



## PERCEPTIONS OF THE ELDERLY ON ELDERLY ABUSE

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Determining the perception of the elderly who are at high risk of abuse in the community and identifying the existing abuse may be effective in creating the necessary awareness about elderly abuse. Therefore, this study aims to determine the elderly's perception of abuse.

**Materials and Method:** The study employed a descriptive and cross-sectional design. It focuses on the members of the population in Isparta who are 65 years or older. In determining this selection, the sample was determined at a 95% confidence level by simple random sampling technique. The study included 500 volunteers who had sound aural and verbal faculties and were fit enough to answer the survey questions. A questionnaire was created based on the relevant literature and was subsequently used to collect data.

**Results:** The questionnaire was presented to a total of 500 elderly citizens consisting of 297 women and 203 men. The results showed that 42.2% were in the age group of 65-69, and that 55.6% were married. We found that the majority of the elderly interpreted the physical acts in the statements as abuse and that they accepted economic abuse. The elderly held family members responsible for abuse. In cases where the perpetrator was a family member, they refrained from reporting them.

**Conclusion:** It is necessary to improve the elderly's awareness of abuse and neglect. The elderly, caregivers, and family members must participate in educational processes on aging and on the elderly. Research to detect and prevent abuse and the creation of national policies are also needed.

**Key Words:** Aged; Elder Abuse; Elder Neglect; Perception.

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## YAŞLILARIN İSTISMAR ALGISI

### Öz

**Giriş:** Toplumda istismara uğrama riski yüksek olan yaşlıların istismara ilişkin algılarının belirlenmesi; mevcut istismarın tanımlanması ve gerekli farkındalığın oluşmasında etkili olabilecektir. Bu yüzden çalışma, yaşlıların istismara yönelik algılarının tespit edilmesini amaçlamaktadır.

**Gereç ve Yöntem:** Araştırma, tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel türde planlanmıştır. Evren, Isparta ilinde bulunan 65 yaş ve üzeri nüfustur. Örneklem basit rastlantısal teknikle, %95 güven düzeyinde belirlenmiştir. Araştırmaya anket sorularına cevap vermek için yeterince işitsel ve sözel becerileri uygun olan 500 gönüllü birey katılmıştır. İlgili literatür temel alınarak oluşturulan soru formu verilerin toplanması için kullanılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Soru formu 297'si kadın, 203'ü erkekten oluşan 500 yaşlıya uygulanmıştır. Yaşlıların %42.2'si 65-69 yaş grubunda, %55.6'sı evlidir. Bu çalışmada, yaşlıların çoğunluğunun ifadelerdeki fiziksel eylemleri istismar olarak yorumladığını ve ekonomik istismarı kabullendikleri bulunmuştur. Yaşlılar istismardan çoğunlukla aile üyeleri sorumlu tutmaktadır. Ailenin fail olduğu durumlarda, onları ihbar etmekten kaçınmaktadırlar.

**Sonuç:** Yaşlı bireylerin istismar ve ihmale yönelik farkındalığının artırılmasının gerekmektedir. Yaşlılar, bakım veren kişiler ve aile üyeleri yaşlılık ve yaşlılar hakkındaki eğitimsel süreçlere katılmalıdır. İstismarı tespit etmek ve önlemek için araştırmaların yapılması ve ulusal politikaların oluşturulması gereklidir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Yaşlı; Yaşlı İstismarı; Yaşlı İhmali; Algı.



## INTRODUCTION

In Turkey, the elderly population is increasing at a higher speed than that of other age groups as is the case all over the world. In the developing countries like Turkey, it is anticipated being much faster of population aging process. In 2013, while the growth rate of total population was 13.7‰, growth rate of elderly population was almost triple with 36.2‰ (1). Due to this demographic change, there has been growing interest in research on the elderly and on aging. But a common limitation of most studies is that they describe the current situation. While Turkish society is making a transition from its traditional social structure to a modern social structure, the impact of modernization is often ignored in terms of the individual and the nature of the social relationships.

In the community life of a traditional society, the elderly are the protectors and carriers of social values. Today, corporate embodiments, traditional relationships, and structures representing modernity in communities that are undergoing the transition process from traditionalism to modernism, run together the functions that sometimes overlaps or sometimes conflicts with each other (2). In such societies, elder abuse is a social problem that may be noticed too late.

Elder abuse can be defined as “a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person” (3). In many studies, elderly abuse is defined in five categories: physical, sexual, psychological, economic abuse, and neglect. Sometimes elderly abuse is also called as elder mistreatment or elder maltreatment (4).

Abuse can be seen in any society, economic situation, or ethnic and religious structure. However, since the meaning of abuse changes depending on individuals, families, and social and cultural values, it is often difficult to notice elderly abuse. This is because, abuse can be shaped by morality, ideology, cultural conditions, and daily life experiences (5).

Determining the perception of the elderly who is at a high risk of abuse in the community, and identifying the existing abuse, may be effective in creating the necessary awareness about elderly abuse. For this reason, this study aims to determine the elderly's perception of abuse.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study employed a descriptive and cross-sectional design and the data was collected from Isparta province (in Turkey) between July and December 2015. The research po-

pulation was made up of 24.595 individuals who were 65 years of age and older (6).

The sample size was calculated as 379 people with 5% tolerance and 95% confidence interval level by simple random sampling techniques. 500 people were targeted in order to minimize the sampling mistake.

The study included 500 volunteers who were 65 years or older, who had sound aural and verbal faculties, who were fit enough to answer. Participants were reached at place such as parks, mosques, local markets and cafes. The data were collected using face-to-face interviews.

A questionnaire was created based on the relevant literature, and was subsequently used to collect the data. Assessments were made using a structured questionnaire with two parts. The first part included questions on participants' sociodemographic characteristics and if the elderly could provide financial support for their children or not. The second part was composed of statements that had the purpose of evaluating the perceptions of the elderly regarding abuse and neglect, the offender, reason of abuse and responsibility to report. The word “abuse”, which is included in the statements in the questionnaire, was explained as “elder mistreatment” or “elder maltreatment” to the participants. The data were evaluated using a statistical analysis program; and the Frequencies and the Chi-Square Tests were applied.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Suleyman Demirel University. After the purpose of the study was explained, verbal confirmation was collected from the elderly.

## RESULTS

The questionnaire was presented to a total of 500 elderly citizens, consisting of 297 women and 203 men. In the study, participants were aged between 65 and 95 years, and the mean age was  $73.104 \pm 6.99$  years of age (female,  $72.82 \pm 6.86$ ; male,  $73.51 \pm 7.18$ ). The largest group (42.2%) was composed of 65-69 year olds and 56.0% of the elderly could provide financial support for their children.

In the study, statements were given regarding the types of abuse, and the perceptions of the elderly were evaluated according to their responses to these statements.

Three statements were given under the heading of “physical abuse”:

- 14.4% of the elderly do not consider physical violence between couples as abuse; 27.8% of the elderly do not consider giving drugs to an old person to calm him/her down



**Table 1—** Perceptions of the Elderly Regarding Abuse and Neglect

Theme Headers	Statements	YES						p
		Female		Male		Total		
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Physical abuse	Physical violence between old couples is abuse.	257	86.5	171	84.2	428	85.6	0.4
	Family members' calming the elderly down with drugs when they are tired is abuse.	218	73.4	143	70.4	361	72.2	0.4
	Family members' tying the elderly to the bed when they care for him/her is abuse.	213	71.7	135	66.5	348	69.6	0.2
Psychological abuse	Ignoring the emotional needs of the elderly by family members is abuse.	260	87.5	177	87.2	437	87.4	0.9
	Family members' yelling at the elderly when they are stressed is abuse	218	73.4	152	74.9	370	74.0	0.7
Economic Abuse	Family members taking money from the elderly without permission is abuse.	122	41.1	80	39.4	202	40.4	0.7
	Family members' not paying the money borrowed from the elderly back is abuse.	108	36.4	68	33.5	176	35.2	0.5
Neglect	Family members' leaving bedridden elderly people alone is negligence.	155	52.2	92	45.3	247	49.4	0.1
Self Negligence	Some elderly are inadequate to care of themselves.	269	90.6	180	88.7	449	89.8	0.4

as abuse; 30.4% of the elderly do not consider being tied to the bed as abuse.

Two statements were given under the heading of “psychological abuse”:

- 26% of the elderly do not consider “yelling at the elderly when the family members are stressed” as abuse; 87.4% of the elderly regard being ignored by family as abuse.

Two statements were given under the heading of “economic abuse”:

- 59.6% of the elderly do not regard “taking money from them without permission” as abuse; 64.8% of the elderly do not regard “not paying the money back” as abuse, especially those who give financial aid to the children ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Two statements were given under the heading of “negligence” and “self-neglect”

- 50.6% of the elderly do not regard “bedridden elderly people living alone” as neglect.
- 89.8% of the elderly consider “Some elderly are inadequate to care of themselves” (Table 1).

The evaluation of the perceptions of the elderly regarding “the offender,” “reason of abuse,” and “responsibility to report” (Table 2) showed that:

- They mostly held family members responsible (83.2%); they were against punishing by law family members who are abusive to the elderly (51.2%); they thought that they were subjected to ill-treatment because they did something wrong (86.0%). These thoughts of the elderly are meaningful in terms of the sex variable ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

In traditional culture, younger generations are obliged to take care of the elderly, but this is no longer the case in the modern society. In this situation, the elderly can become a convenient target for exploitation and mistreatment. Physical abuse is defined as visible behaviors such as beating, biting, as well as administering medications not suitable for the elderly, forming a physical restraint by binding to bed (7). Especially in cases of non-violent abuse, the elderly sometimes suffer much more than the abuser thinks and the abuser may not realize the extent of the negativity s/he causes. Therefore, it is



**Table 2—** Perceptions of the Elderly Regarding “The Offender,” “Reason of Abuse” and “Responsibility to Report”

Theme Headers	Statements	YES						p
		Female		Male		Total		
		n	%	n	%	n	%	
Perceptions Regarding the Offender and Reasons for Abuse	The elderly are subject to maltreatment because they do something wrong.	247	83.2	183	90.1	430	86.0	0.06
	The elderly are generally treated badly by their families.	241	81.1	175	86.2	416	83.2	0.1
	If parents mistreat their child, the child treats them badly in the future.	110	37.0	91	44.8	201	40.2	0.08
	Those with mental, emotional or substance abuse problems mistreat elderly people.	67	22.6	65	32.0	132	26.4	0.1
Responsibility to Report	Neighbors who notice that the elderly are treated badly should call the police.	224	75.4	157	77.3	381	76.2	0.6
	The family member abusive to the elderly should be punished by law.	133	44.8	111	54.7	244	48.8	0.03*
	If the elderly is treated badly within the family, no one outside the family should know about this.	96	32.3	88	43.3	184	36.8	0.01*

\*p<0.05

important to determine how non-violent abuse, which can be seen in different ways, is perceived.

This study shows that, while the majority of the elderly interpreted the physical acts in the statements as abuse, 27.8% did not regard giving the elderly drugs to calm them down as abuse, and 30.4% did not regard binding the elderly to the bed as abuse (Table 1). Lee’s (7) findings showing that 38% of the elderly consider calming the elderly with drugs as appropriate, and that 13% consider tying the elderly to the bed as appropriate, are consistent with our findings.

Despite domestic violence being one of the most important social problems, society’s internalizing or turning a blind eye to violence, or even regarding it as a traditional norm (8), is among the major obstacles in the prevention of violence. Population-based surveys place lifetime rate of physical intimate partner violence at between 42% and 76% (9). We have found that the significant ratio of elderly (14%) do not consider physical violence between couples as abuse. Moreover, the fairly close ratio of men and women participating the statement in this study supports the idea that many processes, from the way violence is perceived to the way it is realized, are affected by social conditions such as family structure, cultural value and norm etc. (8).

Psychological abuse is related to behaviors and attitudes that lead to emotional distress and emotional injury, as well

as ignoring the emotional needs of the elderly (10). Psychological abuse that lacks physical symptoms is difficult to detect. However, this type of abuse is frequently encountered in society. In a study, the physical abuse rate among the elderly was reported as 1.9%, while the psychological abuse rate among the elderly was found to be 4.2% (11). In the study, the fact that the majority of the elderly (87.4%) regard ignoring the emotional needs of the elderly by the family as abuse shows their awareness of psychological abuse. Also, 26% of the elderly think that caregivers can yell at the elderly if they are stressed. This may be associated with the challenges of elder care, because individuals of old age may require a long and comprehensive care due to the weakening of their senses, physical disabilities, and chronic illness. Therefore, elderly care can be a type of care that is difficult and inconvenient for caregivers. To maintain their care relationship, the caregiver and older person need support. When this support is not provided in time and adequately, elderly abuse and neglect may increase (12).

Economic abuse is defined as the illegal or improper use of the economic resources of the elderly (10). Economic abuse rates are reported as 2.5% in Turkey, 5.2% in the United States, and 6.4% in Japan (13). In our study, more than half of the respondents see no harm in family members taking money from them without permission, nor in them not paying it



back. As a result, it seems that the majority of the elderly, especially those who give financial aid to their children ( $p < 0.05$ ), accept this economic abuse. Similarly, Oh et al. found that the Korean elderly, who provided their children with financial support, were subject to economic abuse at a higher rate (11). Based on the results, it may be suggested that not only social and cultural values but also the fear of being alienated by their families influence this acceptance. In a study conducted in Nigeria, the elderly reported maltreatment such as social isolation and lack of visits when they refused to make financial support to their children (14).

Negligence is defined as a failure to meet the basic needs of the elderly intentionally or unintentionally. Although physical abuse is the best-known of all types of abuse, negligence is more common (15). In the study, the fact that 50.6% of the elderly agreed with the statement about family members leaving the bedridden elderly alone shows that the elderly's awareness of "negligence" has not formed sufficiently.

Self-neglect refers to a type of behavior displayed by an individual that threatens his/her own health and safety. It has been suggested that this concept should also be included in the study and definition of elderly abuse (13,15). It is assumed that self-neglect is caused by mental, physical, and social disorders, and that it also encourages such disorders. The self-neglect of an elder person is the most common form of elderly abuse and neglect that gets reported to social services (16). The fact that 89.8% of the participants in this study think that some elderly are inadequate to care of themselves is consistent with the high self-neglect rates reported in the literature.

The literature contains various data on the causes of abuse and the characteristics of those who abuse the elderly. These studies, although they do not precisely define the characteristics of people who abuse, report that family members with mental, drug addiction and emotional problems are more likely to abuse the elderly (17). Furthermore, it was found that the abuse of the elderly is made by the sons or daughter-in-laws (11), and that the rate of the elderly who thought that the abusers are family members is 79.8% (7). In the study, the majority of the participants (83.2%) hold the family members responsible for the abuse; and the rate of those who think that the individuals with mental, physical and social problems like drug addiction or mental diseases abuse the elderly is 26.4%. The findings are supported by the results of the other studies (7,11).

Cadmus et al. reported that modernization, urbanization and the increase in the number of women in the labor force

have led to a decrease in the number of the primary caregivers for the elderly, and to an increase in the rate of the abuse of the elderly in Nigeria (14). There are several studies for the causes of elderly abuse. The research analyzed several factors, such as the characteristics of the person who is abused, the characteristics of the person who abuses, the conditions of the social environment causing violence, and familial conditions (12). In addition to these, history of domestic violence may result in the abuse of the elderly. In some cases it has been reported that the adults, who received abuse during childhood, abused their families (17). Similarly, we found that a substantial proportion of the elderly were of the opinion that "If parents mistreat their child, the child will behave badly towards them in the future." Besides the reasons related to the perpetrator, victim-blaming attitudes are also common (18). Erlingsson et al. (19) found that the elderly considered themselves to bear some part of the blame for becoming victims of abuse due to situations such as grouching, the presence of dementia-related behavior problems, and opening the door to strangers. In this study, the fact that the majority of the elderly agreed with the statement "Older people are exposed to ill-treatment because they are doing something wrong" indicates that they blame the victim in the case of abuse.

It is challenging to obtain sufficient and accurate data on elderly abuse, because it is often hidden and presents a social problem. Although many cases of elderly abuse and neglect are reported every year, the unreported rate of elderly abuse cases is estimated to be 84% in America (15). However, when the elderly who have serious injuries, apply to healthcare institutions, the abuse can be detected. Among the factors that cause this situation to remain unreported are the elderly's fear of being sent to elderly care institutions, the elderly' being ashamed of their families's behaviors, and ill-treatment by relatives (17,19). This study found that 76.2% of the respondents thought that the cases of abuse should be reported to the judicial authorities by neighbors who witness the abuse. However, half of the participants thought that "family members should not be punished for their abusive actions" and 36.8% of the elderly thought that "elderly abuse occurring within the family should not be revealed". The results concluded from the statements show that although the participants think that it is necessary to report abuse cases, they stay unwilling about reporting when the abuse is experienced within the family. This contradiction may be considered as a reason of the reports of abuse being less. Also, as shown in Table 2, there were statistically significant sex differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). It



was found that while women abstained from being punished for abusing family members, men thought that abuse is a situation that should remain within family.

In conclusion, this study found that the majority of the elderly interpreted the physical acts in the statements as abuse and that they accepted economic abuse. The elderly held family members responsible for abuse. In cases where the perpetrator was a family member, they refrained from reporting them.

It is necessary to improve the elderly's awareness of abuse and neglect. The elderly, caregivers, and family members must participate in educational processes on aging and the elderly. The scope of educational policies should include socialization requirements for persons of old age, as well as the skills and equipment that will help the elderly overcome potential problems. Research to detect and prevent abuse and the creation of national policies are also needed.

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