

## EXAMINATION OF AGEIST ATTITUDES IN TERMS OF SOME VARIABLES AMONG SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS SOSYAL HİZMET ÖĞRENCİLERİ ARASINDA YAŞLI AYRIMCILIĞINA İLİŞKİN TUTUMLARIN BAZI DEĞİŞKENLER AÇISINDAN İNCELENMESİ

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to assess the attitudes of social work students towards ageism in terms of some variables such as gender, grade, will to work with elders in the future and having fun to spend time with old people. The research was conducted in Ankara University with the participation of social work students in the spring term of 2017. One hundred and fifty-three students participated in this research. The Ageism Attitude Scale (AAS) was employed in the study. The research was designed as a descriptive study. The average score of the participants was 91.32 ( $\pm$  10.60; min: 46, max: 115). It was found that the attitudes of female students towards the elderly people were more positive and less discriminatory/ageist than the attitudes of male students. Similarly, the attitude of students willing to work with older people in the future was found to be better compared to the other groups. Moreover, the percentage of students who ranked a desire to work with the older people first (with a higher priority) was only 14.4%.

**Keywords:** Ageism, social work, social work students, older people, attitudes towards older people.

### ÖZ

Bu araştırmada; cinsiyet, sınıf, gelecekte yaşlılarla çalışmayı isteme, yaşlılarla zaman geçirmekten hoşlanma gibi değişkenler açısından sosyal hizmet öğrencilerinin yaşlı ayrımcılığına ilişkin tutumlarının belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırma, Ankara Üniversitesi sosyal hizmet bölümü lisans öğrencileri üzerinde 2017 yılı bahar döneminde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmaya 153 öğrenci katılmıştır. Araştırmada Yaşlı Ayrımcılığı Tutum Ölçeği (YATÖ) kullanılmıştır. Araştırma betimleyici türde tasarlanmıştır. Çalışmaya katılan öğrencilerin yaşlı ayrımcılığına yönelik tutum ölçeğinden aldıkları ortalama puan 91.32 ( $\pm$ 10.60; min: 46 max: 115) olarak hesaplanmıştır. Araştırmada, kız öğrencilerin, erkek öğrencilere göre, ayrıca yaşlılarla bir arada olmaktan hoşlanan ve gelecekte yaşlılarla çalışmayı isteyen öğrencilerin de anlamlı düzeyde diğer gruplara göre yaşlılara yönelik olumlu ve ayrımcılıktan uzak bir tutum içinde oldukları tespit edilmiştir. Öğrencilerin çalışmayı istedikleri grup olarak yaşlı grubu birinci sırada (yüksek öncelikli) seçenlerin oranıysa sadece %14.4'tür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yaş ayrımcılığı, sosyal hizmet, sosyal hizmet öğrencileri, yaşlılar, yaşlılara yönelik tutumlar.

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing trend of enlarging older population can be seen in Turkey, similarly to global scale. The older population (65 and above) in Turkey was 7.7% in 2013. However, it increased to 8.3% in 2016. According to population projections, this rate is expected to reach 10.2% in 2023, 20.8% in 2050, and 27.7% in 2075 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2013). According to 2016 data, there are 408 private and public nursing homes, and the services of these institutions are benefited by 30,832 older individuals. Moreover,

8,206 older individuals are waiting in the queue to be placed in one of the nursing rooms connected to the Ministry of Family and Health (Turkish Ministry of Family and Social Policies, 2016). In addition to these limited opportunities, a prejudiced and discriminatory attitude towards the elderly can sometimes be observed in society. Society generally regards old age as a decrease in physical and mental activity, loss of identity and status, loss of respect, and increase in dependency on others (Kite and Wagner, 2002).

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Because the thoughts about death are generally latent and cause stress, negative meanings associated with old age and old people can spread in society quite easily (McCoy et al., 2000).

This situation shows the need for reforms to prevent discrimination against older people and for strengthening policies for old age welfare. One of the most important disciplines for old age welfare is social work. As known, social work is a care and solidarity job based on increasing clients' social function and helping clients become self-sufficient in the long term through professional assistance. The uniqueness of social work comes from the fact that it works from a "person in environment" (PIE) perspective. Therefore, it regards its subjects, who can be individuals, groups, organizations, societies, and even bigger masses, as systems that mutually affect each other. Social work is a profession that respects the right of self-determination of individuals, families, groups, and societies and directs the clients to be empowered to find their own solutions. It aims to increase the welfare of individuals by employing a holistic approach and thus assesses and helps clients through a multifaceted approach. In this way, it utilizes the knowledge from different disciplines such as psychology, medicine, sociology, philosophy, economy, anthropology, law, and social policy (Trevithick, 2008). Naturally, there are professional practitioners of the social work profession who work according to this framework. It is essential that social work undergraduate students as social work practitioner candidates and social workers as practitioners of the social work discipline should be equipped to work with older people as well as avoid discrimination in their personal and professional attitudes. As it is known, elderly people are frequently exposed to ageist attitudes. Ageism refers to prejudices and discrimination on the grounds of a person's age. Generally elderly people are exposed to ageist attitudes by other younger groups. There are several manifestations of ageist attitudes such as "considering elderly people as in need of care and dependent persons, abusing the elderly, excluding the elderly from society and to not taking into consideration the elderly people" (Çayır, 2012; Buz, 2015).

All these views affect the elderly people negatively. We know that both professionals and social work students will directly influence the quality of service provided by adopting a manner that avoids ageist/discriminatory attitudes towards elderly individuals. For this reason, students who are still in training for their profession need to be trained from an early stage to acknowledge this issue. This study aims to research the attitudes of social work undergraduate students towards

ageism in the case of students in the Ankara University Social Work Department. The attitudes of students were evaluated based on many variables such as gender, grade, thinking of working with the old, etc. No other research has been found in the current literature that analyzes the attitudes of social work students with an emphasis on "ageism." This shows the originality of the research. There are some studies about attitudes towards elderly people on the literature. So, this study differs from the others by the "ageism" emphasis.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Research Model and Sample Selection

The general screening model was chosen for this study, aimed at providing a description of the actuality. The universe of this descriptive study is all the undergraduate students of the Social Work Department in Health Sciences Faculty at the Ankara University during the spring semester of 2017 academic year (N=320). With the aim of reaching half of the student population, the study managed to reach the above target with 153 students. Therefore, the research sample consisted of 153 undergraduate students in Ankara University Social Work Department, during the spring semester of 2017. The main descriptive characteristics of participants are presented below in Table 1.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

<i>Descriptive Info</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	119	77.8%
	Male	34	22.2%
<b>Age</b>	18-21	111	72.6%
	22 and above	42	27.4%
<b>Grade</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	54	35.3%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	37	24.2%
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	30	19.6%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	32	20.9%
<b>Who are away from family</b>	Yes	109	71.2%
	No	44	28.8%
<b>Who has family member above 65 year old</b>	Yes	94	61.4%
	No	59	38.6%
<b>Who likes to be with old people</b>	Likes	79	51.6%
	Sometimes	67	43.8%
	Doesn't like	7	4.6%
<b>Who likes to work with old people</b>	Yes	95	62.1%
	No	58	37.9%
<b>Who has will to work with most</b>	Children	55	35.9%
	Young or Adults	32	20.9%
	Women	13	8.5%
	Migrants	12	7.8%
	Families and Couples	11	7.2%
	Other groups	8	5.2%

Most of the participants are female students (77.8%), and most of them are students aged between 18 and 21 (72.6%), and the remaining students are older. A majority of the students have chosen the social work department consciously (81.7%), but a small minority have stated otherwise (18.3%). First graders are the largest group participants in the study (35.3%) and third graders are the smallest group of participants (19.6%). A vast majority of the students (71.2%) live away from their families. Most of the students (61.4%) have at least one person in their family who is above 65 years old, and the rest have no family member above 65 years old. Of the participants, 51.6% like to be with old people and 43.8% sometimes like and 4.6% do not like being with old people. Those who aim to work with old people constituted 62.1% and those who do not constituted 37.9% of

the sample. Only 14.4% of the students have chosen older people as the group they most wanted to work with (Table 1).

### Data Collection Tools

A "Personal Information Form," which consists of 17 questions, and the AAS were employed in the research. The AAS is a scale that was developed by Vefikuluçay Yılmaz and Terzioğlu (2011), and it aims to assess ageist attitudes. It is a Likert-type scale, which consists of 23 items, and offers five different possible answers: "completely disagree," "disagree," "neither agree nor disagree," "agree," and "completely agree." The maximum score in the AAS is 115 and the minimum is 23. The positive responses score "1-2-3-4-5" and the negative ones score "5-4-3-2-1." The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the scale is calculated as 0.80. The AAS consists of three dimensions (Vefikuluçay Yılmaz and Terzioğlu, 2011).

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The first dimension, "limiting the life of the old," contains beliefs and perceptions about limiting the social lives of the old. Questions 1, 5, 23, 22, 12, 17, 21, 19, and 14 are related to this aspect of the scale, with the maximum score for this aspect at 45 and the minimum at 9. The reliability coefficient for this dimension is calculated as 0.70. The second dimension, "positive discrimination towards the old people," contains beliefs and perceptions that are positive towards the old people. Questions 13, 8, 9, 7, 2, 6, 20, and 4 are related to this aspect of the scale, with the maximum score for this aspect at 40 and the minimum at 8. The reliability coefficient for this dimension is calculated as 0.70. The third dimension, "negative discrimination towards the old people," contains beliefs and perceptions that are negative towards the old people. Questions 16, 11, 15, 3, 18, and 10 are related to this aspect of the scale, with the maximum score for this aspect at 30 and the minimum at 6. The reliability coefficient for this dimension is calculated as 0.67. The reliability coefficient for this research is calculated as 0.89 for AAS, 0.78 for limiting the life of the old dimension, 0.83 for positive discrimination towards the old people dimension and 0.71 for negative discrimination towards the old people dimension.

### **Ethical Issues**

Permission from the Ethics Committee of Mehmet Akif Ersoy University and the institutional permission from Social Work Department of Ankara University were granted for this research to be conducted, and all the data were collected with the consent of the students. We took special care to ensure that only students who had volunteered participated in the study.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

All of the students participated in the study voluntarily. Half of the students filled the research forms in their classroom and half of the students filled the online forms. The data were analyzed by using SPSS 24, and the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were applied. Due to calculated kurtosis and skewness values which were not between -1.5 and +1.5, non-parametric tests were applied; furthermore, the result of Shapiro-Wilk test was not suitable to use parametric tests ( $p=0.002$ ).

## **FINDINGS**

The average AAS score of the participants was calculated to be 91.32 ( $\pm 10.60$ ; min: 46, max: 115). The maximum possible score was 115. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the attitudes of the assessed students were mostly positive towards the old people. As the data were not normally distributed, non-parametric tests were applied for the analysis.

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**Table 2.** The Output of (AAS) U Test in Terms of the Relation Between Ageist Attitudes and Gender

AAS	Gender	N	Sequence average	Sequence total	U	Z	P
<b>Limiting the Lives of the Old</b>	Female	119	77.48	9220.0	1966.0	-,251	0.80*
	Male	34	75.32	2561.0			
<b>Positive Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Female	119	78.41	9252.5	1780.5	-1,001	0.31*
	Male	34	69.87	2375.5			
<b>Negative Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Female	119	77.72	9248.5	137.5	-,376	0.70*
	Male	34	74.49	2532.5			
<b>AAS Scale Total</b>	Female	119	77.65	9162.5	1870.5	-,599	0.54*
	Male	34	72.51	2465.5			

\*p>.05

Although there was no significant difference between the gender groups, female students were found to be less discriminatory against the old people in terms of average

scores on the AAS and AAS subscales (Table 2). We think that this difference can be associated with the social gender norms and the caretaker role attributed to women by the society.

**Table 3.** The Output of (AAS) U Test In Terms of the Relation Between Ageist Attitudes and a Desire to Work with the Old

AAS	Opinion	N	Sequence average	Sequence total	U	Z	P
<b>Limiting the Lives of the Old</b>	Wishes to work	95	85.79	8150.0	1920,0	-3,154	0.002**
	Wishes not to work	58	62.60	3631.0			
<b>Positive Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Wishes to work	95	89.09	8463.5	1511,5	-4,570	0.000*
	Wishes not to work	58	55.52	3164.5			
<b>Negative Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Wishes to work	95	91.14	8658.5	1411,5	-5,068	0.000*
	Wishes not to work	58	53.84	3122.5			
<b>AAS Scale Total</b>	Wishes to work	95	89.47	8500.0	1475,0	-4,693	0.000*
	Wishes not to work	34	54.88	3128.0			

\*p<.001, \*\*p<.05

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The participants who stated they did not want to work with the old scored significantly less on the AAS and AAS subscales than those who stated they did want to. This demonstrates that those who do not want to work with the old show attitudes that are more discriminatory towards them (Table 3).

Also seen in Table 4, the fourth graders' average

scores on the AAS and on the "limiting the life of the old," "positive discrimination towards the old people," and "negative discrimination towards the old people" subscales are significantly higher than students from other grades. Therefore, it can be said that they are less discriminatory against the old. However, it is concerning that the third graders had a lower average score.

**Table 4.** The Output of the (AAS) Kruskal-Wallis Test In Terms of Grade

AAS	Grade	N	Sequence average	Df	X2	P	Difference**
<b>Limiting the Lives of the Old</b>	1.	54	74.97	3	10.328	0.01*	1-4 2-4 3-4
	2.	37	73.85				
	3.	30	62.72				
	4.	32	97.45				
<b>Positive Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	1.	54	69.00	3	7.894	0.04*	1-2 1-4 2-3 3-4
	2.	37	84.97				
	3.	30	65.00				
	4.	32	89.78				
<b>Negative Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	1.	54	77.54	3	11.267	0.01*	1-4 3-4 2-4
	2.	37	74.15				
	3.	30	58.97				
	4.	32	96.30				
<b>AAS Scale Total</b>	1.	54	72.74	3	11.433	0.01*	1-4 3-4
	2.	37	77.31				
	3.	30	59.91				
	4.	32	96.64				

\*p<.05 \*\*Difference founded by posthoc test

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**Table 5.** The Output of the (AAS) Kruskal-Wallis Test in Terms of Students' Preference For Being with the Old

AAS	Grade	N	Sequence average	df	X <sup>2</sup>	P	Difference
<b>Limiting the Lives of the Old</b>	Likes	79	90.36	2	18.897	0.000*	1-2
	Does not like	7	31.36				1-3
	Sometimes likes	67	66.01				
<b>Positive Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Likes	79	91.12	2	20.850	0.000*	1-2
	Does not like	7	33.57				1-3
	Sometimes likes	67	63.97				2-3
<b>Negative Discrimination towards the Old People</b>	Likes	79	94.37	2	27.332	0.000*	1-2
	Does not like	7	35.50				1-3
	Sometimes likes	67	60.86				2-3
<b>AAS Scale Total</b>	Likes	79	93.92	2	28.786	0.000*	1-2
	Does not like	7	27.86				1-3
	Sometimes likes	67	61.30				2-3

\*p<.001

Similar to the results in Table 3, the average scores on the AAS and AAS subscales of the groups indicating that they liked, sometimes liked, and disliked being together with the old people were significant ( $p < .001$ ) between almost all groups (Table 5). In summary, the students who stated that they like to be with old people have a less discriminatory/ageist attitude towards the old people according to the average scores. Furthermore, the student group that stated they do not want to be with the old people exhibited the most ageist attitudes.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study, which was conducted with the participation of Ankara University Social Work Department undergraduate students in the spring semester of 2017, aimed to assess the attitudes of the students towards discrimination against the old in terms of some variables. One hundred and fifty-three students, who were from the first, second, third, and fourth grades, participated in this study, and this number amounts to nearly half of the total student population. We believe that this descriptive study is important because it is the first research assessing the ageist attitudes of social work students towards older people, especially in terms of "discrimination." The average score of the participants was calculated as 91.32 ( $\pm 10.60$ ; min: 46, max: 115). The maximum possible score was 115. When this result is compared with

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the results of similar researches some differences which of the following could be seen. Altay and Aydın's study (2015), in which they examined the ageist attitudes of nursing students, found their average score as  $68.82 \pm 8.54$ . Vefikuluçay Yılmaz and Terzioğlu (2011), in their foundational study of the AAS scale, calculated the average AAS score of 500 students from different departments and found it as  $86.22 \pm 9.34$ . This is a lower score than the social work students' score. The fact that the average score of the social work students is found to be higher than the other student groups' score emphasizes their positive attitudes towards the old people. In the study conducted by Duru-Aşiret et al. (2015), it was found that the UCLA Geriatrics Attitude (GA) scale of the nurses was on average 48 out of 70. Bakırhan et al. (2017) found that the UCLA GA scale of 1,270 physiotherapy and rehabilitation students scored an average of  $48.18 \pm 5.67$  out of 70 in their research. This result again emphasizes the positive attitudes. According to Zehirlioğlu, Yönt, Bayat, and Günay (2015), the attitudes of 135 nurses, all of whom work in university hospitals, were found to be marginally positive. According to the study by Duyan et al. (2015), which was conducted with the participation of 419 social work students from different universities, it was found that the average score of the students was 130.96 (out of a maximum of 238) and that they generally displayed positive attitudes toward the old. Only our research, which was conducted on Social Work Department undergraduate students of Ankara University in the spring semester of 2017, shows a relatively higher average score, which identifies a positive attitude towards the old people, than the study by Duyan et al. (2015). Social work students' positive attitudes towards the old people can be interpreted as an expected result of social work education and its nature which defends disadvantaged groups.

In the study by Zambrini et al. (2008), which was conducted with the participation of 472 university students in healthcare departments in Spain, it was found that 54% of the students had a positive attitude towards the old people, more so with female students than with male students. Moreover, it was discovered that students of psychology and physiotherapy and rehabilitation wished to specialize in geriatrics more but medical students wished to do so the least. Mandiracıoğlu and Lülecı (2015) conducted another study with the participation of 277 pharmacy students. They found that female students had less discriminatory attitudes towards the old people. According to Duyan et al.'s (2015) research, there is no relation between gender or age group and attitude towards the old people. According to Daniş et al.'s (2015) research conducted with the participation of 219

social work and 181 nursing students in Turkey, generally both departments' students attitudes towards the old people were found similar. Sözürmaz and Mandiracıoğlu (2017) conducted a study with the participation of 236 students on their attitudes towards the old people (UCLA GA) and their aging anxiety. They found that participants had positive attitudes towards the old people but aging anxieties were found to be abundant. Mosher-Ashley and Ball conducted another study with the participation of 119 students. They were all studying in Massachusetts in the following departments: management, psychology, nursing, and occupational therapy. Researchers did not find any significant relation between age or department of the participant and their attitudes towards the old people (Mosher-Ashley and Ball, 1999). In this research, it was also found that senior class students had more positive attitudes towards the old people and they were less discriminatory towards them. Moreover, AAS scores of the female students were found to be higher than the scores of males. In other words, females have more positive attitudes towards the old people and they are less discriminatory towards them. So, in the light of result of this research, the high scores of social work students on AAS could be explained both with the social work education which is focused on vulnerable groups and their welfare and the majority of female students. Those females are considered more engaged with old people due to gender roles attributed to women by the society. Bakırhan et al.'s (2017) study, which was conducted with the participation of physiotherapy students using the UCLA GA scale, found that—similar to our study—female students had more positive and less discriminatory attitudes towards the old people. According to another result of this research fourth graders' average scores on the AAS and on each subscale are significantly higher than students from other grades. This difference can perhaps be explained again by the effects of social work education. However, it is concerning that the third graders had a lower average score. Therefore, it can be said that the third grade consists of students who are the most discriminatory. Although it is a small possibility, it can be said that more third grade students with discriminatory attitudes participated in the study by chance.



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Additionally, it is found that those who live with an old person, those who wish to live with an old person/family member, those who visit nursing homes, those who wish to work in geriatrics after graduating, and lastly, those who participated in workshops and meetings in their study period had more positive attitudes and behaviors towards the old people. According to Duru-Aşiret et al.'s (2015) study, which was conducted with the participation of 227 nursery students, it was found that those who wish to work with the old people in the future scored higher on the UCLA GA scale. Similarly, in our research, we found that those who wished to work with the old people exhibited less discriminatory attitudes towards the old people than those who did not want to work with them. Furthermore, it was determined that those who like to be with old people exhibited less discriminating attitudes towards the old people than those who do not or only sometimes like to do so.

In conclusion, our research showed that most of the undergraduate students in the Social Work Department had a non-discriminatory (non-ageist) attitude towards the old people. Nonetheless, it was also found that there were some students who scored very low according to the scale (from 46 to 115). Additionally, those who chose to work with the old as their first choice were just 14.4%. This shows that although most of the participants had positive attitudes, those who wish to work with the old are a fewer group of students in the first place (14.4%). By revealing such important outcomes, this research can contribute both to literature and social work field. It is also clear that these results can be taken into consideration when rethinking and reforming social work education policy. It is well known that Turkey does not have a large population of old people; however, it is also one of the countries with the most rapidly aging population. As Liu et al. (2013) note, those who work in the medical sector are affected by the societal attitudes, and transforming these attitudes, which are spread throughout the community, requires a structured process.

To sum up, the research shows that the vast majority of students have non-ageist attitudes. However, those who prefer to work with older people are less in number. Some reforms are needed for promotion of working with older people and for the education of discriminating students. Prejudices and beliefs which encourage ageism should be challenged through student and community education and occasionally through public service broadcastings and social campaigns. Moreover, geriatric work should be encouraged in universities with social work education. By instilling empathy in this education, the difficulties experienced in old age and the issue of empowerment of old people should be dealt with more intensively. Moreover, the number of welfare internships for older people should be increased in social work departments so as to increase possibilities for students.

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