obtain better bargains.

The development in the eighteenth century of notions of choice in marriage based on romantic love (an idea that was superimposed on, rather than a replacement for, earlier patterns), precipitated some changes in older women's romantic options. Since romantic love was, and is, viewed as the property of youth, older women were seen as even more undesirable than when they only had to bring a higher bride-price. With the twentieth century development of competitive dating, a process which located all the power of choice normatively with men rather than women, older women faced an interesting situation. Rhetorically, they were free to love a man of any age. Realistically, women's choices were made within a structural context that virtually mandated men's choice of a younger woman.

Contemporary media discussions of older women and younger men insist that romance and marriage between older women and younger men are on the increase, both statistically and normatively (Houston 1989). These discussions focus neither on psychodynamic nor cultural areas of possible difficulty, but, rather, seek to justify and celebrate these relationships. A letter to Dear Abby, and Dear Abby's response, exemplify media treatments:

I am a 43 year old woman, divorced, no children, have an excellent job, and am secure in my position. Fourteen months ago, a bright 31 year old man came to work here in another department. The last thing I had in mind was a serious relationship with this kid, but you guessed it. It happened. I fell in love with him. He didn't pursue me. I invited him out first. We discovered we had so much in common we couldn't wait to see each other again. We're still 'in the closet' about our relationship, but we can't keep it under wraps much longer. . . . I'm embarrassed—almost ashamed—and terribly concerned about what people will think about 'us.' He's more in charge and mature about this than I am. . . . Am I crazy? Can this work? Meanwhile we are sneaking about like a couple of thieves. Help me! . . .

Quit sneaking around and don't worry about what people will think. Can it work? Yes, if you both want it. Please read the new book *Loving a Younger Man* by Victoria Houston. . . . It's written by a woman who once walked in your shoes. She resolutely reaffirms my advice: "Forget the numbers, and follow your heart." (Los Angeles Times Nov. 7, 1987, p. 3).

Although statistics on changes in rates of marriage over time are unobtainable (at least in published form), there is no doubt that the mass media have publicized the idea of increasing, and increasingly legitimate intimacy between older women and younger men. And it is also possible that the increasing ability of women to earn high salaries and develop their own resources enable some women to operate in the dating and marriage market much as men once did. However, while cultural and normative changes may indeed be occurring, intimate relationships between older women and younger men remain stigmatized.

In attitude studies (Derenski and Landsburg 1981; Cowen 1984; Hartnett, Rosen, and Shumate 1981) both adults and adolescents viewed age-discrepant relationships unfavorably, especially where the discrepancy was large, and saw the older woman/younger man type as more suspect and less promising than the older man/younger woman type. There were almost no gender or age differences between male and female respondents in their stigmatization of age-discrepant relationships.

Much has been written, following Goffman (1961), on stigma and its impact on the self. Goffman (1961) defines stigma as an elusive intersection of culturally disvalued attributes and identities with particular audiences and with the generalized other. He identifies three types of stigma: moral stigma, based on engagement in disapproved behaviors; tribal stigma, or racial difference; and physical stigma, based on anomalies of the physical self. The knowledge that one is stigmatized leads to an attempt to change the self in the culturally desirable direction, or to techniques that neutralize the stigma.

Techniques of neutralization are those ways in which the stigmatized seek to bridge, verbally, the gap between cultural expectations and their violation. While accounts are features of everyday disjunctions of conduct (Mills 1959; Lyman and Scott 1970), techniques of neutralization are directed toward the justification of stigmatizing behaviors or statuses such as juvenile delinquency (Sykes and Matza 1959) or mental patienthood (Goffman 1961; Warren and Messinger 1988).

A theory of stigma in age-discrepant relationships can illuminate the clinical interpretation of those relationships. Problems that are brought to marriage counselors not only have psychodynamic elements (Singer-Magdoff 1988) but also reflect general themes in the culture. These themes are neutralized during the idealizing phase of the marriage; once marital trouble is experienced and defined, they emerge as clinical problems. I propose that people in age-discrepant marriages neutralize stigma through the denial and refocusing techniques described below, protecting their relationship from the implications of stigma. By contrast, I expect that people who seek counseling for what they perceive as marital trouble redefine cultural stigma as legitimate, and seek to change themselves.

## Methods

This paper is based on fifteen intensive interviews with older women (7) and younger men (8) involved in age-discrepant marriages (5), cohabitation (2), or divorce (1 man) (see Table 1). The sample was a non-clinical one of self-referrals from older woman-younger man couples known to the two researchers and three graduate assistants. The original plan was to interview each partner in the relationship, although we had some refusals (see Table 1). Most of the interviews were done individually, although the interviews with Iris and Joe and with Lilian oc-

**Table 1**  
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Wife	Husband	Length M	Prior M	Children
Sally 41	Bart 31	3 months	F-1; M-1	M-3
Belinda** 49	Keith* 37	7 years	F-3	F-4
Beatrice 46	Cliff 36	6 years	F-1	F-2
Iris 40	Joe 32	2 years	F-1	F-2
Lilian 48	George# 29	3 years	F-1	F-2
Maria 43	Arturo 28	3 mo.	M-1	M-1
Michaela 63	Joel** 53	18 years	F-1; M-1	F-3

\* divorced respondent  
 \*\* spouses who were not interviewed  
 # cohabiting; not formally married

curred jointly. With the exception of that interview, where two interviewers were present, the interviews were done with one member of the study team.<sup>1</sup>

The interview questions were designed to explore several areas of the relationship between older women and younger men in our society, focusing on the interplay between gender, age, and power-resources. We asked questions concerning traditional and nontraditional elements of gender roles, life stage concerns (since a marriage between a woman of 35 and a man of 25 presents different issues than one between a woman of 55 and a man of 35), sexuality and body image, history of age-discrepant relationships, and issues of children, childlessness, and stepchildren. We were concerned with the response of family, friends and colleagues to the relationship, and with the respondent's sense of self.

The focus in this paper on stigma was an unexpected outcome, rather than a focus of the interviews—although given the nature of the interview as a social form, it should not have been quite so unexpected. Self-scrutiny and techniques of neutralization are provoked by the expectation or experience of stigma. Combining the method of interviewing with a stigmatized topic, the interviewer (even one who is personally known) represents the generalized other as the embodiment of social standards and norms, while the interview method of studying a stigmatizing topic presents a natural occasion for the recounting of techniques of neutralization (Harkess and Warren 1993).

These women accepted the status quo when it came to their own interpretations of age discrepancy. They felt and in some cases internalized stigma, with its attendant feelings of shame and embarrassment. Their husbands defended their wives, and age discrepancy, but in the language of stigma-recognition: “she’s young at heart.” Only one woman, an academic, framed her experiences within a feminist critique of patriarchy. It is to their meanings, not those of a critique of patriarchy (however valid) that this analysis turns.

## The Couples

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are given in Table 1. The age difference between the older women and younger men ranged from eight to twenty years, while the duration of the relationships were from a few months to 18 years. The age range of the women was from 40 to 63, and of the men from 25 to 53. The socioeconomic level of the respondents ranged from lower class (a maid and a hospital orderly) to lower middle (a park attendant and a computer technician) to upper middle class (professional couples), with a concentration in the lower middle class. In all but two cases (Cliff and Beatrice, where his was much higher, and Lilian and George, where they were equal) the woman’s income exceeded the man’s. Only in one case (Keith), where the husband was a graduate student at the time of the marriage was this discrepancy only a cohort effect rather than a class difference. All the respondents were white and Anglo except for Maria and Arturo, who were Hispanic immigrants. All were urban or suburban Californians, aside from Michaela and Joel who lived in rural California.

Most of the women and some of the men had had previous marriages, all of them ended by divorce (in one case annulment) rather than death. Only one couple, Pete and Joelle, had their own child, aged five,

although one wife had had an abortion, two had had miscarriages and one (Maria) got pregnant just after the interview. Most of the women and some of the men had children from previous marriages. Given the age discrepancy and typical gendered patterns in custody after divorce, the women's offspring were generally grown and out of the household, while the men's were younger but also generally in the ex-wife's household. Sally and Bart, however, had custody of Bart's three children from his previous marriage, while Lilian and Gary lived with Lilian's 20 and 12 year olds. Keith had lived with his wife's youngest child from her third marriage, but not with her older children from her previous two marriages.

The visual aspect of age discrepancy emerged from the respondents' stories as the most significant aspect of their experience as a couple in the world outside the household. To the interviewers, the age difference between these men and women was visually apparent. Exceptions were Joelle and Pete, and Sally and Bart, who seemed to the interviewers to be the same age. None of the women appeared to have made an attempt to appear much younger than they were; most used little or no makeup and did not dye their hair. Some were dressed in nonyouthful formal clothes, while others dressed in a casual, low-key style associated with no particular age group. Most of the men did appear somewhat older than their stated ages, generally because of beards and mustaches, and sometimes because of clothes that tended toward the baggy, grey, and nondescript.

### *Love and Marriage*

Most of the respondents regarded their involvement in an age discrepant relationship as incidental to the fact that they fell in love with someone of a different age. But two saw a pattern in their behavior. Beatrice said that she had dated only younger men since her divorce in the early 1970s: "It just seemed that the younger ones were drawn to me, and I was drawn to the younger ones. I really did not enjoy the men a few years older than myself, or my age." Keith described his attraction to his ex-wife, and to his previous fiancée also fourteen years older than he, as not so much an attraction to older women as an attraction to women around 38-40 [he subsequently, at 40, married a woman of 39].

By definition, these respondents did not conceal their ages from one another. But the beginning of several relationships involved unawareness or concealment of the woman's age. Cliff said of his first encounter with Beatrice:



When I first met her she was just showing me through the apartment house and oh, I thought she was pretty good looking, you know, and I didn't know what her age was either. . . . I figured she was a little older than me, but I didn't know how much because she looked a lot younger than her age. . . . I think she was 48 then.

Sally was the only woman in the sample who "passed" as younger quite intentionally, by virtue of her appearance and chosen social circle. She attempted to conceal her age from her husband-to-be, but he found it out by looking in her wallet at her driver's license, and then told her co-workers. She said that she "Didn't want the people at work to know how old I was. They'd view me in a different light and that I'm not part of the mainstream."

In describing their courtship and bonding, both the men and the women described an initial irrelevance of the age discrepancy to their mutual attraction, and a subsequent relevance of age-related qualities to the continuation of the relationship. Pete's description of the development of his relationship with Joelle expresses the "in spite of" tone of all the respondents' (except Beatrice and Keith's) accounts of how they got involved:

Well, see, it wasn't something that was presented to me as an option—how would you like to develop a relationship with a woman who is significantly older than you?. . . . First we became best friends and we really hit it off well. . . . things happened pretty quickly. . . . a real relationship based on friendship and communication on issues of real importance and that's what gave us a foundation for developing a loving relationship. . . . by the time it was taking a romantic turn, it, the age factor, was not important enough to cause us to just make an arbitrary decision—well, we're going to have to stop this thing because you're older than me.

The younger men spoke of special qualities due to age in the older women they were involved with, including depth, nurturing, sexuality, maturity, responsibility, and financial security. Pete contrasted young "superficial . . . dings" with Joelle, an older "real person . . . three-dimensional." Keith said of Belinda, "I like being nurtured and that's another thing about older women vs. younger women," and "With younger women I found them much less interested in sex than either Belinda or [a previous older woman fiancée] turned out to be." The theme of responsibility and maturity was also proffered:

Arturo: I decided to get married with her because I think she's more, uh, she has more years, and I don't want to go in the same way like the first time. My first marriage was a lot of problems.

Both Keith and Arturo spoke of the financial security marriage to an older woman would bring as one of the elements of their attraction. The older women spoke of special needs embodied in the younger men, which they, because of greater age and maturity, were able to fulfill. Michaela described how her husband had "a temper . . . a chemical imbalance," and how it was she that had helped him to cope with this, and with his consequently troubled relationships with his children from an earlier marriage. They spoke of an ability to handle, manage, or otherwise cater to their difficult husbands:

Michaela: I can work circles around him. And he'll say that too.

Maria: He is messy and needs training because he is young.

Some of the men concurred in the women's depiction of them as damaged, problematic or in some way in need of salvation. Pete described himself as "the guy she fell in love with, me, he had some growing up to do. I'm not sure it's all done yet." His specific referent was a "coke problem" upon which he was spending most of his income, a problem which "She saw me through" despite his being "out of control." Joelle's assessment of him was that "He's dependent on me for emotional support."

The older women spoke of their initial attraction as rapid and intense. Sally said, "It took about fifteen minutes until I knew I was interested" in Bart. Their accounts focused, subsequently, mainly on the ways which they met their husbands' needs. But for a couple of the still-youthful older women, with memories of painful divorces, marriage to a younger man represented a renewal of youth and hopefulness:

Joelle: just growing up [when he did] made them a lot more spontaneous and not so step by step . . . I was very much . . . 1950s. He taught me to be spontaneous . . . I felt [when they married] like I was twenty two again, a chance to do it right. He was prince charming to me.

The women spoke of problems in their marriages much more freely than the men, and were not hesitant to attribute problems to age difference. Despite Keith's celebration of the sexuality of older women, two of the older women said that sex was a problem in their marriages, because their interest in sex was winding down with age. Cliff said that his wife's "ending of sexual desire" consequent upon taking blood pressure medicine was not a problem in that "I have come to the conclusion . . . I've had a lot of relationships in the past, all sex and no love, and I'd rather have this, where there's a little bit of sex and a lot of love."

The paradox of older woman/younger man relationships in our culture inheres in Joelle's and Cliff's comments. Joelle, who celebrated her husband's spontaneity, also expressed its other side:

he . . . didn't care a bit if we paid our bills, and that would drive me nuts . . . so there has to be some happy medium there. So what's positive about that can also be negative about that.

What is appealing about age and cohort difference is also unappealing. And, for Cliff, neutralization of the significance of sexuality in his life was the consequence, ultimately, of his commitment to a much older woman.

### **Relationships as Stigma**

The stigma of age discrepancy is, in essence, that of the dialectic of lover and beloved set against that of parent and child. The lover and beloved are sexual; the parent and child are not. The child is spontaneous (delightful) and irresponsible (to be trained differently), the adult mature and responsible. Western culture represents the older woman and younger man as mother and child, an imagery and accusation—since mother and child are not supposed to be lover and beloved—of which all the respondents were well aware.

The imagery of mother and child framed the two self-discourses of these couples: the **embodied self** of the visibly aged or young person, and the **cohort self** of the person belonging to a particular generation with all its history and taken for granted understandings. In general, in our gendered culture, the embodied self is more problematic for women than men; this problem is amplified considerably when women marry younger men. The cohort self links one to a set of others presumably suited for friendship and marriage; marriage to someone a cohort older or younger fractures the taken for granted sharing of experiences and networks.

#### *The Embodied Self*

For these couples, the most salient public problem was the embodied self of the woman, the fear of her looking older than the man, perhaps even old enough to be taken for his mother. Their wives' embodied selves became problematic for the men as the women grew older. Reflecting on his ex-wife, Keith said:

she seemed to be more fake as I got to know her better. Breast enlargements, colored hair, grey to blond. Also her hearing was, at age 44, kind of hard for her to hear, kind of like my grandmother.

For many of these men, the progress of time rendered their wives' bodies increasingly divergent both from an idealized youthful body and from the body she presented during the first months of the relationship. The aging wife represented both public and private departure from cosmetic and marital ideals.

During the interview with Cliff, this 36 year old husband of 56 year old Beatrice had spent twenty minutes detailing the positive aspects of his relationship. In response to the interviewer's question, "Any negatives?" he said:

Anytime that I had the feeling that people were looking at us, although it might not have been, say I'm walking through a parking lot and holding her hand. Now that we've both aged the amount we have, you can tell the difference in our ages better.

I: You're saying she's aged more than you.

Well, no . . . just different. But anyway that would have been about the only time, but then I got over that. . . . I'd have to say, when we were younger, it was harder to tell there was an age difference, but now there is. . . . I worry about that sort of thing because women age faster than men. Women are expected to look more youthful than men.

The stigma of gendered age discrepancy devolves around the cultural demand for "women to look more youthful than men," indeed, around the cultural focus on the embodied self as culture's mirror. Cliff, like the other women and men in the study, was hyper-aware both of his wife's body, and of audience reaction to the dyad.

The women echoed these concerns. Beatrice described her present self as problematic physically, and her projected, future bodily self as increasingly so:

I: What does the age difference mean to you in terms of the way you feel about yourself?

That is an interesting question and that is one of the sorest points there is. I am going to be 66 in 10 years and he is going to only be 46, and I'm going to be 76 and he'll be 56, and I'm going to be a shriveled up old lady and he's going to be in his prime . . . I am even now, just started about a year ago, trying to do something about wrinkles.

Sally, who recently gained 25 pounds, experienced stigma in the “snide remarks” directed at the disjunctive appearance of the couple in terms of the visual pairs young/slender, older/fat:

I asked Bart if he were embarrassed, because I know how [his fellow firefighters] can be, and I said to him when we were dating, did anyone make snide remarks to you, and he admitted they did, but he would never tell me the words . . . he’s a very handsome man. . . . My mother made a very snide remark the day I was moving. . . . in with Bart, she said to me, you know, Bart is an extremely handsome man, what do you think he sees in you?

As Goffman (1961) notes, some stigmata can be removed or modified, while others can be hidden. Concealment of true age is one strategy that can be used in age-discrepant relationships, as Sally had attempted a year or two earlier. Age is cosmetically modifiable to some degree in the direction of more youthfulness. Modification of the embodied self was one response made by these women, or suggested by the men. Lilian, at 48, insisted that she was going to have a face-lift so not to be wrinkled, like her sister, at 60 (with her own 42 year old lover). Arturo encouraged his wife to look younger by wearing miniskirts, because “if she was still wearing those older kind of dresses I would see her more older than she is.” In a miniskirt, when he looked at Maria he saw her “pretty, and I can see the person, the one I want.”

Although marriage in Western culture is embedded in social structural relations such as social class, income, education, wealth and status, the lived experience of marriage in these age-discrepant relationships is one of visual appearance in the public mirror. Income and education do not show in the body. The epitome of shame and misery for the mirrored self of the woman, reflected in the man’s embarrassment, was to be taken for the husband’s mother. This was mentioned by three of the women, ironically—since hers was the smallest age difference in the sample—one was Iris:

when I had my miscarriage . . . [the doctor thought Joe] was my son. . . . I had that happen before not with my husband but with another man I was dating. It’s horrible to me. But I’ve steeled myself to it.

During the joint part of the interview, Iris said that this had not happened another time, but Joe said that it had:

On the trip this summer, someone said, ‘your boy,’ talking about me.

The timing of concern with the couples' public embodiment differed between husbands and wives. For the wives, the most difficult period in the relationship was at the beginning, when they felt that everyone was looking at them. For the husbands, their wives' aging process brought the difference into focus over time. Beatrice said of her first months with Cliff that she felt that everyone was staring at them. Cliff described an in-love obliviousness to the public gaze that gradually gave way to a greater awareness. Joelle said, "I did in the beginning feel that it was obvious, and I was a little self-conscious, but again, all that is gone."

The husbands' embodied selves were seen both by themselves and by the wives as problematic for their adherence to, rather than deviance from, cultural standards such as handsomeness, slenderness, and youthfulness. Our culture provides the vocabulary and technology of youth-retention: hair dying, cosmetics, plastic surgery, diet, youthful clothing, and exercise, usable by the women to equalize the appearance of age discrepancy (although, as indicated above, most did not appear to have done this). There is no parallel vocabulary and technology for increasing the aging appearances. However, there were indications that these men sought an aging of the adornments of the body: clothes, facial hair, and length of hair. These aspects of the men's selves were linked to their cohort self.

### *The Cohort Self*

In the private relational and symbolic world of marriage, the cohort self-mirrored and underlined the age discrepancy between these men and women. Both the web of group affiliation to which each spouse belonged by virtue of age, and the cultural symbolism common to that cohort, were problematic to these women and men. The youthfulness of the husband's cohort, and the age of the wife's cohort, were both problematic:

Keith: Friends . . . this was a perennial problem. We looked for friends that got along. Most of my friends didn't want much to do with her, a lot of her friends were **old** friends, about 50 years old, and to me, at the time, they were talking about Brahms and raising their teenage kids, and I felt . . . that I didn't have a lot to offer them, a lot of competition about, I felt I was being pulled between two life situations.

Iris: that is the only way where age has been an issue—a way in which cohort experiences impact the relationship. He might have some friends, girlfriends of some of his male friends, and they re-

ally are young women . . . they're yucky, they're young women in their twenties and I feel I have absolutely nothing in common with them. So that's almost an issue, but there are sets of friends that he was friendly with and I don't particularly enjoy socializing with them, so we just don't socialize with them.

Milt, too, described the tactic of not socializing with the younger cohort as a way of minimizing the relational competition between cohort and younger man: "I wasn't inclined to get involved with my own age group while I was in graduate school. It seemed that I had too many things to do to get in with somebody that needed me."

For the wives, clothing and hair styles symbolized both the age contrast of the embodied self, and the cohort difference. In speaking of his wife's view of him, Milt commented:

I remember. . . . her requesting many times that I cut my hair . . . [which was] in a pony tail. Well I mean . . . when we would go to her parents it was always very uncomfortable, so she would say, 'when are you going to cut that,' and 'when are you going to grow up and get serious about life.' . . . Cuz her children had long hair too.

Milt did indeed cut his hair and learn to dress more "maturely," in shirts and slacks instead of jeans and shorts. In response to the reverse cosmetic effect of facial hair, Milt grew a beard, and said of his wife

she liked it. . . . when I grew it she came in and said, 'you look, you look—' and I said, 'older,' and she said, 'yeah, you look older.' and I said, 'OK, that must work out alright.'

At least five of the younger men interviewed wore beards at the time of the interview.<sup>2</sup> Beatrice said of her husband's beard, "I've never seen him without a mustache and beard. And I don't want to. And I don't want anyone else to."

Cohort membership is symbolized to people socialized from the 1960s on, by attachment to musical styles, which, in turn, reflect attachment to a generation. No questions were asked in the interviews about music, but music came up in virtually every interview. After a discussion of age-appearance in dress, for example, Arturo said, "She like the music the one I like. Because, uh, I was thinking about it before I get married with her."

Sally said that she and her husband used to have most of their arguments about his music (rock and roll) versus her music (classical). In response to the question "what do you think the minuses are regarding the age difference?", Joelle replied:

I try to appreciate his music, and I've gone with him to events, but I think he's coming more to my way of thinking, we're in the middle now, easy rock.

Rock and roll or heavy metal music underline the youth cohort membership of the husband, and the distance between the wife's and husband's generations. As in the case of Milt's long hair, the young husband playing rock music reminds the older wife of her own children's musical tastes, and evokes the same specter of the wife as mother, husband as son, evoked by the mirroring of the embodied self. Only Lilian described in positive terms this musical distancing between herself and her mate, and linkage between her mate and her child (a 20 year old son):

I: How does [son] feel about George?

He adores him. He's an expert in rock music so they sit and talk rock music by the hour. . . . I'm not interested in it.

The differences in cohort also meant, for all but one of these couples (Cliff and Beatrice), a disjuncture in the traditional gender patterns of occupation and income. The lower SES level of most of the husbands, coupled with their younger age, resulted in either lesser or (in two cases) no earnings on the part of the husband. The income problem was an irritant in itself to many of these wives; it also symbolized the dependency of childhood. Sally described how her husband's messy habits, coupled with his economic dependence and student status, made her feel as if he were making her into his mother:

The word that came out of my mouth this morning is, Bart, your mother doesn't live here and I don't want to be one.

I: do you feel he gives that role to you?

He tries. . . . I said, you know, Bart, I'm not your mother and I don't want the role. . . .

None of the men directly mentioned feeling as if they were their wives' children, and only Keith referred to an alternative, more sexualized definition, that of gigolo. He said that

There was a little bit of my feeling that people were treating me like a gigolo, or wondered, I had a friend who came through saying, 'oh great, this one has a house' . . . Have you seen the movie 'American Gigolo?'; it's just like a connection, bang, bang.

Keith added at another point that he did "not feel like a child. More like a mascot. More like a lover than a husband. Perhaps I should have stayed that way."



Cohort differences also brought about disjunctions in typical age-related family patterns. Although some of the husbands had been married before and had children then, most did not expect to have children with their current wives. Cliff and George had stepchildren older than themselves; they and Keith became “grandparents” in their twenties and thirties.

### **Techniques of Neutralization**

These women and men did not simply accept the stigma of age discrepancy, but acted and spoke in ways that countered it. The wives, as I have described above, tried to alter their physical selves and the cosmetic appearance of their husbands, while the husbands went along with the collaborative aging of their embodied and cohort selves. In the interviews, the accounts the respondents gave of their age-discrepant marriages included techniques of neutralization, which focused not so much on the self—which was obdurately cohort-linked, and only temporarily modifiable—but on transforming the cultural meaning of the relationship. Among the techniques of neutralization were various forms of denial, refocusing, and equalization.

The cultural meaning of the relationship—and thus the sources of stigma—revolved, for the men, around physical appearance, and family structure. Denial of the importance of appearance was effected globally and explicitly by denying that the chronology or the appearance of age discrepancy had any meaning at all. “Age is just a number” was a phrase used by three of the respondents to deny the cultural meaning of gendered age-discrepant relationships.

The husbands neutralized discrepant family structures by denying their cultural meaning. Cliff, for example, described his premature grandparent status as “neat” and “fun.” Cliff and those other husbands whose wives were past childbearing age at the time of marriage neutralized the stigma of childlessness by denial of the wish for children. These husbands did not deny the value of children in general, they simply said that they had never wanted children, or wanted the particular relationship more than they wanted children. Of the still-married, only Cliff said that “Sometimes, I feel like I miss” having children.

The wives also neutralized discrepant family structures by denying that their husbands wanted or needed children. Lilian, for example, legitimated their eighteen-year age-discrepant relationship in the context of George’s unsuitability for fatherhood:

I'm the person that he's chosen to have this permanent relationship with. . . . He wants to mate and settle down, but he does not want children. . . . he loves parenting my children. . . . For a long time I thought he was fooling himself, but I think he's right, I think given his personality and who he is that he would have enormous difficulties raising a very young child. Basically I am not sure he could do it.

These comments were also echoed in other husbands' and wives' insistence that the men were more suited to be stepfathers than to be natural fathers.

For the wives, the most emotionally wrenching problem of their appearance as part of the age-discrepant couple was the fear, or experience, of being mistaken for mother and son. This public stigmatization was mirrored in the domestic sphere, with the spouses' daily activities potentially labeled as symbolizing motherhood or childhood. Joelle denied the age-meanings of the wife-mother by endowing it with universal gender meaning: "I think sometimes that all wives are moms." Her husband, however, saw himself in childlike terms as "the kid . . . having some growing up to do."

There was some acceptance, implicit or explicit, of the mother-child attribution. Maria said that Arturo "is messy and needs training because he is young," while Arturo said that "I married an old person because I thought she would appreciate me." Joelle, having responded "no" to the question of mothering Pete, nevertheless said later in the interview:

Have you seen that movie 'Big'? . . . well, in that movie a character, a boy who wishes to be big gets the body of a 30 year old but the mind of a 12 year old. But the things you see about the 12 year old that don't disgust you, because they're in a grown-up are refreshing! And Pete had maintained a sense of adventure and totally being able to get involved in almost anything, like a child would look at a leaf and still be able to be fascinated with it.

And, as Sally described Bart, above, the disjunction of cohorts led to an echoing of mother and child within the everyday life rounds of some of these marriages.

The cultural meaning of age discrepancy was also neutralized by a process of refocusing: focusing the gaze of the observer away from the stigma of age discrepancy by refocusing it onto an alternative stigma or an alternative cultural value. Milt refocused the couple's mirror image on height, equalizing the cultural stigma of discrepant height with that of discrepant age:

when we would go to malls and things like that she reported many times that she noticed that people would notice us. That there was something about this relationship that wasn't quite right. She's also taller than me by about two inches so if she doesn't wear flats we look very odd (laughter) in the standard sense.

Sally said that she felt embarrassed in the relationship not because of "my age-self but because of my obese-self."

In one of the dyads, the stigma was refocused on the husband, who was described by both partners as a drug addict, odd looking, and (in contrast with his wife) ill-educated and sporadically employed. Joelle described her family's reaction to Pete: "my sister's first reaction was, can't you do any better than that. And my mother . . . we tried so hard to get her to. . . . get past what he looked like." Pete gave an almost exactly similar description, indicating that couples may jointly construct techniques of neutralization within their joint reality constructions (Berger and Kellner 1970).

One type of refocusing on alternative cultural values embodied in age-discrepant relationships involved the value of a time-matched lifespan as against death and widowhood. Early widowhood could be avoided by the matching of younger male and older female biologies. Several respondents referred to the differential longevity of males and females in our society, and its future impact on widowhood:

Pete: we realized that . . . we had probably done the best thing in the world biologically, you go to my family's home town . . . they call the house widow's rest because there's like eight sisters, all widows, we stand a lot better chance of not abandoning her to years alone. As for a new emerging policy [sic] for couples it makes sense you know.

A second refocusing technique involved refocusing on the alternative cultural value of depth, interestingness or "inside" qualities, rather than the visual, appearance ones.

Pete: if I was going to pick out of a lineup and name the ones who were pretty, I am sure I would pick younger ones over older ones if there were no more to it than that. You can't communicate with beauty, you can only look at beauty. And, uh, that's not what relationships are made of. . . . She was a real person, she was three-dimensional.

The meaning of age-discrepant appearance, which is clearly of great importance to the women's mirrored selves, was neutralized by Cliff's assuring his wife that "it's your insides that matter, not your outsides. He

always tries to tell me that." Only Sally, of the seven women, expressed unconcern about the age difference or aging process, precisely because her mirror told her she looked 31, not 41.

Equalization of age was also described in biological terms, with some of the women and men claiming that the men were "really" as old as or older than the women because of poor genetics or poor habits. Lilian said of herself and George:

I've gotten more energetic as I have aged. I've got more energy now than when I was twenty. . . . I think about ten years from now he's going to be a physical wreck and I'm going to be in great shape. I think I'll still be running up the mountains ten years from now, and that he will be in very bad physical condition. I worry about him, I talk to him all the time about the fact that he's got to get out and exercise 'cause his body's going.

Age equalization had a mirrored, public as well as a private, aspect. Michaela gleefully told an anecdote about her husband (at 53) rather than her (at 63) being offered a senior citizen discount. She also said, "he's gotta keep up with me. No way. He's a stick in the mud sometimes. . . . he's older than me."

These respondents equalized the age difference in life experience as well as biological terms, denying the difference in cohort between man and woman. The two couples who met in graduate school (Bart and Sally, and Keith and the older woman he dated prior to his marriage) made use of this technique. Keith, for example, said that "Melissa and I were much more contemporaries, fellow graduate students." This equalization was completed by the fact that Melissa had spent fifteen years as a nun, thus erasing any meaningful cohort or personal history that might make her older than Keith.

## Discussion

In summarizing the results of several clinical studies of older women and younger men, Singer-Magdoff (1988) finds "some degree of pathology" (not surprisingly in a clinical study). She comments that

The women in the December-May group apparently had unavailable, narcissistically involved mothers and highly competitive fathers who were high achievers and with whom the women tended to identify. The men in these relationships had powerful mothers and passive-aggressive fathers, some high achievers. (Singer-Magdoff 1988, 144).

She also reports “somewhat successful” “attempts to rectify early environment deficits . . . in these December-May relationships” since these younger men are “freer and not afraid to be expressive and nurturant.” (p. 144).

The wives in this study referred not so much to their families of origin, but to earlier marriages to same-age or older husbands. A number of them were quite literal about their second marriages as rectifying the earlier “mistaken” marriage, and being given a second chance. They also contrasted their younger husbands as freer and more spontaneous, sometimes as more sexually sensitive—but not nurturing. The traditional nature of most of these marriages meant that the wives did most of the nurturing as well as most of the household chores.

Belinda, during her marriage to Keith, performed every single domestic chore, including ironing his underwear. Sally, whose husband was not working at the time of the interview, said that Bart

won't cook . . . [after she came back from work that evening] he said . . . 'well, what are you going to make me?' 'Well, there's some chicken in there, you just have to heat it up.' But, he wouldn't even put it in the microwave. So, I had to get up, take it out of the refrigerator, and put it in the microwave.

Beatrice, who worked only two nights a week, expressed gratitude that her marriage, and her husband's supportiveness, enabled her to be a traditional wife:

Well, you have to remember that I am 56 years old, and way back then the man went off to work and the woman stayed home and took care of the children, and I'm used to that.

Milt described how his wife came to him to ask for money to make purchases, and explained her behavior as cohort-linked: “I keep relating it to when she was raised, the time period.” Pete said of his contribution to household labor, “Well, I'm pretty passive in a lot of areas.”

Both cohort self and stigma may be involved in what was to the research team a surprising degree of traditional gender dynamics in household arrangements associated with nontraditional age relations. These women were, indeed, raised in a cohort earlier than the men in which it was assumed that the women would perhaps stay home and take care of the children, but certainly take care of household and children when they were at home. But we wondered if the women's (with the exception of Lilian) literal obeisance to the men's needs might re-

flect stigma indirectly, as a sense of obligation and gratitude, and lack of entitlement to the equality a younger woman might demand.

But perhaps this is a gender/income issue. Hochschild (1990), in her study of domestic labor among married couples, speculates that the extra domestic labor performed by women who out earned their husbands, as compared with those of equal incomes, was a form of apology for their income superiority. Beyond age and income, in Michaela's view, her catering to her husband was simply a gender issue: "I found out, women have to cater to men. Every one of them has some sort of bee up their bonnet."

Paradoxically, however, virtually all the women claimed in one way or another that they were dominant in the relationship in some indefinable way—perhaps as dominant as a mother, or mentor. This dominance was expressed most forcefully by Lilian, who said:

I'm completely in control in this relationship. It's very weird. . . . because basically I'm very free of the need for a relationship. He's not. . . . I can offer him all the glitter and glamor he'd never get on his own. . . . he comes from a working class family. . . . this is very exciting and wonderful to him. He's very proud of my success and he likes the money.

The reciprocal of dominance is passivity, or perhaps chaos. As noted above, several of the men described their lives prior to their involvement with an older woman as powerless or chaotic. Joel was a manic-depressive; Michaela saw that he got lithium pills and took them. Bart had no money and nowhere to live in the aftermath of a traumatic divorce; Sally took him in. Arturo said he married Maria after his divorce "because I needed a work permit." Keith said that when he and Belinda met, "she was real active and I was kind of passive in the process." Keith captures the ironies of dominance and subordination among younger men and older women when he says, "She had more power in some ways, more income, more things. But I think there's power in being younger. That was always a concern." The irony is that the active woman with the higher income ironed his underwear.

In early youth, men must disidentify with their mothers in order to become men as our culture defines maleness. Marriage and the subsequent domestication of sexuality and the life-round may come to reconstitute the early dilemma of identification and disidentification for men. Women may seek to shape and control their husbands' behaviors in ways that echo parenting. These emergent mother-son dynamics can occur in any marriage. But I believe that the structure of age-discrepant

marriage itself, amplified by the cultural meanings of such marriages, casts this scenario into a virtual inevitability.

All these women reflected upon both the psychodynamic and cultural stigma of the parental within marriage. Their voices speak from the tension of acceptance and denial:

Belinda: I really did not enjoy the men a few years older than me or my age, they were for one thing all macho and looking for the young girls. So, I don't know, the younger ones took to me. In that article, it said that maybe its a mother thing, who knows, but it doesn't seem like a mother thing.

And from the tension of nurturing and resentment:

Michaela: I'm the type of person that needs someone to take care of. I like to take care of people. I like doing it. I wait on him hand and foot if I can. Just like tonight he came out, he'd been in the jacuzzi with [male friend] and he took a shower and says, you know I want to brush my hair, I wish you'd wash my brush. Well what the hell's wrong with him going and washing that brush? So, I went in and washed his brush for him.

The men were much more reticent. Only Pete and Keith alluded to the son-ness of their emotional bond. But Bart was forthright about the son-ness of his financial bond. He said to the interviewer in a subsequent conversation at a social event: "I married Sally because she earns \$60,000 a year and that will put me through school."

## Conclusion

The uneven psychodynamic, cultural, structural, and gendered set of relations between older men and younger women arises from the context of contemporary Western marriage, and from stigma—the public and private distrust of intimacy between older women and younger men. When older women and younger men are embarking on what they perceive as viable marriages, they protect the sense of self and other in the relationship by neutralization techniques. When older women and younger men enter the clinical setting, or contemplate divorce, the stigma of age discrepancy may be affirmed rather than denied or neutralized.

The central feature of stigma for the women in these marriages is the visual: the appearance of an older woman with a younger man. For the men, it is the cohort: exile from one's proper age group and place in history. But the lurking fear, for both, is the relation between child and

parent: the playing out in the marriage of a mother and a son, and the absence of a mutual child within the marriage.

What, given a theory of stigma, can clinicians expect from older women and younger men? Once couples decide that they are experiencing troubles and seek help, the mutual and individual neutralization of stigma may give way to a redefinition of stigma as legitimate rather than illegitimate. The husband may reconnect with cultural themes related to fathering children, and to the definition of involvement with older women as related to being mothered. He may take up the woman's theme of visual differentiation, and begin to find his wife's appearance problematic. He will re-connect with his cohort.

The wife may, in turn, take up the theme of the cohort self, re-finding her own place in an age cohort with its more sedate musical expression. She will approach the youth-reviving techniques of our culture with renewed tenacity, blaming her own aging for the breakdown of the marriage. Perhaps she will come to define herself as having sought to mother this younger man. The psychodynamic principles of suppression, repression, and the Oedipal-parental origins of current problems will be pressed into service by spouses as well as clinicians to replace techniques of neutralization.

This is the prediction of stigma theory to a clinical setting; it is borne out by our interview with Keith, the divorced man, and contact with him and his ex-wife throughout their marriage and divorce. His post-divorce comments indicate a marital history of neutralization followed by a separation-linked reinterpretation:

she was seeking a bearded entity to father more children. I didn't know that was her agenda, so I was kind of agenda-ized by her without my knowing it clearly. . . . the negative thing for me was the rush to have children. . . . Another negative thing was just the complications inherent, she was married twice before, she had a stepdaughter, a son and a daughter, none of which I particularly wanted, then she had two daughters from the second marriage that I was very close to . . .

I: was this sort of an attraction for you, that she had some of the things you didn't have?

K: Oh yes. In part some of the difficulty now is that since we've been separated I'm sort of growing up all over again . . . I think consciously and to a larger extent unconsciously, I had an instant family to walk into. I didn't have to make those decisions. I had to catch up real quickly. It was illusory in some ways, but I kind of caught up real quickly SES wise . . . I was an overnight success . . . But it was in a pretty illusionary sense.



Thus, in the waning or aftermath of an age-discrepant marriage, the real becomes illusory, and the illusory real. What seemed, during the days of idealization, to be the cultural illusion of stigma now becomes the suppressed reality. What seemed to be the reality of a good relationship now becomes illusory. This process, of course, occurs in the wake of any relational breakdown. It is the content, not the structure of the redefinitions which will vary with age discrepancy and other marital patterns. And it is this content that is shaped by the interaction of psychodynamic with the cultural images of ideal marriages, and of stigmatized ones.

### NOTES

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2. Unfortunately, the significance of beards did not appear until after the interviews were completed, so that the visual descriptions of the couples did not always indicate whether or not the man had facial hair.

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