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## Attitude change of college students toward older adults

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Attitude Change of College Students Toward Older Adults

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With University Honors

Department Of

Family, Consumer, Nutrition Sciences

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Abstract

Attitude change of approximately 200 undergraduate students' attitudes towards the elderly was assessed. To measure attitude change a modified version of the Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (1961) was administered to college students at the beginning and end of the semester. The three courses varied in content regarding older adults and the aging process. The aging and the family class focused entirely on aging and required contact with an older adult. The human development class focused on the lifespan and included a segment on aging, while the child development class acted as the control group with no course content related to aging. Data were summarized, and findings suggest that attitudes significantly improved after taking the aging and the family class.

### Research Problem

The purpose of the project is to determine the influence of three college courses on attitude change of college students toward older adults. Thus, the dependent variable in the study is attitude change, and the independent variable is the course taken.

### Dependent Variable

Attitude change of approximately 200 undergraduate students was assessed by comparing pretest and posttest results of a survey administered to the students. The survey assessed attitudes toward older adults in general.

### Independent Variable

To measure attitude change a modified version of the Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (1961) was administered to college students at the beginning and end of the semester. The three courses varied in content regarding older adults and the aging process. The aging and the family class focused entirely on aging and required contact with an older adult. The human development class focused on the lifespan and included a segment on aging, while the child development class acted as the control group with no course content related to aging.

### Assumptions

A number of factors influence one's attitude toward older adults. Previous experience and exposure to the older adult population are especially influential. If past experiences have been positive, then attitudes will be positive, and vice

versa. As was pointed out in two studies (Hawkins, 1996; Downs & Walz, 1981), students who were close with an older adult, or had previous experiences with the older adult population, had more positive attitudes.

It has also been found that socialization of a student (Yenerall, 1995) influences their attitudes and beliefs. Yenerall found that older students (third and fourth year) were more likely to hold positive attitudes. In addition, he found that students majoring in Education or Social Sciences were also more apt to have positive attitudes. The courses surveyed for this study are requirements for the FCNS department-- a Social Science based program. Therefore, the students may be socialized to possess more positive attitudes toward older adults.

#### Hypotheses

Attitude change occurs due to increased positive knowledge and information. To improve attitudes held by undergraduate college students towards older adults the students need to be exposed to positive information that is complete, and focuses on all aspects of aging-- biological, psychological, and social. Therefore, positive attitude change will occur most significantly in the students enrolled in the aging and the family course in comparison to the other two courses.

#### Justification

By the year 2030 21.8% of the population will be over 65 (Hooyman, & Kiyak, 1999). This growth in the older adult population is due to the aging of the

"Baby Boomer," generation. With the older adult population increasing at such a rate, further research of this topic is needed (Green, 1981; Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Hawkins, 1996).

Socialization is especially influential on attitudes (Yenerall, 1995).

Socializing agents such as television, schools, and parents need to focus on facilitating positive attitude change in college students (Downs & Walz, 1961).

The educational community would especially benefit from this research. By researching attitudes towards older adults it provides an understanding of what kinds of information and experiences are effective in producing positive attitude change. For instance, negative information could affect already positive attitudes in a negative way (Kremer, 1988). It is necessary for educators to provide a balance of information and knowledge for their students in order to facilitate positive attitude change (Davis-Berman, 1995).

The benefits of researching attitudes are plentiful in the college community. With the increasing number of older adults returning to campus and continuing their education (Schwalb & Sedlacek, 1990), educating younger students will help their interactions with this growing population of older students. In addition, the older adults in the community surrounding colleges will benefit. Courses on aging that incorporate direct contact with older adults are influential in changing attitudes. Therefore, the students enrolled in these courses are likely to get involved in the community.

Prejudices must be addressed in the classroom setting (Hawkins, 1996). The negative attitudes held by college students toward older adults are just a reflection of their prejudices. By addressing the issue in the classroom, students can use the information to positively change their attitudes. Many studies have shown a course addressing the topic of aging is influential in positively changing attitudes (Porter & O'Connor, 1978; Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Angiullo, Whitbourne, & Powers, 1996; Davis-Berman, 1995; Katz, 1990).

There are many older adults in key social, political, and economic roles (Hawkins, 1996). If negative attitudes persist, the people in these roles, and the positions they hold will be looked upon negatively, even down graded.

Another implication of negative attitudes toward older adults is how it affects personal attitudes of one's own aging. If attitudes are negative there could be difficulty accepting one's own aging, resulting in low self-esteem in later life. In addition, negative attitudes can influence the way one feels about or acts towards older adult friends or family (Hawkins, 1996).

By studying college students' attitudes we can predict what is to come in the way of attitudes toward the older adult population. Looking at how to change attitudes is especially important. If we know how to influence attitude change, then it will be easier to create positive attitudes toward the older adult population.

## Review of Literature

Much of the past research found college student's attitudes to be negative (Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Angiullo, Whitbourne, & Powers, 1996; Davis-Berman, 1995; Yenerall, 1995). Typical perceptions held by college students of the older adult population were that they were conservative, and set in their ways. Older adults were seen as passive, weak, and low in energy. In addition, it was thought that they were dependent upon others (Green, 1981). These negative attitudes held by college students were typical of society in general. This was evident in the way older adults were portrayed on television, and in other media resources. Given that older adults were perceived so negatively, they were compared to minority groups, and the perceptions held toward them. Kogan (1961) kept this in mind when creating his Old People (OP) Scale. He integrated items from scales assessing attitudes towards minorities into his scale, changing them to read and assess about older adults. When the results were analyzed he found that those people holding negative attitudes toward older adults also tend to hold negative attitudes towards minorities, and people with disabilities.

More recently, however, it has been found that attitudes are becoming increasingly more positive, and are not as negative as was once thought (Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Angiullo, Whitbourne, & Powers, 1996; Davis-Berman, 1995; Yenerall, 1995). College students currently have been raised with less age discriminatory practices (Yenerall, 1995). Attitudes of

society in general have changed for the better. Older adults have been living longer providing a larger opportunity for today's families to have the intergenerational contacts that were not possible in the past. According to Yenerall (1995) attitudes are leveling off at a more positive view point.

Attitudes have become positive due to the media's improved portrayal of older adults (Yenerall, 1995) and the increasing concern for their well being. If attitudes are to change, other socializing agents, such as school, and television, must change (Downs & Walz, 1961). These changes have already begun. Schools, especially colleges and universities, have made courses on aging available to their students. Yenerall (1995) found that third and fourth year students were taking advantage of these courses, and therefore possessed more positive attitudes toward older adults.

Attitudes towards older adults were found to be more negative when the respondents compared older adults to younger age groups (Hawkins, 1996; Siotterback & Saarnio, 1996; Wingard, Heath, & Himmelstein, 1982). In one study (Hawkins, 1996) college students' attitudes were assessed towards three groups of older adults (young-old 65-74, old-old 75-99, centarians 100+). It was found that as the age of the older adults increased, attitudes became increasingly negative. Siotterback & Saarnio (1996) had respondents rate attitudes toward older adults, middle aged adults, and young adults. It was expected that attitudes would be increasingly negative as the target group aged. This was the case. Older adults were rated significantly more negative than middle aged and

younger adults. However, it was found that attitudes toward middle aged adults were not as negative as they were expected to be.

Wingard, Heath, & Himelstein (1982) reported similar findings. Their study compared the difference in attitudes when measured in comparison to the young adult population, and isolated attitudes toward older adults in general. They found that when older adults were being compared to younger adults, attitudes toward the older adults were significantly lower. When respondents are asked to compare the older adults to a younger group this tends to be the case. The respondent is calling upon the negative stereotypes they hold about the population. However, when older adults are rated in general, attitudes are not as negative. The respondent can be more objective about their replies.

Negative attitudes held are not limited to older adults. These attitudes carry over to the aging process in general. There are possible ramifications that could occur due to negative attitudes toward older adults (Hawkins, 1996). These ramifications include fear of, and difficulty accepting one's own aging, and low self-esteem in later life. Kremer (1988) found that negative information provided to students on aging and the aging process has a negative effect on attitudes toward one's own aging. In contrast, Katz (1990) found personal anxiety about aging is resistant to change through education. These negative attitudes toward older adults and the aging process carry over to society. Self-esteem of older adults is impacted negatively, as well as the treatment they

receive. In addition, negative attitudes reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices held toward older adults (Hawkins, 1995).

Despite attitudes held by college students, their grandparents tend to be looked at as the exception. They are not viewed with the same negative perceptions as older adults in general (Davis-Berman, 1995). Positive past experiences with older adults, such as grandparents, have a positive influence on attitudes (Hawkins, 1996; Downs & Walz, 1981). However, attitudes toward grandparents and older adults have been found to positively change due to a course on aging (Katz, 1990; Davis-Berman, 1995; Angiullo, Whitbourne, & Powers, 1996; Porter & O'Connor, 1978).

It has been found that there are three ways to facilitate attitude change; discussion, direct exposure, and increased information or knowledge (Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986). Which method provides the best results differs from one study to the next. Many of the studies assessed used a college course to facilitate change in attitudes (Porter & O'Connor, 1978; Angiullo, Whitbourne, & Powers, 1996; Davis-Berman, 1995; Katz, 1990). These courses utilized a combination of these techniques. Attitudes were measured using a number of scales. These scales were administered at the beginning and end of the course to measure change in attitudes.

Lectures were found to be most effective in changing attitudes by Angiullo, Whitbourne, and Powers (1996). In this study a group of students participated as volunteers at a nursing home in addition to classroom lectures. It

was expected that these students would experience greater positive change in their attitudes. However, the volunteer experience was found to have no significant effect on attitude change despite the students' reports of a positive experience. The lectures, however, did positively influence attitudes. Katz (1990) also found a lecture based course to have a positive effect on changing college students' attitudes toward older adults. In addition to the lectures small group discussions were part of the curriculum.

Some courses combined techniques for facilitating attitude change. Davis-Berman (1995) studied a course where the students were required to participate in simulating a change that occurs with age for 24 hours. In addition, an interview was to be completed with an older adult as part of the course requirements. These experiences, plus a lecture based course, did facilitate positive attitude change in the students. Porter and O'Connor (1978) also used a variety of techniques in the course. This course involved a lot of interaction on the student's part with their older adult consultants. This direct interaction, along with the lectures presented in class, influenced attitudes of all parties involved to positively change. Gordon and Hallauer (1976) found a combination of direct contact and content from a course on aging to have the most influence on positive attitude change. Direct contact alone did not facilitate positive attitude change to the extent that the combination did.

Murphy-Russell, et al. (1986) found in their workshops that direct contact with older adults facilitated the most positive attitude changes. The workshops

measured attitudes and change in attitudes after each of the three sessions. Each session varied in the technique used to facilitate change. Consistently, the session providing direct contact with older adults influenced the most positive change in attitudes.

One study (Kremer, 1988) looked at the effects of negative information on attitudes toward older adults and towards the participants' own aging. Overall, the study found that attitudes toward older adults changed positively. Attitudes towards the participants' own aging became more negative based on the negative information they received.

It is essential when planning a course to facilitate change in attitudes to keep a balanced view of the aging process and older adults (Davis-Berman, 1995). A combination of techniques appears to best facilitate attitude change (Davis-Berman, 1995; Porter, & O'Connor, 1978; Gordon, & Hallauer, 1976). Direct contact with older adults throughout the course of the semester-long class appears to have substantial influence on positive attitude change (Davis-Berman, 1995; Porter, & O'Connor, 1978; Gordon, & Hallauer, 1976; Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986). Related to this concept, previous exposure and contact with older adults influence attitudes and perceptions one holds (Hawkins, 1996; Downs, & Walz, 1981). If previous experiences are positive, then attitudes will be positive. Therefore, in order for direct contact to influence attitude change, the experience must be positive to facilitate positive attitude change.

Additional considerations to keep in mind when assessing attitudes toward older adults are procedural differences. Wingard, et al, (1982) found that responses will show attitudes to be more on the negative end of the spectrum when older adults are compared to a younger population. However, a more realistic view of how respondents perceive older adults results from rating older adults in general. This is due to the fact that the respondent is more objective and relies less on the negative stereotypes that are held toward the older adult population.

Despite negative attitudes that were prevalent in years past evidence shows attitudes are becoming increasingly more positive. Reasons contributing to this change stem from socialization of the younger generations. Currently, older adults are living longer providing the opportunity for grandchildren to build relationships with grandparents. Society views older adults more positively in general. This is evident in television, and other media resources. Overall, today's college students have been exposed to fewer age discriminatory practices. (Yenerall, 1995).

Further research is needed on this topic in order to better serve the rapidly growing older adult population. Negative attitudes held bear a number of potential ramifications on treatment, and self-esteem of older adults (Hawkins, 1996). Having further understanding of what facilitates and contributes to positive attitude change, educators can better emphasize, stimulate, and guide the development of these factors. With the aging of the "Baby Boomer"

generation, intervention is necessary to foster positive attitudes toward older adults and the aging process.

## Methodology

### Selection of the Sample

The sample consisted of approximately 200 undergraduate college students enrolled in one of three courses in the School of Family, Consumer, and Nutrition Sciences (FCNS), Northern Illinois University. A quasi-experimental design was used. Two of the courses were a lifespan development course and an aging and the family course, while the third group, a child development class, acted as the control group. The lifespan development course had only a brief unit on aging, and older adults. However, the aging and the family course was devoted solely to older adults, the aging process, and related topics. This course implemented a variety of techniques to help facilitate attitude change similar to those in the studies cited. The content covered in lectures ranged from information on biological and psychological changes to leisure and retirement. The students were required to have direct contact with an older adult by completing an interview. One class session was devoted entirely to simulating changes that occur in later life, and writing a paper describing the experience. In addition, many classes were spent in small group discussions with classmates.

### Development of the Instrument

The scale used in this study was the Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People (OP) Scale (1961). It was developed by Kogan to assess attitudes of college students toward older adults. The survey used (Appendix A) was a modified version of the OP scale. The scale used for this study was a six point Likert Scale, with two items added regarding age and sex. Responses to items on the OP Scale could range from A=Strongly Disagree, B=Disagree, C=Slightly Disagree, D=Slightly Agree, E=Agree, F=Strongly Agree. Because items were presented as both positive and negative statements, it was necessary to reverse score the negative items.

### Administration of the Instrument

The surveys were administered during the first week of all three courses. The participants were informed that the survey they were about to complete was part of a research project and that their participation was appreciated. The directions at the top of the page were read aloud and the consent forms (Appendix B) were signed. A consent form was filled out by all who participated in the survey. Each participant was to complete and sign the consent form and keep a copy for themselves. This form gave permission to use the data collected. The participants were given approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The same survey was administered again during the last week of all three courses. The same steps were followed for completion of the questionnaires.

### Data Analysis

Pretest and posttest scores were examined for all groups. In addition, similarities and differences within and between groups were assessed. The data collected was put into frequencies and percentages. A T-test for significance was applied to the aging and the family group of data to provide a within group comparison by analyzing the pre and post-test results. Scores were transformed whereby odd numbered items were recoded. If a respondent "strongly disagreed" with a negative statement, then the response represented a positive attitude. Therefore, the higher the score, the more positive the attitude of the respondent. When the remaining data is analyzed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be used for discovering between group differences on post-test scores.

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Appendix A

Survey Used

Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (modified)

**DIRECTIONS:** Start your responses with #101 on the Scontron sheet. Be certain to respond to all items.

**Scale:** A = Strongly Disagree  
B = Disagree  
C = Slightly Disagree  
D = Slightly Agree  
E = Agree  
F = Strongly Agree

101. It would probably be better if most old people lived in residential units with people of their own age.
102. It would probably be better if most old people lived in residential units that also housed younger people.
103. There is something different about most old people: it's hard to figure out what makes them tick.
104. Most old people are really no different from anybody else: they're as easy to understand as younger people.
105. Most old people get set in their ways and are unable to change.
106. Most old people are capable of new adjustments when the situation demands it.
107. Most old people would prefer to quit work as soon as pensions or their children can support them.
108. Most old people would prefer to continue working just as long as they possibly can rather than be dependent on anybody.
109. Most old people tend to let their homes become shabby and unattractive.
110. Most old people can generally be counted on to maintain a clean, attractive home.
111. It is foolish to claim that wisdom comes with old age.
112. People grow wiser with the coming of old age.
113. Old people have too much power in business and politics.
114. Old people should have more power in business and politics.
115. Most old people make one feel ill at ease.
116. Most old people are very relaxing to be with.
117. Most old people bore others by their insistence on talking about the "good old days."
118. One of the most interesting and entertaining qualities of most old people is their accounts of their past experiences.
119. Most old people spend too much time prying into the affairs of others and giving unsought advice.
120. Most old people tend to keep to themselves and give advice only when asked.

(over)

Appendix B

Consent Form

## CONSENT FORM

I understand that the responses I give to this survey will in no way affect my grade in this course. Further, I understand that participation by completion of the entire survey (both Part A and B) will result in full credit for this class assignment. Both parts of the survey are to be completed. Part A at the start of the semester and Part B at the end of the semester. I will not be graded on the responses themselves. Any answers I give will be kept anonymous and confidential, and results of the survey will be reported in summary form. My name will never be associated with my individual responses. Participation in this assignment is voluntary. If I choose not to participate, I may consider this my "lowest grade dropped" assignment.

Signature of the participant \_\_\_\_\_

FILE COPY

-----TEAR OFF HERE-----

## CONSENT FORM

I understand that the responses I give to this survey will in no way affect my grade in this course. Further, I understand that participation by completion of the entire survey (both Part A and B) will result in full credit for this class assignment. Both parts of the survey are to be completed. Part A at the start of the semester and Part B at the end of the semester. I will not be graded on the responses themselves. Any answers I give will be kept anonymous and confidential, and results of the survey will be reported in summary form. My name will never be associated with my individual responses. Participation in this assignment is voluntary. If I choose not to participate, I may consider this my "lowest grade dropped" assignment.

Signature of the participant \_\_\_\_\_

PARTICIPANT'S COPY