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## RESEARCH

# HEALTH SCIENCES STUDENTS' AGEING ANXIETY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS OLDER PEOPLE

## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The aim of this study was to determine ageing anxiety and attitudes towards the elderly in students studying in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Adnan Menderes University in Turkey.

**Materials and Method:** This cross-sectional study carried out during 2016 and included 236 students enrolled at the university. Of these students, 146 were from the nursing department, 54 from the midwifery department and 36 from the nutrition and dietetics department. The students completed a questionnaire on demographic features, University of California, Los Angeles Geriatrics Attitudes Scale (14 items) and Anxiety about Aging Scale (20 items).

**Results:** Most of the participants were female nursing students. Approximately one-fifth of the students reported that their families shared their home with older relatives. Approximately half of the students reported that they participated in activities for older people. Mean scores for University of California, Los Angeles Geriatrics Attitudes Scale and Anxiety about Aging Scale were  $48.22 \pm 5.44$  and  $66.38 \pm 8.75$ , respectively. First-year students, studying nutrition and dietetics and those not participating in nursing home activities had significantly lower scores on the University of California, Los Angeles Geriatrics Attitudes Scale. Students staying with older relatives had significantly higher scores on the Anxiety about Aging Scale.

**Conclusion:** Although health sciences students who will provide care for older people in the future had positive attitudes towards them, they also had high ageing anxiety. Undergraduate education should, therefore, be restructured to create positive communication between students and older people.

**Key Words:** Ageing; Anxiety; Attitude; Students

## ARAŞTIRMA

# SAĞLIK BİLİMLERİ ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN YAŞLANMA ENĐİŞESİ VE YAŞLILARA YÖNELİK TUTUMU

## Öz

**Giriş:** Çalışmanın amacı Adnan Menderes Üniversitesi Sağlık bilimleri Fakültesi'nde öğrenim gören öğrencilerinin yaşlılara yönelik tutumlarının ve yaşlanma endişelerinin belirlenmesidir.

**Gereç ve Yöntem:** Bu kesitsel çalışma 2016 yılında yürütülmüştür ve Adnan Menderes Üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 146 hemşirelik, 54 ebelik ve 36 diyetisyenlik olmak üzere toplam 236 öğrenci çalışmaya katılmıştır. Öğrenciler öz bildirimle demografik özelliklere ilişkin bir anketi, 14 maddelik yaşlı tutum ölçeği ve 20 maddelik yaşlanma endişesi ölçeğini doldurmuşlardır.

**Bulgular:** Katılımcıların çoğunluğu kız ve hemşirelik öğrencileridir. Yaklaşık 1/5'i kendi ailelerinin yaşlılarla aynı evi paylaştığını yaklaşık yarısı da yaşlılarla ilgili aktivitelere katıldığını belirtmiştir. Öğrencilerin UCLA yaşlı tutum ve yaşlanma endişesi ölçeklerinden aldıkları ortalama puan sırasıyla  $48.22 \pm 5.44$  ve  $66.38 \pm 8.75$  olarak saptanmıştır. Yaşlı tutum ölçeğinden diyetisyenlik, 1. sınıf öğrencileri ve huzurevinde aktiviteye katılmayan öğrenciler istatistiksel anlamlı düşük puan almışlardır. Yaşlanma endişesi ölçeğinden, evlerinde yaşlı yakını ile yaşayanlar istatistiksel anlamlı yüksek puan almışlardır.

**Sonuç:** Gelecekte yaşlılara da hizmet sunacak olan sağlık bilimleri öğrencilerinin yaşlılara tutumu olumlu olsa da ageing anksiyeteleri yüksek bulunmuştur. Mezuniyet öncesi eğitimde yaşlılarla olumlu iletişim oluşturacak bir yapılandırma önemlidir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Yaşlanma; Endişe; Tutum; Öğrenciler

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of elder people will cause instabilities in health and welfare systems furthermore the general approach towards aging and old people will be effected negatively (1). Industrialisation and modernisation have changed not only family structures but also work lives and lifestyles, and individuals in younger generations now have less frequent contact with those in older generations that might counter-act negative beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes. Age-segregated socialisation has led to misunderstandings between generations (2), and these miscommunications have fostered the emergence of misunderstanding and misconceptions, negative attitudes towards ageing and older people and ageing anxiety. Lasher and Faulkender (3) defined ageing anxiety as a combination of concerns and predictions about losses due to the ageing process. Ageing-related diseases, functional and cognitive losses and physical changes are the factors underlying ageing anxiety (4,5). Furthermore, exposure to negative attitudes towards older people may cause anxious feelings about one's own ageing process (6).

Negative attitudes towards older people, pejorative stereotypes and development of ageing anxiety can discourage healthcare workers from working with or offering high-quality healthcare and social services to older people (4,7). However, effective two-way communication helps older people in confiding with the healthcare staff. Therefore, attitudes towards older people are a critical part of their healthcare (8). Older people comprise a special population for healthcare services, and it is crucial that the healthcare staff prepare for a demographic evolution in society.

Difficulty in understanding and having empathy for older people and lack of awareness about age-specific health problems in prospective healthcare workers have negative effects on their attitudes towards older people. Therefore, identifying ageing anxiety and attitudes towards older people in health sciences students is critical for preventing the development of negative attitudes. The aim of this study was to determine the level of ageing anxiety and attitudes towards older people in students

studying in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Adnan Menderes University in Aydin, Turkey.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Study Design and Sample Selection

This descriptive study was conducted at Adnan Menderes University during 2016. The study covers a total of 310 students attending an elective course entitled "health promotion" in the Faculty of Health Sciences and 236 students (76%) participated to the study. Among these students, 146 (81%) were studying nursing, 54 (83%) were studying midwifery and 36 (55.4%) were studying nutrition and dietetics.

### Instruments

Data about demographics were collected using a self-report questionnaire that included questions about personal characteristics (age, sex, family living place, presence of older family members, living with older people and interest in working with older people). The University of California, Los Angeles Geriatrics Attitudes (UCLA-GA) Scale was used to evaluate the students' attitudes towards older people. The multidimensional UCLA-GA Scale, a five-point Likert scale composed of 14 items, is among the most commonly used tools to evaluate attitudes towards older people. Its subscales are social values, medical care, affection and allocation of resources. The mean total score for the scale is based on the subscale scores. The highest possible score is 70, and high scores indicate positive attitudes (9,10). The Anxiety about Aging Scale was used to evaluate ageing anxiety. This five-point Likert scale has four subscales and 20 items (3,11-12). Its subscales include fear of older people, psychological concerns about ageing, anxiety about physical appearance and fear of losses associated with ageing. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety and increased negative attitudes towards ageing.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained, and written permission was received from the departments in which the study was conducted. All participating students gave informed consent.



### Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package Program for Social Sciences 18.5 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). A *p* value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Results are expressed as means±standard deviation. In addition, the *t* test and analysis of variance and linear regression analysis were used to determine relationships between scores on the scales and sociodemographic features.

### RESULTS

Demographic features of the students are listed in Table 1. Most of the participants were female nursing students. The amount of time students had lived in urban or rural areas before the study was nearly similar. The mothers of most of the students were primary school graduates or literate only, whereas their fathers had higher education levels. A large percentage of the students had an older relative, and approximately one-fifth of the students indicated that their families shared their home with an older relative. Approximately half of the students participated in activities for older people and nursing home practicums.

The mean scores (range) of the students were 48.22±5.44 (32–65) for the UCLA-GA Scale and 66.38±8.75 (33–92) for the Anxiety about Aging Scale. For the Anxiety about Aging Scale subscales, students had mean scores of 20.74±3.69 (5–25) for fear of older people, 16.32±3.26 (5–25) for psychological concerns about ageing, 16.74±2.7 (7–23) for anxiety about physical appearance and 12.78±3.85 (5–23) for fear of losses associated with ageing. There was a significant moderate correlation between the UCLA-GA Scale and Anxiety about Aging Scale scores (Pearson: 0.34, *p*=0)

No significant difference was found between the scores for the scales with respect to sex, place of living and presence of an older relative. First-year students, nutrition and dietetics students and students not participating in nursing home practicums had significantly lower scores on the UCLA-GA Scale. Students with older relatives staying at their

homes had significantly higher scores on the Anxiety about Aging Scale. First-year students, nutrition and dietetics students and students sharing their home with an older relative had significantly higher scores for the Anxiety about Aging Scale subscale for fear of older people. Students staying with an older relative and those taking part in activities for older people had significantly higher scores on the psychological concerns about ageing subscale.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Women	208	88.1
Men	28	11.9
<b>Year in school</b>		
1	38	16.1
2	52	22.0
3	67	28.4
4	79	33.5
<b>School</b>		
Nursing	146	61.9
Midwifery	54	22.9
Dietetic	36	15.2
<b>Place of longest residence</b>		
Urban	117	49.6
Rural	119	50.4
<b>Education of mother</b>		
Primary school or less	142	60.2
Secondary school	25	10.6
High school	55	23.3
University	12	5.1
No answer	2	0.8
<b>Education of father</b>		
Primary school or less	89	37.7
Secondary school	40	16.9
High school	69	29.2
University	38	16.2
<b>Living with elderly relative</b>		
Yes	46	19.5
No	178	75.4
No answer	12	5.1
<b>Visiting nursing home</b>		
Yes	103	43.6
No	133	56.4
<b>Participation in service to the elderly</b>		
Yes	106	44.9
No	130	55.1

Students with older relatives staying at their homes had significantly higher scores on the anxiety about physical appearance subscale. No correlation was found between fear of losses associated with ageing and any of the tested variables (Table 2). Results from the multiple linear regression analysis

revealed that there were no relationships between scores on the UCLA-GA Scale and independent variables. The students living with an older relative at home had significantly higher scores for the Anxiety about Aging Scale and subscales for fear of older, psychological concerns and physical appearance.

**Table 2.** Mean scores on the geriatrics attitudes and the anxiety about aging scale subscale according to sociodemographic characteristics

	UCLA-GA	Ageing anxiety	Fear of people	Psychological Con.	Physical Ap.	Fear of losses
<b>Sex</b>						
Women	48.32±5.52	66.16±8.97	20.65±3.70	16.09±3.23	16.62±2.76	12.92±3.82
Men	47.50±4.87	68.04±6.78	21.42±3.59	17.96±2.99	17.60±2.85	11.72±4.04
<b>School</b>						
Nursing	48.78±5.25	67.58±8.00	21.35±3.53	16.95±2.84	16.82±2.65	12.72±3.93
Midwifery	48.61±6.09	65.78±9.53	20.69±3.20	16.46±3.79	17.06±3.09	12.36±3.96
Dietetic	46.08±4.69	65.51±7.29	19.22±3.55	16.19±3.031	16.57±2.17	13.79±3.19
F Sig.	3.47, 0.033	5.36, 0.005				
<b>Year in school</b>						
1	44.85±4.52	63.52±9.90	18.89±4.37	15.21±3.48	16.31±2.49	13.14±3.24
2	49.06±5.44	65.53±10.80	20.76±3.68	16.08±3.93	17.20±3.20	12.19±4.12
3	48.40±5.14	68.26±7.40	21.16±3.12	16.17±2.45	16.56±2.58	13.49±3.56
4	49.26±5.62	66.92±7.66	21.38±3.55	16.54±3.07	16.80±2.87	12.21±4.16
F Sig.	6.09, 0.001	4.39, 0.005				
<b>Presence of elderly relative</b>						
Yes	48.29±5.43	66.55±8.80	20.97±3.65	16.34±3.22	16.78±2.78	12.76±3.95
No	47.74±5.61	65.22±8.47	19.13±3.60	16.13±3.53	16.44±2.87	12.92±3.16
<b>Living with elderly relative</b>						
Yes	49.50±6.410	70.47±8.52	22.43±2.69	17.91±3.44	17.51±2.50	12.83±4.78
No	48.05±5.12	65.44±8.67	20.40±3.81	15.89±3.04	16.52±2.87	12.82±3.64
t. p	3.22, 0.001	3.38, 0.001	3.84, 0.000	2.06, 0.040		
<b>Visiting nursing home</b>						
Yes	49.18±5.07	67.08±8.42	21.17±3.70	16.71±3.11	16.72±2.54	12.58±4.08
No	47.43±5.63	65.82±8.99	20.42±3.66	16.01±3.34	16.75±2.97	12.93±3.68
t. p	2.43, 0.016					
<b>Participation in service to the elderly</b>						
Yes	48.68±4.82	67.46±8.13	20.95±3.61	16.86±2.97	16.79±2.35	12.87±3.96
No	47.81±5.92	65.47±9.17	20.58±3.75	15.86±3.43	16.70±3.11	12.71±3.78

## DISCUSSION

Ageing anxiety refers to anxiety about changes and losses which occur during the ageing process (7). Studies have shown that adolescents with anxiety about their own ageing processes can have more negative attitudes towards older people as their

contact with older people decreases (5). Here attitudes towards older people and ageing anxiety were investigated in students studying at Adnan Menderes University in Aydin, Turkey. Results of the study showed that attitudes towards older people and ageing anxiety were related. Indeed, students



with high scores on the UCLA-GA Scale had lower scores on the Anxiety about Aging Scale, which is consistent with other published results (13).

The students in this study had a positive attitude towards older people. In other studies using the same scale to evaluate attitudes towards older people, nursing and pharmacy students attained scores of  $48.64 \pm 5.51$  and  $47.23 \pm 5.93$ , respectively (14,15). Beliefs about older people and ageing vary from culture to culture. The positive attitudes of the Turkish society towards older people, which are influenced by traditions and cultural norms, may explain the positive attitudes identified in this study.

Studies have emphasised that healthcare workers are influenced by societal attitudes towards older people (16). In the current study, nutrition and dietetics students and first-year students scored lower on the UCLA-GA Scale, which suggested that they had more negative attitudes. This result may be attributed to the fact that these students had not yet acquired appropriate knowledge during their occupational education. Misconceptions about ageing can cause negative attitudes towards and discrimination against older people (17).

In this study, the students got higher scores for ageing anxiety than those reported by other studies (6,7,12,18). Ageing anxiety is reportedly affected by societal culture. One study found a significant difference between Turkish and American students in terms of ageing anxiety (12); it was also found to differ between Arab and Jewish students in a study conducted in Israel (19).

Here sex had no impact on ageing anxiety. However, women have higher ageing anxiety (4). Women are most affected by the importance placed by the media on physical appearance of women and the encouragement to invest in physical appearance related to strong materialistic values. The female body, which modern society targets for change into a perfect figure, has become a tool for the survival of the consumer society. Therefore, women are exposed to more pressure to meet societal standards of beauty. Women also recognise that their social opportunities

are determined by physical characteristics. The emergence of physical and functional losses and increase in diseases during the ageing process have a greater effect on women (13).

Here students with older relatives staying at their homes had higher scores on the Anxiety about Aging Scale and its subscales, which indicated negative attitudes towards ageing. A study by Allan and Johnson (13) found that participants staying with older relatives had higher anxiety levels about ageing (13). Similarly, here, students participating in activities with older people had high scores on the concerns about physical appearance subscale. A study on Turkish participants conducted by McConatha et al. (12) found high psychological concerns about physical appearance that were ascribed to social and economic chaos and uncertainty in Turkey. The researchers also commented that their participants received no information about ageing except through observation of older relatives, which might have explained their psychological concerns (12). Another Turkish study found that ageing anxiety was related to the degree of emotional connection between grandchildren and their grandparents (18). A study by Bergman (19) emphasised that Arab students spent more time with and had greater respect and value for older people owing to cultural factors. However, the study also found that low education levels in older relatives could be obstacles in communication between generations.

Here nutrition and dietetics and first-year students had lower scores on the fear of older people subscale. In other words, they reported less fear of their older relatives. Unlike the other students in the study, these two groups of students had less responsibility for the care of older people during practicums. In a qualitative study on nursing students, more than half of the students had negative thoughts about ageing, and nearly half considered ageing a negative phenomenon.

Although the students in the present study had a positive attitude towards older people, they were anxious about the ageing process. McGuin et al. reported in their study that participants were

concerned about the aging process (5). Students in this study who were staying with older relatives were more anxious about ageing. Physical and functional losses and social and financial problems resulting from ageing have a considerable effect on young people living with older relatives, and anxiety in students likely to provide care for ageing people may affect their career choices. Voluntary, friendly communication with older people and nurturing of equality between these groups of individuals may have positive influences on their choices (13). Therefore, young people should be provided opportunities to interact with older people in appropriate environments to foster positive attitudes about ageing and ageing people (20). Such interactions will also help young people cope with concerns about ageing.

This study had some limitations. The descriptive study design of the study did not allow complete explanations of causal relationships. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a single centre and an elective lecture's students. therefore, its results do not represent all health sciences students in Turkey. However, this study is the first study on ageing anxiety in health sciences students.

In conclusion, compared with subjects from other countries, Turkish health sciences students, who may eventually provide care for older people, had more severe ageing anxiety despite their positive attitude towards the ageing population. Restructuring the education of these students to allow positive experiences with older people during their practicums will diminish their anxiety about ageing and eliminate negative attitudes towards older people.

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