

## ATTITUDE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS TOWARDS THE ELDERLY

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Attitude is known as the result of a person consciousness process. According to object of study, the intensity of feelings towards the elderly, people can express positive or negative attitudes, based on their knowledge, feelings and behaviours. The objective of this study is focused on describing the attitudes of the students of a higher education level who present a positive attitude towards the elderly and it is also our aim to find out if the sociodemographic variables interfere with a positive or negative attitude shown by the students. It was carried out a transversal, descriptive and correlative quantitative study on 250 students from Central Portugal enrolled in higher education, with a mean age of 24.12 years. To measure the variables, it was used an Attitude Scale towards the old people, and a socio-demographic characterization form. The students who presented a positive attitude towards old people were older men, with a partner, living in rural with relatives and not often with the elderly but who give importance to the contact with the elder person and those who do not participate in volunteer activities with the elderly. It can be said that age, marital status and living together with a partner can influence negative attitudes of the students towards the elderly, but with no relevant results for a positive attitude.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Students, Nursing, Higher Education, Elderly.

### Introduction

The aging of the population is a worldwide reality with relevant expression in Portugal (Ferreira, 2009). It is expected that the number of older people in the world double by 2050, from 12.3% of the world's total population to 21.5% (WHO, 2015). In Portugal, the aging rate in 2015 was 146%, which means that for every 100 young people there will be 164 elderly people (INE, 2016).

The increase of the older age groups and the decrease of the young population leads to an inversion of the age pyramid (Carneiro, Chau, Soares, Fialho and Sacadura, 2012). The aging expression is obvious in the Portuguese population (INE, 2012). Portugal is the eighth country in the world ranking and it is considered, by the United Nations, the fourth country with one of the oldest age structures (Pocinho, 2014, Eurostat, 2015 United Nations, 2015). This is the result of the developed countries health policies as well as the improvement of the living conditions among the population.

The aging of the population should not be considered a problem, it is a natural condition of the life cycle, which arises integrated actions of change in the attitudes and behaviours of the population in general (Milheiro, 2012).

Attitudes play an important role in how information is processed in the social world where each person moves, making it possible to understand, to organize and to process the required information. In the same situation, people understand reality in a different way. It can be said that attitudes are a set of

judgments that guide behaviours and promote the action of a person before another person or situation (Netto, 2012).

Attitudes are not directly seen but they can reveal the way of thinking and acting, so they are understood through behaviours, this is, what the person does or says. In this way, behaviours can be considered as the visible side of attitudes, that is, the way of acting (Gonçalves & Lemos, 2014; Alves, 2015). The same authors also point out that three components can be distinguished in attitudes (intellectual or cognitive components, emotional or affective components and behaviour component), which refers to how the individual reacts and acts in a given situation.

The aging process attends to physical, social and emotional changes and those must be accepted naturally by the elderly and understood by the population in general, producing positive attitudes towards these new conditions.

Pereira, Ponte and Costa (2018) report that the aging of the population can become a problem when the society is not prepared for its own aging process, presenting negative attitudes towards this life stage.

At the socio-cultural level, old people can be seen in a positive or negative perspective. A positive one is related to the recognition that they can be active and happy, with wisdom to share and with a lengthy youth, while the negative side is related to the physical and cognitive decline, uselessness and loneliness (Vieira & Lima, 2015).

There are some factors that can be connected to an unfavourable way of interaction which can be translated into negative attitudes towards aging and towards the elderly, namely, the lack of knowledge and the prejudice against the aging process, the Ageism and the interaction with old people ( Marques, 2011; Chonody, Webb, Ranzijn, & Bryan, 2014; Pereira, Ponte & Costa, 2018).

The nursing students, in a clinical context, interact with individuals throughout the life cycle, specifically elderly people. Clinical teaching is one of the educational components of the course and it is also seen as the first experience of the student with clinical practice. It is important that students of higher education level acquire knowledge and develop skills and attitudes shown towards the understanding of the changes related to the aging process and therefore to the improvement of the care they will provide to these patients (Chasteen & Cary, 2015).

Some studies had shown that the higher education students who demonstrated positive attitudes towards old people were the youngest ones, female students, living or having clinical practice with elderly people and that had curricular units about the aging process (Neri & Jorge, 2006 , Yasemin, Demir, Yönder & Yildiz, 2012).

In a study by Gould, Dupuis-Blanchard and MacLennan (2015) with nursing students and focusing on the attitudes and experiences with elderly care, concluded that there is an association between care for the elderly and basic care, not attending to clinical techniques. The loss of autonomy is something they have difficulty to deal with, so they recognize the importance of nursing care to these people. The students, after their clinical practice and according to the scope of the development of their positive attitudes, referred as important the interactions with the elderly, the good mood and new learnings.

So, it is important to know the attitudes of students of higher education level towards old people, since favourable or unfavourable attitudes are the result of their experiences and the information about the aging process and about the old person that the students may have.

The purposes of this study were to trace a portrayal of the higher education students who present a positive attitude towards old people and establish a relation between the different sociodemographic variables (age, sex, marital status, residence, cohabitation, interaction with old people, importance attributed to the interaction with elderly people, participation in volunteer work with this group of people).

## **Methods**

Quantitative cross-sectional study of correlational descriptive nature. 250 university students from the central region of Portugal, aged between 17 and 58 years, with a mean age of 24.12 years ( $\pm$  8.92) participated voluntarily, 78.5% are female and 21.5% male.

Most (97.9%) of the students are single (do not have a partner), living in the countryside (56.3%) and they usually live with other people (63.2%). They often interact with old people (77.7%), they also give great importance to the interaction with the elderly (59.5%) but they do not participate in volunteer work with them (52.6%).

For the data collection it was used the Attitudes towards Old People Scale and a socio-demographic characterization form.

The socio-demographic characterization form consists of a set of questions that aims to obtain information about the students' age, gender, marital status, residence, cohabitation, social relation with elderly people, the importance given to the interaction with the elderly and their participation in volunteer activities with senior people.

The Attitude Toward Old People Scale, KAOP (Kogan' Attitudes toward Old People), was elaborated and validated by Kogan in 1961 in the United States of America and was translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Professor Laura Viegas, in 2002.

The scale consists of 34 items: 17 negative and 17 positive, grouped in double pairs: the attitude is formulated in negative (negative item) and positive (positive item) forms which will result in 17 pairs of answers ( Pair 1 - items 1 and 2, Pair 2 - items 3 and 4, ... Pair 16 - items 31 and 32 and Pair 17 - items 33 and 34) (Kogan, 1961).

It is a Likert type scale, where the student is asked to place their degree of agreement on each of the items. For each item there are six alternatives answers (1 = I totally disagree to 6 = I totally agree). The absence of answers is quoted with 4 values.

Negative and positive items are distributed randomly, forming two sub-scales: one negative (with negative items) and one positive (with positive items)

The values attributed to the positive sub-scale items (items 1, 2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 27, 31 and 33) were inverted (Viegas, 2002).

Thus, for the negative sub-scale and the positive sub-scale, low scores indicate more positive attitudes toward the elderly. The author of the scale has established 3.5 as a theoretically neutral score.

The KAOP Scale evaluates the perception of the participants in seven areas related to the elderly, as shown in Table 1. These areas are evaluated by the answers to the pairs of a particular item for each area (Rodrigues, 2011) (cf. Table 1).

**Table 1.** Pairs of items and areas

Áreas	Pairs	Items
<b>Area 1</b> Segregation through housing space	<b>Pair 1:</b> to live a pleasant residential area it is preferable that it has not many elderly;	1 and 34
	<b>Pair 5:</b> it would probably be best if most of the elderly lived in the same buildings as other people of their age;	5 and 21
	<b>Pair 16:</b> most elderly tend to let their homes become sloppy and unattractive	16 and 32
<b>Area 2</b> Feelings when interacting with the elderly	<b>Pair 8:</b> most elderly brings discomfort to others	8 and 24
	<b>Pair 11:</b> there is a characteristic in older people which is they hardly understand what motivates them	11 and 28
<b>Area 3</b> Interpersonal relationships among generations	<b>Pair 9:</b> most elderly annoy others when they insist on talking about the good old days	9 and 25
	<b>Pair 12:</b> most elderly constantly complain about the behaviour of the younger generations	12 and 27
	<b>Pair 15:</b> most elderly spend a lot of time meddling in the affairs of others, giving advice without being asked	15 and 31
<b>Area 4</b> Homogeneity of the elderly as a group	<b>Pair 3:</b> if elderly want them to like them, the first step is to try to break free of their annoying faults	3 and 19
	<b>Pair 7:</b> most elderly are similar to each other except in special cases	7 and 23
<b>Area 5</b> Dependency	<b>Pair 2</b> most elderly would prefer to leave work as soon as the amount of the pension is enough to cover the expenses they have	2 and 18

	<b>Pair 14:</b> most elderly excessively demand to be loved and encouraged	14 and 30
<b>Area 6</b> Cognitive abilities	<b>Pair 13:</b> most elderly settle into their habits and are unable to change	13 and 29
	<b>Pair 4:</b> it is absurd to think that wisdom comes with age	4 and 20
<b>Area 7</b> Personal appearance and personality	<b>Pair 6:</b> most elderly should be more concerned with their personal appearance. They usually look sloppy.	6 and 22
	<b>Pair 10:</b> most elderly are annoying, inconvenient and unpleasant	10 and 26

In the process of collecting data, the students were asked to give their consent to this study and the confidentiality of personal data was ensured.

SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) programs for Windows was used for all data analysis.

## Results

The results present the characterization of the higher education students' attitudes towards old people as well as the connection between the sociodemographic variables and the attitudes.

### Characterization of the students' attitudes

Attitudes were analysed according to the seven areas in study (Segregation through housing space; Feelings when interacting with the elderly; Interpersonal relations between generations; Homogeneity of the elderly as a group; Dependency; Cognitive abilities; Personal appearance and personality) and to the Positive or Negative Attitude

According to the areas, the results were shown as follow:

A1 - Segregation through housing space – male, age equal or over 23 years old, with a partner, living in urban areas, they usually live with non-relative people, interacting with elderly and they do volunteer work with the elderly.

A2 - Feelings when interacting with the elderly - male aged between 20 and 22 years old, with a partner, living in the countryside, usually living together with other people who are not relatives, not interacting with elderly and not participating in volunteer work with the elderly.

A3 - Interpersonal relationships among generations - female, aged 23 or over, with a partner, living in urban areas, usually living with relatives, not interacting with elderly, not participating in volunteer work with the elderly.

A4 - Homogeneity of the elderly as a group - female, under 20 years old, without a partner, living in the countryside, usually living with other people who are not relatives, often interacting with elderly and participating in volunteer work with the elderly.

A5 – Dependency – female, under 20 years old, without a partner, living in rural areas, usually cohabit with other people who are not family members, do not live regularly with elderly people and have participated in volunteer work with the elderly.

A6 - Cognitive abilities - female, under 20 years old, without a partner, living in the countryside, usually living with other people who are not relatives, often interacting with elderly and participating in volunteer work with the elderly.

A7 - Personal appearance and personality - female, aged between 20 and 22 years old, without a partner, living in the countryside, usually living with other people who are not relatives, often interacting with elderly and not participating in volunteer work with the elderly.

When setting the profile of the students who showed a positive attitude towards old people, the characteristics are: 23 years old or older, male, married or living together with a partner, living in the countryside, usually living with relatives, usually not interacting with the elderly, considering important to have a relation with the elderly and not participating in volunteer work activities with the elderly.

Students who have shown a negative attitude toward old people are under 20 years old, male, single, living in the countryside, living with people who are not relatives, interacting with the elderly, considering important to have a relation with the elderly and participating in volunteer with the elderly.

### **Sociodemographic variables and Attitudes of students**

The interaction between students' attitudes towards the elderly and sociodemographic variables shows the following results:

Age reveals a significant effect on the areas: A4 - Homogeneity of the elderly as a group ( $p = 0.000$ ), A6 - Cognitive abilities ( $p = 0.041$ ) and for the Negative Attitude ( $p = 0.005$ ), however the students under 20 years present more positive attitudes in these areas.

Marital Status is relevant for the areas A3 – Interpersonal relationships among generations ( $p=0.016$ ), A4 - Homogeneity of the elderly as a group ( $p=0.003$ ), A6 – Cognitive abilities ( $p=0.004$ ) and to the Negative Attitude ( $p=0.026$ ). Students with a partner have a more favourable attitude toward interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, while those with no partner have better attitudes in the rest.

Cohabitation presents statistically significant differences in A6 - Cognitive abilities ( $p = 0.014$ ) and on the Negative Attitude ( $p = 0.033$ ), the students who live with non-relatives have shown more positive attitudes in this area.

The importance given to the interaction with the elderly has a significant effect only for A1 - Segregation through the living space ( $p = 0.011$ ), with a more favourable attitude of students who don't give a special importance to the interaction with old people.

Participation in volunteer work with the elderly has a significant effect only for A5 - Dependency ( $p = 0.036$ ) and the students who had already participated in these activities present more favourable attitudes.

Gender, residence, and interaction do not present significant statistical results in any of the areas or sub-scales in study.

### **Conclusion**

The main objective of this study was to characterize the students of higher education who presented a positive attitude towards the old person and to verify if the sociodemographic variables interfere in the positive or negative attitude of the students.

Each person goes old in different ways, and this is influenced by the way the person looks at this whole life cycle process.

Sometimes, the old people present physiological changes in association with some psychological frailty arising from the aging process itself, from the behaviours which were adopted throughout life, as well as from their exposure to risk factors (Velo, 2015).

The development of stereotypes associated with characteristics inherent to aging will also affect the image of the elderly and it can trigger prejudice against this group.

The misconceptions that students could have about the aging and the elderly will influence the way take care of them. This care is understood as something very complex, when associated with situations of fragility and vulnerability (Gould, Dupuis-Blanchard and MacLennan, 2015). The same authors point out that nursing students should recognize the several difficulties that could appear such as the interactions of chronic and acute diseases.

Other authors also argue that education, training and knowledge about the elderly's health allows the acquisition of specific skills and values leading to a better preparation of the students, in relation to the development of more positive attitudes (Neri & Jorge, 2006; Yasemin, Demir, Yönder e Yildiz, 2012).

At a higher education level, the approach of gerontology, directed to the elderly care, will promote changes in the conception of the image of old people, favouring the interpersonal and intergenerational relationship and, consequently, changing the existing prejudices (Perez, Tourinho, Junior, 2016).

Our study allowed us to conclude that the students who showed a positive attitude toward the elderly are older men, living with a partner or with their families, mainly in the countryside, usually they don't live with old people, they think that interaction is crucial and they hardly were in volunteer activities with this group of people. A study by Neri and Jorge (2006) does not corroborate our results and concluded that the youngest female students who live with the elderly are those who showed more positive attitudes. Yasemin, Demir, Yönder and Yildiz (2012) carried out a study that aimed to examine the attitudes of 145 nursing students from a Turkish School of Health and concluded that positive attitudes toward the elderly were higher among female students who were having clinical practice with old people; living with relatives or interacting very often with their elderly relatives.

Among the sociodemographic variables in study, age, marital status, cohabitation, the importance of interaction and participation in volunteer work were those that influenced the most their attitudes.

The sociodemographic variables that interfered with the students' attitudes toward the elderly were age, marital status and cohabitation, which means that those who presented a more negative attitude were the youngest ones, usually single and living with other people who were not family members.

Age was the only variable that proved to be a predictor of the A4 area - Homogeneity of the elderly as a group and of a Negative Attitude. Younger students understand that older people are a homogenous group but they also have a negative attitude towards them.

The results of this study suggest that in higher education courses it should be considered to teach more contents related to aging, since there will be an increase of the elderly in our society. On the other hand, the increase of knowledge and a better understanding about this process will lead to a change of attitude at a personal and social level.

Higher education courses aiming the care for elderly people should emphasize the practical component in addition to the whole theoretical one in units of care specialized in providing a good quality of life to the patient through the increase of their physical, mental and social abilities.

The development of knowledge and skills in the youngest students will allow them to diminish and reject the stereotypes that they may have and on the other hand they will also nourish their feelings among this older generation. Behaviours and attitudes towards the elderly will have implications in the promotion of their quality of life as well as the quality of care that can be provided.

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