

Examining Nursing Students' Attitudes Towards the Elderly and Factors Affecting Attitudes Towards the Elderly

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Abstract

Background: The elderly population is growing and health care professionals are now providing more care to elderly people. **Objectives:** This study was conducted in order to examine the attitudes of nursing students towards the elderly and the relationship between their personal characteristics and these attitudes. **Methods:** A cross-sectional descriptive study design was used. The sample consisted of 357 students. The data was collected between June and July in the 2016-2017 academic year using the Socio-demographic Characteristics Questionnaire and the Turkish version of Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People scale (KOGAN). **Results:** The average positive attitudes' score was 74.10 (SD 11.14), the average negative attitudes' score was 64.74 (SD 12.56) and the average total KOGAN score was 145.35 (SD 16.08). It was determined that more than half of the students were willing to work with elderly people after graduation (65%). Statistically significant differences were found with regard to place of longest residence (for positive attitudes, $p = .037$) and willingness to work with the elderly (for positive, negative and total attitudes, $p = .000$, $p = .031$, $p = .000$ respectively). Significant differences could not be found in terms of the other variables. **Conclusion:** The results of this study indicate that nursing students have slightly positive attitudes towards elderly. It is important that the nursing curriculum includes geriatric courses that will shape students' awareness and knowledge of how to care for elderly people and their attitudes toward the elderly. Adopting a more positive attitude towards the elderly will lead to more and higher quality care being provided for older people.

Keywords: Attitudes towards the elderly, Nursing students, Willingness to work with the elderly, Nursing curriculum.

Öz

Hemşirelik Öğrencilerinin Yaşlılara Yönelik Tutumları ve Yaşlılara Yönelik Tutumları Etkileyen Etmenler

Giriş: Yaşlı popülasyonunun her geçen gün hızla artmasına paralel olarak yaşlılarla çalışacak sağlık profesyonellerine olan ihtiyaç da artış göstermekte ve bu konuda eğitim almaları önem kazanmaktadır. **Amaç:** Bu araştırmanın amacı hemşirelik öğrencilerinin yaşlılara yönelik tutumlarını ve tutumu etkileyebilecek bireysel özellikleri belirlemektir. **Yöntem:** Kesitsel tanımlayıcı tipte bir araştırmadır. Araştırmanın yapılabildiği için gerekli kurum izni, etik kurul izni ve katılımcılardan onam alınmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklem büyüklüğü 357'dir. Veriler 2016-2017 akademik yılı içerisinde (Haziran-Temmuz 2017) toplanmıştır. Veri toplama formu olarak sosyo-demografik özellikler anket formu ve KOGAN yaşlılara yönelik tutum ölçeği kullanılmıştır. **Bulgular:** Ölçeğin pozitif tutum puan ortalaması 74.10 (SS 11.14), negatif tutum puan ortalaması 64.74 (SS 12.56), toplam ölçek puan ortalaması ise 145.35 (SS 16.08) olarak bulunmuştur. Mezun olduktan sonra yaşlılarla çalışmak isteyen öğrenci oranı %65'dir. İncelenen değişkenlerden en uzun yaşanan yer (pozitif tutum puan ortalaması $p=.037$) ve yaşlılarla çalışma istekliliği (pozitif, negatif ve toplam tutum puan ortalaması sırasıyla, $p= .000$, $p= .031$, $p= .000$) ile yaşlılara yönelik tutum arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı farklılık bulunmuştur. **Sonuç:** Hemşirelik öğrencilerin yaşlılara yönelik pozitif yönde bir tutum sergilediği sonucuna varılmıştır. Yaşlılara yönelik tutumu olumlu yönde geliştirmek ve bu konuda farkındalık yaratmak amacıyla hemşirelik müfredatlarının geriatri derslerini içermesi büyük önem taşımaktadır. Yaşlılara yönelik pozitif tutum sergileyen ve bu konuda kendini geliştiren öğrencilerin yaşlılara daha kaliteli bakım sunumunda görev alabilmesi mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşlılığa karşı tutum, Hemşirelik öğrencileri, Yaşlılarla çalışmaya isteklilik, Hemşirelik Müfredatı

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The population of the world is ageing dramatically. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 will nearly double from 12% to 22% (WHO, 2015). In almost every country, the proportion of people aged over 60 is growing faster than that of any other age group. In Turkey, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the ratio of elderly people was 8.2% in 2015 (Turkish Statistical Institute [TUİK], 2016) and the proportion of the older people will reach 10.2% in 2023 and 20.8% in 2050 (TUİK, 2014).

With an increase in the elderly population, physical disabilities, chronic disease and, in particular, cognitive disorders are increasing and this causes instability in health and welfare systems, which affects elderly people negatively (Lehning, Smith and Dunkle, 2015). The demand for health care services is also increased in the elderly population (Küçüküçlü, Mert and Akpınar, 2011). Therefore, health care professionals will need to provide more care to elderly people in the near future. It is important to learn nursing students' attitudes towards the elderly because the attitudes affect the quality of care provided and their career preferences (Liu, Norman and While, 2013; Turan, Yanardag and Metintas, 2016). Their attitudes need to be determined in order to ensure efficient planning and implementation of care for the elderly (Küçüküçlü et al., 2011). In addition, knowing nursing students' attitudes will be a data source for efforts aimed at improving the curriculum in nursing departments. However, many studies in literature have tended to evaluate health care conditions for old people, and their effects on the body's systems, rather than attitudes towards older people (Usta, Demir, Yönder and Yıldız, 2012).

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Some recent research has examined the attitudes towards the elderly in health sciences students (Algozo, Peters, Ramian and East, 2016; Faronbi, Adebowale, Faronbi, Musa and Ayamolowo, 2017; Rathnayake, Athukorala and Siop, 2016; Sözcürmaz and Mandıracıoğlu, 2017; Turan et al., 2016). Although there are many studies in the literature about positive attitudes towards the elderly (Ayoğlu et al., 2014; Darling, Sendir, Atay and Buyukyilmaz, 2017; Faronbi et al., 2017; Rathnayake et al., 2016; Sözcürmaz and Mandıracıoğlu, 2017; Turan et al., 2016; Zhang, Liu, Zhang, Meng and Liu, 2016), there are also studies about negative attitudes (Samra, Griffiths, Cox, Conroy, Gordon and Gladman, 2015; Tavares, Silva, Sa-Couto, Boltz and Capezuti, 2015).

There are also studies showing that the attitude towards the elderly is affected by education (Dy-Boarman, Nisly and Martin, 2017; Horstmanshof, Lingard, Coetzee and Waddell, 2016; Koh et al., 2015; Parsons, MacDonald, Hajek and Moddy 2015; Tufan et al., 2015; Turan et al., 2016). Healthcare professionals who will be providing care to the elderly need to have knowledge of and skills relating to the biopsychosocial needs and changes found in older people. While health care professionals are receiving vocational training, there is also a need for training and practical courses regarding the elderly. Students who have four years of education have a better attitude towards the elderly than students who have only received a two-year education. Throughout their four-year education, the attitude of students towards the elderly shows progress with each passing year (Kızılcı, Küçükgüçlü, Mert and Söylemez, 2013; Turan et al., 2016). The results of these studies have been interpreted as showing that nursing students are positively affected by this education. These results suggest that new adjustments should continue to be made to the education given and that the curricula could be enriched by providing better information and better teaching skills and practices that meet the needs of the elderly and increase the quality of their care (Algozo et al., 2016; Cheng, Cheng, Tian and 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). A gerontological nursing course has been included in undergraduate and graduate curricula in the United States and many European countries (Aydın, 1999). In Turkey, many nursing schools do not have any geriatrics courses. Ayoglu et al. (2014) stated that Turkish students felt that their education regarding the care of the elderly was inadequate.

When the relevant literature is reviewed, besides education, other factors affecting the attitudes of the students towards the elderly and their willingness to work with elderly are inconsistent and changeable. It is thus necessary to increase the number of research studies that examine attitudes towards the elderly population and to evaluate the possible relationships between students' attitudes and other variables such as age, gender, year of study, place of residence, experience of living with someone of 65 or older and willingness to work with the elderly. The current study was thus conducted in order to examine both nursing students' attitudes towards the elderly and the relationship between their personal characteristics and these attitudes. The research questions were:

1. What are nursing students' attitudes towards the elderly?
2. What are the factors that influence students' attitudes towards the elderly?

Methods

Study Design

This study was designed as a cross-sectional descriptive study.

Location of Study

The study was conducted from June to July in the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year between June and July 2017 at X University.

Study Population and Sampling

The participants in the study included students on a four-year program in the Department of Nursing. All student years were included in the study. There were 518 registered students of nursing in the faculty and 357 students (69%) participated in the study.

Data Collection Instruments

A Sociodemographic Characteristics Questionnaire and the Turkish Version of Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (KOGAN) were used. Students were informed about the purpose and significance of the study and were reminded that they were not obliged to participate. The questionnaire was distributed to students before lectures; they were asked to return the completed questionnaire within one week.

The Sociodemographic Characteristics Questionnaire; This form was prepared to obtain socio-demographic information about the students and data that could affect their attitudes towards the elderly. Age, gender, class level, prior experience of living with an elderly person and willingness to work in the field of geriatrics were among the data collected.

Turkish Version of the Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (KOGAN); Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale is an instrument that has been used to evaluate attitudes towards the elderly for more than 50 years. In the systematic review by Neville (2015), eight different scales which examine the attitudes of nursing students towards the elderly, and which had been used in 42 different studies published between 2008 and 2013, were investigated. Among these scales, Kogan's was described as the most trusted and most frequently used scale for measuring attitudes towards old people.

The scale is a Likert-type scale consisting of 34 items and six different answer levels following one another sequentially (Kogan, 1961). These answers are "strongly disagree", "slightly disagree", "disagree", "agree", "slightly agree" and "strongly agree". These categories score from 1 to 7 points respectively. An item to which no answer is given a score of 4. The scale contains 17 negative and 17 positive expressions about old people. The total score for the scale is calculated by adding the reversed scores of negative answers to the positive scores. The score that can be obtained from this scale developed by Kogan ranges between 34 and 238. A high score from the scale shows a positive attitude towards the elderly while a low

score indicates a negative attitude. In the reliability and validity study of the scale in Turkish, the internal consistency reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) was found to be .89 by Küçükgüçlü et al. (2011).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Program, version SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes towards the elderly and willingness to work with the elderly. The independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to group comparisons by socio-demographic variables. Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationship between attitudes towards the elderly and the age of participants. A value of $p < .05$ was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional permission was obtained from the university, and written informed consent was obtained from each student in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration. This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Institute of Health Sciences, X University, Turkey (2017/3GO2017/71).

Results

A total of 357 students of nursing participated in the current study. The mean age of participants was 21.07 (SD 2.24) years. The majority of the participants were female (69%). More than half of the student nurses had experience living with older family members at home (58%). It was determined that more than half of the students were willing to work with elderly people after graduation (65%). Other variables related to the students are showed in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Students

Socio-demographic Characteristics	X	SD
Age (years)	21.07	2.24
	n	%
Gender		
Female	247	69.2
Male	110	30.8
Year of study		
First year	120	33.6
Second year	73	20.4
Third year	87	24.4
Fourth year	77	21.6
Place of longest residence		
City	193	54.1
Rural Areas	88	24.6
Suburban Areas	76	21.3
Living with an elderly person		
Yes	206	57.7
No	151	42.3
Willingness to work with the elderly		
Yes	231	64.7
No	126	35.3

The average positive attitudes' score was 74.10 (SD 11.14), the average negative attitudes' score was 64.74 (SD 12.56), and the average total KOGAN score was 145.35 (SD 16.08) (Table 2).

Table 2. Average Scores of Students from the KOGAN Scale

	Min-Max	X	SD
Positive Score	21-105	74.10	11.14
Negative Score	24-108	64.74	12.56
Total Score	99-208	145.35	16.08

When the scores that students obtained from Kogan's scale were analysed in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics, while statistically significant differences were found by place of longest residence (for positive attitudes, $p = .037$) and willingness to work with the elderly (for positive, negative and total attitudes, $p = .000$, $p = .031$, $p = .000$, respectively), significant differences could not be found in terms of the other variables (Table 3). For place of longest residence, the students who lived in rural areas showed a more positive attitude towards the elderly. Students with more positive attitudes towards the elderly were found to be more willing to work with the elderly ($p = .000$, Table 3).

When the relationship between age and KOGAN score was examined with the Pearson's correlation test, no significant relationships were found ($p = .644$, Table 3).

Table 3. Socio-demographic Characteristics and KOGAN Mean Scores of the Nursing Students

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Positive Attitudes' Scores of KOGAN X (SD)	Negative Attitudes' Scores of KOGAN X (SD)	Total Scores of KOGAN X (SD)
Gender			
Female	74.14 (11.11)	64.25 (12.33)	145.89 (16.66)
Male	74.00 (11.27)	65.84 (13.07)	144.15 (14.67)
	t = .114, p = .909	t = -1.104, p = .270	t = .942, p = .347
Year of study			
First year	74.60 (11.11)	66.37 (12.21)	144.22 (15.21)
Second year	74.12 (11.89)	64.34 (12.95)	145.78 (17.57)
Third year	73.06 (11.72)	63.54 (13.02)	145.52 (14.34)
Fourth year	74.46 (9.86)	63.94 (12.19)	146.51 (17.88)
	F = .355, p = .786	F = .1068, p = .363	F = .351, p = .789
Place of longest residence			
City	73.59 (11.68)	64.22 (12.58)	145.36 (16.98)
Rural Areas	76.62 (10.72)	65.12 (12.94)	147.50 (14.47)
Suburban Areas	72.46 (9.82)	65.61 (12.18)	142.84 (15.29)
	F = 3.319, p = .037 ^a	F = .386, p = .680	F = 1.718, p = .181
Living with an elderly person			
Yes	74.77 (12.24)	64.62 (12.60)	146.15 (15.70)
No	72.97 (11.00)	64.95 (12.66)	144.62 (16.61)
	t = 1.497, p = .135	t = -.240, p = .811	t = 1.224, p = .222
Willingness to work with the elderly			
Yes	75.66 (11.13)	63.68 (12.71)	147.98 (16.50)
No	71.23 (10.63)	66.69 (12.11)	140.54 (14.10)
	t = 3.655, p = .000 ^a	t = -2.171, p = .031 ^a	t = 4.280, p = .000 ^a
Age			
Correlation coefficient (r) = .025			
p = .644			

^ap < .05

Discussion

Reported attitudes towards the elderly have sometimes been inconsistent, with positive, negative and neutral attitudes being noted in nursing students and with these attitudes appearing to be slightly less positive since 2000 (Liu et al., 2013). For this reason, it is important to determine the current attitudes of the nursing students towards the elderly and to develop them in a positive direction.

The nursing students who participated in the current study reported slightly positive attitudes towards elderly. This result reflects Turkish society in which the elderly are generally held in esteem. Traditionally, people in Turkey see the elderly sources of wisdom and guidance. In general, older people are considered as important, strong and wise people within the family. Social norms and families have important roles in shaping attitudes. The result of this study is consistent with literature examining Turkey, China and Sri Lanka (Ayaoğlu et al., 2014; Kızılcı et al., 2013; Rathnayake et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2016; Darling et al., 2017; Turan et al., 2016; Faronbi et al., 2017). It can be asserted that the results of these studies are rooted in the cultures studied. Studies have also emphasized that healthcare workers are influenced by societal attitudes towards elderly (Liu et al., 2013). More than half of the students (57.7%) in this study had experience of living with elderly people at home. This may be one reason for the positive attitudes of the students.

Contrary to the findings of the current study, there are studies showing that attitudes towards the elderly are affected by education (Dy-Boarman et al., 2017; Horstmanshof et al., 2016; Koh et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2015; Tufan et al., 2015; Turan et al., 2016). It was determined in these studies that as nursing students progressed in their studies, their positive attitudes towards the elderly also increased. In the current study, when the mean scores of students' attitudes were assessed based on their year of study, there were no statistically significant differences found between the students. This result is consistent with the current literature (Darling et al., 2017; Rathnayake et al., 2016). A study by Ayoglu et al. (2014) stated that students' education about elderly people is inadequate in Turkey. The findings of the current study support this conclusion. It is very important that the healthcare services in both developed and developing countries are prepared for the aging population. Even though the increasing need for elderly care is being felt now more than ever, it can be said that nursing education is not well enough developed to meet this need (Liu et al., 2017).

There was a nonsignificant positive correlation between the ages of students and attitude scores. This finding is consistent with the literature (Ayoglu et al., 2014, Darling et al., 2017; Turan et al., 2016). A systematic review stated that three out of 11 studies reported a significant positive association between increasing age and positive attitudes (Liu et al., 2013). Another eight studies reported an insignificant positive correlation (Liu et al., 2013).

Gender has been a frequently investigated variable, but the literature shows inconsistent findings. Ayoğlu (2014) found that male students had more positive attitudes towards elderly people than females. In this study, however, it was found that gender did not influence students' attitudes towards the elderly. The findings of the current study are consistent with the literature (Rathnayake et al., 2016; Sözcürmaz and Mandiracıoğlu, 2017; Turan et al., 2016). It is thought that all the male and female students will have had similar experiences of Turkish society's attitudes towards the elderly and that this is the reason that their attitudes were similar irrespective of their genders.

In terms of place of longest residence, the students who have lived in rural areas showed a more positive attitude towards the elderly. In Turkey, urbanization and industrialization have caused significant changes in family structures in the big cities. There has been a rapid shift from traditional family structure to the nuclear family structure in our country. However, although family structure has changed in Turkey in general, in rural areas values such as the positive perception of the elderly and family ties have been preserved (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı [DPT], 2007).

More than half of the students (57.7%) stated that they had experience of living with an elderly person, such as a grandmother or grandfather, at home. There was no statistically significant difference in terms of living with an elderly person and attitudes towards them. This result is consistent with Ayoğlu et al. (2014) and Turan et al. (2016). However, it was found in the current study that students displayed more positive attitudes when they lived in the same house as an older relative. In the study conducted by Rathnayake et al. (2016), it was determined that students with any experience of living with an elderly person displayed more positive attitudes.

In this study, students with more positive attitudes towards the elderly were found to be more willing to work with the elderly. Along with the increasing number of elderly people in need of care, the number of nurses willing to work with the elderly should also be considered. In the literature, the willingness to work with an elderly person is a much-debated topic. According to the results of Ayoglu et al. (2014), 66.6% of students, and, according to a study by Ozdemir and Bilgili (2016), 66.3% of students stated that they were willing to work with elderly people after graduation. More than half the students (55%) stated that they were willing to work with the elderly in a study by Darling et al. (2017). When these results from Turkey are compared to those from other countries, they can be interpreted as showing that Turkish nursing students are more willing to work with elderly people. It is believed that this result reflects the positive attitude towards the elderly that is present in Turkish society.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that nursing students have slightly positive attitudes towards elderly people. The place of longest residence and willingness to work with the elderly are significant factors related to positive attitudes. Other variables such as age, gender, year of study and living with an elderly person do not affect the participants' attitudes towards elderly. These positive attributes should be sustained by improving the students' geriatric education. Geriatric education should be an integral part of nursing education. In order to provide better care for the elderly, it is important that graduates maintain a positive attitude towards them and adopt a geriatric nursing point of view.

The results of this study cannot be generalized to all nursing students in Turkey. Further studies with a larger sample size may be needed. A prospective study design would be preferable to determine whether attitudes towards the elderly change as students progress through their academic years. Additionally, it is necessary that specific concepts, such as “attitude”, be more deeply investigated using qualitative research methods.

The Use of Results in Practice

Adopting a more positive and less negative attitude means providing more and higher quality care for the elderly. Therefore, it is recommended that nationally credited and structured geriatric education programs be developed in nursing schools, where the nurses of tomorrow are taught. This will improve student’s competence when caring for the elderly in various health care settings.

There is also a need for innovative schemes that will increase the willingness of students to work with the elderly. It is believed that this ratio can be further increased, especially through practical courses. Culture can be an important factor in curriculum studies. For this reason, cultural heritage can be used as a resource to help students understand elderly people better and socialize with them more positively.

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