

Opinions of high school students in central Elazig about elderliness

A Ferdane Oguzoncul¹
Murat Aygen²
Yasemin Acik¹
S Erhan Deveci¹
B Canan Demirbag³
Edibe Pirincci¹

¹Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Firat University, Elazig, Turkey; ²Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Firat University, Elazig, Turkey; ³Department of Public Health, School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey

Methods: Students attending five different types of high schools in central Elazig (a city in Turkey) during the 2009–2010 school year constitute the study population. One class was randomly selected from each high school. Out of 650 students, 640 participated in the study. The data were evaluated by using the SPSS program; percentage, mean, and chi-square analyses were used.

Findings: Of all the students, 41.7% defined the elderly as those who are 60 years of age or older. When asked the question “What does elderliness mean to you?”, the majority of the students, 27.2%, responded “peace and resting”. The second most common answer, given by 23.6% of students, was “sickness/tiredness”; 16.6% responded “wisdom/experience”. Many students (30.3%) stated that the most difficult thing about living with the elderly was their interference in everything; 30.6% of students stated that there was no difficulty at all. According to 42.7% of the students, the greatest problem that the elderly face is health. Of all of the students, 58.3% stated that they feared growing old.

Conclusion: Our study has concluded the following: 1) High school students have a conventional perception of elderliness and 2) They embrace the elderly and think that perspectives on elderliness will change through education.

Keywords: old age, elderly, high school students, opinion

Introduction

For every living creature, elderliness is the final and inevitable phase of life.¹ Elderliness is an unstoppable phenomenon that has biological, chronological, and social aspects. The process is not the same for all; it exhibits differences based on the individual involved.²

The elderly population is on the rise worldwide both in terms of number and position in society.³ Although the extent of the increase varies with region and age group, the members of today’s elderly population mostly reside in developed countries. However, a more rapid increase in the elderly populations of developing countries is expected in the future.⁴

It is foreseen that in many countries that are categorized as developing, the population of people ages 60 years or above will reach 1.2 billion in 2025 and two billion in the year 2050.⁵ While there is no particular range that demarcates the advent of elderliness, the most frequently used age limit is 65 years.² In terms demography and law, the concept of elderliness is used to denote those ages 65 years and older.³

Today, Japan is the nation with the oldest population. Life expectancy at birth in Japan is calculated to be 80 years. Life expectancy at birth is 79 years in countries such as Canada, Sweden, and Switzerland, whereas it is 78 years in countries such as England, France, the Netherlands, and Italy. Life expectancy at birth is 75 years or older in 37 world nations.⁶

Correspondence: A Ferdane Oguzoncul
Firat Universitesi Tip Fakultesi, Halk
Sagligi Anabilim Dali, Kat:3 23119
Elazig, Turkey
Tel +90 0424 237 0000 ext 4685
Email aferdane@gmail.com

Parallel to these developments around the world, there has been an increase in the elderly population of Turkey as well. In the last second half of the 20th century (1950–2000) in Turkey, the percentage of the population that is 60 years of age or older has increased from 3.5% to 5.5% of the total population. This rate is increasing incrementally every day.⁶

Currently, there are approximately four million elderly people in Turkey. It is estimated that this number will double in the next 20 years, rising to seven to eight million, and then reach 12 million by the year 2050.⁶

Since ancient times, mankind has sought and continues to seek answers to questions such as these: “Who is elderly?”; “Is there a beginning of elderliness?”; “When does someone feel old?”; and “Do the symptoms of elderliness present in the same way for every individual?” The famous historian Homer emphasizes the experience and wisdom of the elderly when he claims that the youth are ready to harness the ability and experience of the elderly.¹ For Plato (427–347 BC), who draws attention to the individualistic aspect of the period of old age, the lifestyle during adolescence and adulthood is the determining factor in the activity and situation of an elderly individual.¹

In different societies, various beliefs concerning the social meaning of aging and attitudes are held, and various customs toward the elderly are observed. In traditional societies, elderly people are seen as “guardians of culture” because of their experience and accumulated manners. Thus, they are perceived as individuals who bear significant social roles in the growth of the second generation and the preservation of culture. In modern societies, they are considered to be individuals whose productivity has come to an end, who are burdens for their families, and who are expected to die as soon as possible.⁷

People have also different perspectives about aging. There are significant variations in perspectives among different age groups and among different sociocultural and economic structures. The phenomenon of elderliness, which has been present since the beginning of humanity, has been increasing in importance in recent years.⁸ In societies in which industry is dominant, people are moving toward nuclear families, and the average lifespan is increasing. Consequently, the number of elderly people whose needs for accommodation and social support are met in care and nursing homes is increasing.⁶

In European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, France, and England, single individuals who are 65 years or older make up 11% of households. This rate is significantly lower in developing countries, where elderly people live with their children or their grandchildren.⁶ In Eastern societies (Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan) most elderly people live with their children.⁹ Despite everything, Japan sustains a strong tradition of respect for social life and for parents as

well as its tradition of integrating the elderly into social life.¹⁰ In Iran, also an Asian country, the elderly have started to live alone, particularly in urban areas, because of geographical and social mobility, an increase in the number of nuclear families, a decrease in the number of children, and women’s integration into the workforce. However, only a quarter-century earlier, families, particularly those of the lower, lower-middle, rural, and even the upper-middle classes, used to live with their one or two sons. Elevations in social, cultural, religious, and economic situations; an increase in the standards of education and living; and modernization have resulted in radical changes in the family structure. This situation has left the elderly alone.¹¹ This process began in the 1950s in Turkey. Society is aging at a steadily increasing rate despite a high birthrate (population aged 65+ years: 7.3%).¹²

Throughout history, respect has been a milestone of our culture. Since time immemorial, ancestors have been respected and the elderly protected. Nevertheless, perspectives on old age vary, and elderliness is a complicated phenomenon. While some perceive elderliness as a problem, others adopt positive attitudes toward it.⁸

In our country, as in other countries undergoing the aging process, there exists a necessity to reconsider the phenomenon and policies surrounding elderliness. The conception of aging involves the discussion of subjects such as social integration of the elderly beyond mere daily care, the acquisition of lost statuses and roles, increasing functionality, and the efficient use of spare time.⁹

Elderliness elevates the status of an individual in almost every society. Senior citizens are individuals who are respected and enjoy some special privileges. In fact, this respect does not stem from age alone; wisdom, experience, and knowledge transmitted from ancestors, all of which are believed to come with age, increase the status of the elderly.¹³

The youth must get to know and understand adults and the elderly as much as adults need to know and understand the youth. In many conventional understandings, parents perceive caring for children as a social responsibility, and children believe that they must take care of their old parents. This attitude can also be seen in our traditions.¹³

The basic connection that the elderly have is to their families and particularly to their children. Therefore, it seems that the most significant source of social support is the nuclear family.¹⁴ Our society needs the elderly population as a balancing element and a source of experience.¹⁵

Aim and objectives

People have different perspectives concerning aging. There are differences in perspective among various age groups and

among different sociocultural and economic structures. These differences reveal the relationships between the young generation and older generations (the pediatrics–geriatrics relationship), which may cause problems such as generational conflicts. In such situations, both groups may despise each other. The youth must get to know and understand adults and the elderly as much as adults need to know and understand the youth.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the perspectives on elderliness of students attending different types of high schools in central Elazig.

Materials and methods

Students attending five different types of high schools (private high schools, state high schools, science high schools, Anatolian high schools, and vocational schools of health) located in central Elazig during the 2009–2010 school year constitute the population of this study. One class was randomly selected from the first, second, third, and fourth grades of each participating high school. Out of 650 students, 640 (98.4%) participated in the study.

Before conducting this study, written research permission was obtained from the Elazig Provincial Directorate of National Education, and participants provided their oral consent. A questionnaire in line with the relevant literature was developed by researchers and was administered to students under direct observation in order to collect data about their demographic features and opinions about elderliness. Regarding the questions on elderliness, the question of what the youth know about the elderly was taken into consideration. Open-ended questions were used as well as multiple choice questions so that those completing the surveys could best express their thoughts. The questions were mostly focused on the idea of the elderly and the imminent thoughts of students toward the elderly rather than direct examples of experiences with the elderly.

Data gathered from this study were evaluated by using the SPSS statistics program, and a chi-square test was used to detect significant frequency distributions, medians, standard deviations, and differences between groups. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Study limitations

The study faced some limitations because conducting the study with all of the high school students in the city would be difficult in terms of time and cost. Because of this, only five different types of high schools in the city center (excluding districts and villages) were included in the study. For the study sample, one class was selected for each grade. The study was conducted with those students who agreed to participate. No exclusion criteria were defined for study participants.

Results

The age distribution of participating students was 16.51 ± 1.11 years (minimum 14 years, maximum 20 years). The students' sociodemographic characteristics are seen in Table 1.

Of all of the students, 41.7% defined the elderly as those who are 60 years of age or older. The mean of the age at which a person was considered elderly by the students was 53.90 ± 9.392 years. The students' opinions about elderliness are given in Table 2.

For the question, "Where should the elderly generally stay?", the answer distribution according to high school type is provided in Table 3.

The percentage of those students who would want their parents to live with them was found to be 84.7% in private schools, 90.8% in vocational schools of health, and 93.8% in other types of high schools (state high schools, science high schools, Anatolian high schools).

Discussion

In the study, 41.7% of the participating students defined elderliness as being age 60 years or older. Students were asked at which age they thought elderliness began; the mean response was 53.90 ± 9.392 years. This is the average for the responses, for which the range was 30–85 years.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the 640 students who participated in the study

	N	% of total N
Gender		
Male	244	38.1
Female	396	61.9
Family type		
Nuclear	541	85.6
Extended	81	12.7
Separated	11	1.7
Home status		
Owned by family	436	68.1
Rented	131	20.5
Public housing	43	6.7
Owned by family elder(s)	30	4.7
Paternal education		
Illiterate	29	4.5
Literate	40	6.3
Primary school	171	26.7
Middle/high school	241	37.7
College/university	159	24.87
Maternal education		
Illiterate	129	20.2
Literate	71	11.1
Primary school	232	36.3
Middle/high school	147	23.0
College/university	61	9.5

Note: The total N is 640.

Abbreviation: N, number of students.

Table 2 The 640 students' opinions on elderliness

	N	% of total N
Elderly group according to students		
Below 60 years of age	373	58.3
60 years of age or older	267	41.7
What does elderliness mean?		
End of everything	67	10.5
Wisdom, experience	106	16.6
Peace and resting	174	27.2
Sickness	151	23.6
Lack of self-sufficiency	47	7.3
Loneliness	95	14.8
Difficulties of living with the elderly		
Generational conflict	99	15.5
Intervening in everything	194	30.3
Lack of self-sufficiency	69	10.8
Communication	82	12.8
No difficulties	196	30.6
The biggest problem the elderly face		
Lack of self-sufficiency	90	14.1
Loneliness, indifference	186	29.1
Not being understood	91	14.2
Health problems	273	42.7
Are you afraid of growing old?		
Yes	267	41.7
No	373	58.3
Does conception of elderliness change through education?		
Yes	595	92.9
No	45	7.1

Note: The total N is 640.

Abbreviation: N, number of students.

The categorization of elderliness varies with the culture of the country and with life expectancy at birth. In a study conducted in Manisa, a definition of elderliness similar to ours was found.⁶ Since the group participating in the study comprised adolescents, their definitions of elderliness may be extended to younger age groups.

The majority of students (27.2%) stated that for them, elderliness means “peace/resting”, but 23.6% of students expressed that elderliness means “sickness”. Young people’s association of elderliness with illness may be related to their observations of the elderly around them. The proportion of those who claimed that elderliness means “wisdom/

experience” was 16.6%, whereas in the study conducted in Manisa, 35% of young people stated that elderliness means “the end of everything”. The proportion who defined elderliness as “wisdom” was 12.5%.⁶ In almost every society, elderliness provides an elevated status for the individual. The senior citizen is an individual who is respected and has some special privileges.¹¹ Nurses working in a nursing home in İzmir considered elderliness to be a difficult period during which constant care is needed for health and social problems.¹⁶ The reason for obtaining different results in our study may stem from interregional and sociocultural differences.

Students maintained that the most important difficulty with living with the elderly is intergenerational conflict (30.3%), while an almost equal portion of the students (30.6%) expressed that there are no difficulties at all from living with the elderly. For a questionnaire in which respondents were asked, “To what extent do elderly people have certain characteristics?”, 34% of those ages 25–34 years old stated that the elderly talk nonsense; 44% of respondents considered them to be lazy; and 61% of respondents maintained that elderly people are stubborn.¹⁷

The majority of students (83.4%) stated that the elderly should stay with their families. Compared to those attending of other types of schools, more students in vocational schools of health held that the elderly should be in nursing homes ($P < 0.05$). This response may be due to their applied classes, in which they observe sicknesses of the elderly. One out of every ten elderly persons lives alone.¹⁸ Similarly, in research conducted by Bekaroğlu in Trabzon, 66.6% of the elderly living in homes stated that they lived with their children or with their children and spouse, and 21.6% said that they lived with their spouses.¹⁹ Also, 8% of respondents stated that they lived alone, and 4.6% stated that they lived with other relatives.¹⁹

The percentage of those who want their parents to live with them when their parents grow old was 84.7% in private schools, 90.8% in vocational schools of health, and 93.8% in other types of high schools. Subasi and Oztek conducted a

Table 3 According to high school type, the distribution of answers to the question “Where should the elderly stay?”

Type of school	Response to “Where should the elderly live?”					
	With their families		Nursing homes		Own homes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Private high school	106	88.3	3	2.5	11	9.2
Vocational schools of health	97	82.9	8	6.8	12	10.3
Other*	331	82.2	9	2.2	63	15.6
Total**	534	83.4	20	3.2	86	13.4

Notes: *Other: state high schools, science high schools, Anatolian high school. **Percentages are with respect to the total of the line (534). $\chi^2=10.722$; standard deviation=4; $P=0.03$ (statistically significant at $P < 0.05$).

Abbreviation: N, number of students.

study of 1,055 households in Ankara's Cankaya district to investigate the opinions of people over 18 about elderly care.²⁰ In the study, 75.0% of participants stated that children should take care of their parents who are old and cannot look after themselves. They maintained that elderly individuals should be cared for in their own homes.²⁰ In a study conducted by Baran et al in 2005 to analyze the relationship between elderly people and their families, 69.5% of individuals who were providing care for the elderly (son, daughter-in-law, daughter, son-in-law, or grandchildren) think that the elderly should be looked after by the son and daughter-in-law or by the daughter and son-in-law.²¹ On the other hand, the percentage of those who think that the elderly should be taken care of privately for a certain amount of money (3.5%) and the percentage of those who think that public institutions should provide care for the elderly (5.5%) were quite low. Also, 93.8% of the elderly maintained that they were happy to be living with their children.²¹

Conclusion

Our study found that high school students generally perceive elderliness in a traditional manner, and they think that perspectives on elderliness may change through education. Necessary precautions to ease life and care for the elderly staying at home should be taken. Therefore, families should be supported and social support should be provided.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this study.

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