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**AGEISM: COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT OLDER PEOPLE**

**ABSTRACT**

Old age is generally defined as a social phenomenon accompanied by prejudices, stereotypes and negative images. Despite the argument that in recent years a social process of positive change is taking place in the perception of the elderly, the negative image is still the most frequent among all age groups, including the young people. This research was planned and carried out to determine college students' perceptions about older people and ageist attitudes towards them. The data were obtained using a questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in different courses at universities in city of Ankara. The convenient sample of 278 volunteers consisted of 141 women and 137 men, ranging in age from 17 to 32 years. Results from the "Froboni Scale of Ageism" suggest that female and male students were quite similar in the ageist behaviors. Findings also stated that although male students mean scores were some more higher than females', gender was not statistically correlated with ageism.

**Keywords:** Ageism, perceptions, attitudes, elderly, gender.

**YAŞLI AYRIMCILIĞI: ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN YAŞLILARA İLİŞKİN ALGILARI**

**ÖZET**

Yaşlılık çağı basmakalıp önyargılar ve olumsuz imaja eşlik eden sosyal bir fenomen olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Son yıllarda yaşlılık algısında olumlu değişimlere ilişkin bir tartışma olsa da, gençleri içeren tüm yaş grupları arasında negatif imaj hala en yaygındır. Bu araştırma üniversite öğrencilerinin yaşlı insanlar ve yaşlılığa ilişkin algılarını belirlemek amacı ile planlanmış ve yürütülmüştür. Araştırma verileri Ankara'da iki farklı üniversitede öğrenim gören, 17-32 yaş aralığında, 141 kız ve 137 erkek olmak üzere toplam 278 gönüllü öğrenci üzerinde soru formu kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. "Froboni Yaşlı Ayrımcılığı Ölçeği" sonuçları kız ve erkek öğrencilerin oldukça benzer yaşlı ayrımcısı davranışlara sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Bulgular ayrıca bu tutumlar konusunda erkek öğrencilerin ortalama puanlarının, kız öğrencilere oranla daha yüksek olduğunu ortaya koymakla birlikte yaşlı ayrımcılığı ile toplumsal cinsiyet arasında istatistiksel açıdan ilişki bulunmamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yaşlı Ayrımcılığı, Algılar, Tutumlar, Yaşlılar, Toplumsal Cinsiyet

## 1. INTRODUCTION (GİRİŞ)

As in most other countries, the proportion of older adults in Turkey has been increasing. Due to the rapidly growing population of older adults, universities must educate more students on the issues facing on aging society. To assist universities in educating new generations of workers who understand aging and older adults, it is important to understand aging and older adults and the current attitudes of students towards aging [1].

Ageism consists of behaviors, attitudes, and stereotypes of people based on their age. It is a form of discrimination [2 and 3]. and it portrays the aging process as inevitable deterioration, resulting in uselessness and an inability to be productive [3].

People of all ages are familiar with the term ageism, which refers to any form of prejudice or discrimination based on chronological age [4].

Ageism is an immense construct with multiple facets, layers, and textures which impacts both attitudes and personal behavior towards older people [5 and 4]. Some ageist ascriptions are positive, whereas most attributions are negative [5].

Ageism can lead to ageist discourse, expressed ageist attitudes, and discriminatory practices based on age, which have been shown to cause lowered self efficacy, decreased performance, and cardiovascular stress[6]. Ageist attributions have many implications for aging populations. At the level of direct practice, for example, depression and substance abuse are areas of critical concern [5].

Attitudes toward elders have been studied among a variety of health care professionals and students, including psychiatrists, nursing students, medical students, nursing home supervisors, occupational therapy students, institutional caregiving staff, home health care workers, nurse's aides, and college students in general. But researchers have devoted comparatively little attention to prejudice based on age: ageism.

One might think that if there were any person who would be least likely to hold stereotypes about and be prejudiced against older people would be those whose job is to help them. But, research has shown that counselors, educators and other health professionals are just as likely to be prejudiced against older people as other individuals [7].

Wilderom et al. [8] surveyed 809 students in six successive entering classes at a medical school regarding their willingness to work with elders. Their findings indicated that although students' attitudes toward elders were essentially neutral, only 3% of those surveyed wished to pursue a career in geriatric medicine.

There are also positive references in the literature towards old age and aging. Van Dussen and Weaver [1]. indicated that students have mixed attitudes toward working with older adults. They found working with older adults to be rewarding, gratifying, meaningful, uplifting, and fun.

In spite of the growing need for gerontological specialists, the number of students who articulate a preference for work with older clients is minimal. Lack of gerontological interest among students may be a result of a lack of gerontological content, faculty with limited gerontological knowledge and experience, and little encouragement for students to pursue gerontological specialization [9].

## **2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE (ÇALIŞMANIN ÖNEMİ)**

As our population continues to age, the need to halt ageism and ageist practices becomes more urgent. From this point of view, this research was planned and carried out for determine the college students' perceptions about older people and their ageist attitudes towards them. The findings of this research are important for both gerontological specialist and educators who should review curriculum.

## **3. METHOD (YÖNTEM)**

### **3.1. Subjects (Örneklem)**

During 2008/2009 academic year, a questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in different courses at universities in city of Ankara (including Ankara University, Gazi University and Hacettepe University). The convenient sample of 278 volunteers consisted of 141 women and 137 men, ranging in age from 17 to 32 years (mean= 21.81±2.29).

### **3.2. Measures (Ölçüm)**

The data were obtained using a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of "socio-demographic characteristics of students" and "Fraboni Scale of Ageism" (FSA) sections and filled in by interviewing the subjects.

In this study, FSA [10] was used to measure antagonistic, discriminatory attitudes and the tendency toward avoidance. In this scale three factors were proposed: Antilocution (antagonism and antipathy fuelled by misconceptions, misinformation or myths about older persons), Avoidance (withdrawal from social contact with older persons), and Discrimination (discriminatory opinions regarding the political rights, segregation, and activities of older persons).

Although the FSA has demonstrated potential as a well balanced measure of ageism, in the present study reliability and factor structure has been furtherly explored.

The FSA consists of 29 items. Addition to original 4 point (1-strongly disagree to 4-strongly agree) Likert scale, in the present study "undecided-3" option was used. Items about ageism were evaluated by strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), strongly disagree (1) alternatives. Higher scores indicatemore positive attitudes toward elders [9,11 and 12]. Answers given to sentences typed Likert were scored, used "Varimax Analyses Technique" for validity and items with factor loadings of 0.30 or higher were retained [13]. In order to test the reliability of the questionnaire "Cronbach Alpha" was calculated as inner consistency coefficient. Table 1 shows the scale items and their reliabilities.

Resulting three factor which accounted for 0.68, 0.69 and 0.69 of the coefficient alphas were explained "Antilocution", "Avoidance" and "Discrimination". The data in FSA have been analysed considering gender variable by using SPSS 16.0 and, t-test was performed for determining the differences depending on gender.

Table 1. Factor structure and validity of the Fraboni Scale of Ageism  
(Tablo 1. Fraboni Yaşlı Ayrımcılığı Ölçeğinin Yapı Geçerliliği ve Güvenirliği)

	Factor loadings	Item loadings	Fraboni et al. (1990) factor	Rupp et al. (2005) factor
<b>Factor 1. Antilocution</b>				
1. Many old people are stingy and hoard their money and possessions.	.53	.34	Antilocution	Stereotypes
2. Many old people are not interested in making new friends, preferring instead the circle of friends they have had for years.	.55	.35	Antilocution	Stereotypes
3. Many old people just live in the past.	.61	.43	Antilocution	Stereotypes
4. Most old people should not be trusted to take care of infants.	.52	.35	Antilocution	Stereotypes
5. Many old people are happiest when they are with people their own age.	.45	.30	Antilocution	Stereotypes
6. Many old people would be considered to have poor personal hygiene.	.41	.30	Antilocution	Stereotypes
7. Most old people can be irritating because they tell the same stories over and over again.	.48	.33	Antilocution	Stereotypes
8. Old people complain more than other people do.	.51	.34	Antilocution	Stereotypes
10. Teenage suicide is more tragic than suicide among the old.	.32	.30	Antilocution	Stereotypes
26. Most old people should not be allowed to renew their drivers licenses.	.35	.30	Antilocution	Excluded from measure
29. Old people do not need much money to meet their needs.	.42	.30	Antilocution	Excluded from measure
<b>Eigenvalues: 2.63                      Explained variance: %23.9                      Alpha: 0.68</b>				
<b>Factor 2. Avoidance</b>				
9. I would prefer not to go to an open house at a senior's club, if invited.	.64	.50	Avoidance	Stereotypes
11. I sometimes avoid eye contact with old people when I see them.	.65	.37	Avoidance	Separation
12. I don't like it when old people try to make conversation with me.	.65	.36	Avoidance	Separation
13. Complex and interesting conversation cannot be expected from most old people.	.65	.36	Antilocution	Separation
15. Old people should find friends their own age.	.52	.31	Avoidance	Separation
17. Old people don't really need to use our community sports facilities.	.61	.54	Discrimination	Separation
<b>Eigenvalues: 2.33                      Explained variance: %38.9                      Alpha: 0.69</b>				
<b>Factor 3. Discrimination</b>				
16. Old people should find friends their own age.	.49	.31	Avoidance	Separation
19. The company of most old people is quite enjoyable.	.58	.37	Discrimination	Affective attitude
20. It is sad to hear about the plight of the old in our society these days.	.77	.58	Discrimination	Affective attitude
21. Old people should be encouraged to speak out politically.	.62	.41	Discrimination	Affective attitude
24. There should be special clubs set aside within sports facilities so that old people can compete at their own level.	.71	.52	Discrimination	Excluded from measure
25. Old people deserve the same rights and freedoms as do other members of our society.	.54	.35	Discrimination	Excluded from measure
27. Old people can be very creative.	.43	.28	Avoidance	Excluded from measure
<b>Eigenvalues: 2.52                      Explained variance: %36.0                      Alpha: 0.69</b>				
<b>Original item excluded from revised measure</b>				
14. Feeling depressed when around old people is probably a common feeling.			Avoidance	Separation
18. It is best that old people live where they won't bother anyone.			Discrimination	Separation
23. I personally would not want to spend much time with an old age person.			Avoidance	Affective attitude
28. I would prefer not to live with an old person.			Avoidance	Excluded from measure

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (BULGULAR VE TARTIŞMA)

Table 2 indicates means, standard deviations and t-values of scale of items related to Antilocution.

Table 2. Perceptions about Antilocution  
 (Tablo 2. Olumsuz İmajı İlişkin Algılar)

Antilocution	Gender	$\bar{X}$	S	t
1.Many old people are stingy and hoard their money and possessions.	Female	3.27	1.25	1.47
	Male	3.49	1.24	
	Total	3.38	1.25	
2.Many old people are not interested in making new friends, preferring instead the circle of friends they have had for years.	Female	2.94	1.28	0.25
	Male	2.89	1.28	
	Total	2.92	1.28	
3.Many old people just live in the past.	Female	2.48	1.18	2.55*
	Male	2.86	1.28	
	Total	2.66	1.24	
4.Most old people should not be trusted to take care of infants.	Female	3.24	1.22	1.89
	Male	3.51	1.19	
	Total	3.37	1.21	
5.Many old people are happiest when they are with people their own age.	Female	2.57	1.27	0.73
	Male	2.47	1.09	
	Total	2.52	1.84	
6.Many old people would be considered to have poor personal hygiene.	Female	3.19	1.23	1.30
	Male	3.00	1.23	
	Total	3.09	1.24	
7.Most old people can be irritating because they tell the same stories over and over again.	Female	2.61	1.14	2.97**
	Male	3.03	1.23	
	Total	2.82	3.00	
8.Old people complain more than other people do.	Female	2.35	1.17	1.05
	Male	2.49	1.15	
	Total	2.42	1.16	
10.Teenage suicide is more tragic than suicide among the old.	Female	3.04	1.45	0.38
	Male	2.97	1.41	
	Total	3.00	1.43	
26. Most old people should not be allowed to renew their drivers licenses.	Female	3.13	1.28	1.96*
	Male	2.84	1.19	
	Total	2.99	1.24	
29. Old people do not need much money to meet their needs.	Female	2.58	1.15	0.38
	Male	2.64	1.19	
	Total	2.61	1.17	

According to the research data students generally disagreed with the items in the antilocution subscale and mean scores' related to items in the scale were low. In other words it was found that they generally disagreed or undecided on all of the items.

Although there were no statistical differences, male students more agree with "Many old people are stingy and hoard their money and possessions", "Most old people shouldn't be trusted to take care of infants" and "Most old people shouldn't be allowed to renew their drivers licences" statements than female students.

As a result of t-test applied, it was found that the difference between females and males was significantly related to the statements of the "Many old people can be irritating because they tell the same stories over and over again" ( $p < 0.01$ ) and average scores of males were higher

than those of females while females average scores were higher than males related to "Most old people should not be allowed to renew their drivers licences" statements ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Means and standard deviations and t-values of items related to Avoidance has shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceptions about Avoidance  
 (Tablo 3. Kaçınmaya İlişkin Algılar)

Avoidance	Gender	$\bar{X}$	S	t
9.I would prefer not to go to an open house at a senior's club, if invited.	Female	3.74	3.40	1.18
	Male	3.37	1.30	
	Total	3.55	2.59	
11. I sometimes avoid eye contact with old people when I see them.	Female	4.22	0.97	1.70
	Male	4.01	1.11	
	Total	4.12	1.04	
12.I don't like it when old people try to make conversation with me.	Female	4.27	0.99	2.02*
	Male	4.00	1.22	
	Total	4.14	1.12	
13.Complex and interesting conversation cannot be expected from most old people.	Female	3.96	1.11	0.75
	Male	3.86	1.07	
	Total	3.91	1.09	
15.Old people should find friends their own age.	Female	3.26	1.37	0.25
	Male	3.30	1.29	
	Total	3.28	1.33	
17.Old people don't really need to use our community sports facilities.	Female	3.29	2.15	0.29
	Male	3.35	1.19	
	Total	3.32	1.74	

As shown in "Avoidance" subscale college students expressed more agreement involving "I don't like it when old people try to make conversation with me" and "I sometimes avoid eye contact with old people when I see them" statements.

Related to "Old people should find friends their own age" and "Old people don't really need to use our community sports facilities" statements, students were almost undecided when male students' mean score was higher than females'.

The results of t-test indicated that the difference between females and males was significant related to "I don't like it when old people try to make conversation with me" statement ( $p < 0.05$ ), and females' average score was higher than males' score.

Table 4 indicates means, standard deviations and t-values of scale items related to Discrimination.

According to Discrimination subscale college students especially female expressed more participation related to "It is sad to hear about the plight of the old in our society these days" ( $p < 0.01$ ) and, "There should be special clubs set aside within sports facilities so that old people can compete at their own level" ( $p < 0.05$ ) statements.

Table 4. Perceptions about Discrimination  
 (Tablo 4. Ayrımcılığa İlişkin Algılar)

Discrimination	Gender	$\bar{X}$	S	t
16. Old people should find friends their own age.*	Female	3.91	1.17	1.35
	Male	3.71	1.21	
	Total	3.81	1.19	
19. The company of most old people is quite enjoyable.*	Female	3.81	1.17	1.34
	Male	3.62	1.16	
	Total	3.72	1.17	
20. It is sad to hear about the plight of the old in our society these days.*	Female	4.31	1.17	2.73**
	Male	3.92	1.23	
	Total	4.12	1.21	
21. Old people should be encouraged to speak out politically.*	Female	3.64	1.21	1.24
	Male	3.46	1.19	
	Total	3.55	1.20	
24. There should be special clubs set aside within sports facilities so that old people can compete at their own level.*	Female	4.01	1.15	2.39*
	Male	3.66	1.25	
	Total	3.84	1.21	
25. Old people deserve the same rights and freedoms as do other members of our society.*	Female	3.66	1.42	0.01
	Male	3.66	1.33	
	Total	3.66	1.38	
27. Old people can be very creative.*	Female	3.52	1.09	0.97
	Male	3.39	1.06	
	Total	3.46	1.07	

\*Reverse code

As seen in Table 5. the mean score of "Antilocution" subscale was 31,52 while "Avoidance" subscales' was 22.18 and, "Discrimination" subscales' was 25,93. Furthermore mean score of FSA found as 159,27.

Table 5. Mean scores and t values of FSA and subscales  
 (Tablo 5. FSA ölçeği ortalama ve t değerleri)

	Gender	$\bar{X}$	S	t
Antilocution	Female	31.24	6.24	.728
	Male	31.81	6.79	
	Total	31.52	6.51	
Avoidance	Female	22.68	6.72	1.464
	Male	21.67	4.53	
	Total	22.18	5.76	
Discrimination	Female	26.67	4.90	2.475*
	Male	25.17	5.19	
	Total	25.93	5.09	
FSA	Female	161.18	24.00	1.410
	Male	157.29	21.77	
	Total	159.27	22.97	

Widrick's [14] research findings has shown that FSA score of participants was 57,89 while Wang et al. [11] found same score as 144,30. Compared to other research findings students mean scores were higher. In other words students' attitudes towards the elder were found more positive than their peers in other countries.

Findings also stated that female and male students were quite similar in the ageist behaviors. Cherry and Palmore [4] revealed that

female endorsed positive ageism items more often than did male. Although Rupp et al. [6] found that male had significantly higher ageism scores on the FSA than female, in our study there was no statistical differences depending on gender variable.

##### 5. CONCLUSION (SONUÇ)

Young population being in positive attitudes towards elderly can be explained by the continuing comparatively traditional family structure in Turkey. However it is thought that attitudes towards the elderly might change negatively in the future because of the growing number of aged population and rapidly changing social structure. Therefore, it is important to enhance research in this field and enhanced education programs in gerontology for young population. It is also important to plan projects which provide young population to be in communication with the elderly and which they can actively work.

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