

Attitudes Of Dental Students Toward Older People During A Nationwide Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The numbers of older people have been increasing but the attitudes towards them haven't always been positive. This research aims to examine the attitudes of clinical-stage dental students towards older people and how some selected variables affect them during a nationwide conflict, and after the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Students in their last two years at Damascus University were surveyed using a custom questionnaire with Kogan's scale. 673 questionnaires were collected. Despite the conflict and pandemic which were previously related to personality disorders; Syrian undergraduates' attitudes towards older people tended to be slightly positive among those who were alike in general characteristics, had basic geriatric knowledge, and haven't yet contacted with old patients. Students' gender and internal displacement that forced them to live with older relatives didn't significantly alter their psychological attitudes. The attitudes towards older people remained moderately positive during two highly stressful events. The findings were promising but further investigations and interventions should be considered.



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1. Introduction

Global demographic changes have occurred throughout recent years and perhaps the most noticeable of them is the increase in the average life expectancy [1]. The numbers of older people have been growing worldwide; the percentage of individuals aged 60 years and over in Syria was estimated in 2000 at about 4.8%. It increased to 7.5% in 2020, and it is expected to reach approximately 19.8% in 2050 [2].

Such a significant reshaping of population distribution could lead to challenging situations. Sometimes people are not able to live their last years in good health. In addition, the risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms and hospitalizations increases with age [3]. As a result, older people have been sometimes seen as a burden and have experienced negative and ageist attitudes [4]. This issue is important to address in the medical field. The negative attitudes of medical students are related to their declining to specialize in treating or working with older people [5- 7]. Only 5% of the dentists were interested in treating people aged +65 years old, while more than 60% preferred the younger adults [8]. Only 16.8% of dental students felt

comfortable while working with older people [9].

War-affected populations, like the Syrian people, are at a very high risk of developing personality disorders [10], [11], which could influence attitudes and behaviors. Also, wide stressful events –such as the global outbreak of the novel coronavirus in 2019- may alter personality traits, especially in younger adults [12].

The importance of this study comes as it is the first that aimed to examine dental students' attitudes towards older people during times of conflict, and after the COVID-19 outbreak. It aimed also to analyze the effects of some selected socio-demographic factors on those attitudes.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Design and Sample:

A cross-sectional study was conducted in the faculty of dentistry at Damascus University, Syria. Potential participants in the sample were dental students who qualified to the clinical practice stage; they had successfully completed the first three years which through them, all students learn similarly about basics of geriatric dentistry. Each student's attitudes were measured before dealing with or treating older patients. Most of the participating students were nearly 11 or 12 years old when the conflict outraged in 2011 in Syria. They approved to take part in this study and filled a printed form of a custom questionnaire. The data collection took place over a one-year. The minimum required sample size for a 95% confidence level was 400; according to the practical guide in health studies [13]. 722 questionnaires were distributed to students.

2.2 Instrument used:

The questionnaire used in this study began with the informed consent of the student's approval or refusal to participate in the sample. Then, there was a set of questions about selected socio-demographic characteristics. Student's name was not required to be mentioned, and all of the collected surveys were numbered anonymously in an ascending order. The second part in the questionnaire was the Kogan's Attitudes toward Older People (KAOP) scale. It assessed students' attitudes by answering 34 statements. There are 6 responses to each phrase on a Likert scale starting from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". These responses are scored (1-2-3-5-6-7) respectively for the positive statements. For the negative ones, however, the scoring key is reversed, and the unanswered phrase gets a score of (4) [14]. A score of (136) represents the neutral attitudes [15], [16]. Students were divided into attitude groups according to their scores [6]: very negative attitudes (scores from 34 to 67), negative (68-101), slightly negative (102-135), slightly positive (137-170), positive (171-204), and very positive (205-238). The original language of the KAOP scale is English, but an Arabic-translated version was used in this study [17]. Cronbach's alpha was (0.854), very close to 1, and the instrument was considered reliable.

2.3 Data analysis:

Data was analyzed with SPSS 26.0 (IBM). Kolmogorov-Smirnov was applied as a test to determine distribution normality. Mann-Whitney (U-test) was used to examine the differences in students' attitudes between groups of socio-demographic variables. P-value of less than (0.05) was set to be statistically significant.

3. RESULTS

Out of the 722 distributed questionnaires, 673 returned fully answered with participation consent (n=673, response rate: 93.21%). The study sample consisted of Syrian dental students who were close in age [Mean: 22.58, Standard deviation (SD):0.8]. About 64.8% of the participants were 5th year students (n=436), and

35.2% were in the 4th year. More than half of this sample approximately were females (n=350), and almost a quarter of the students mentioned living with an older relative (n=168), while the others didn't. Descriptive statistics for some socio-demographic variables are mentioned in Table 1. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for students' attitudes results

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for socio-demographic variables of the participants

Variable	Number (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean ± SD
Age			22.58 ± 0.8
Current year at university:			
Fourth year	237	35.22	
Fifth year	436	64.78	
Gender:			
Males	323	47.99	
Females	350	52.01	
Living with older relatives:			
Yes	168	24.96	
No	505	75.04	

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for students' attitudes results in the KAOP scale

Students' attitudes towards older people	Number (n)	Percentage (%)	Lowest score	Highest score	Mean ± SD	Range	Interquartile Range
Very negative	0	0	81	192	138.49 ± 17.27	111	22
Negative	15	2.23					
Slightly negative	256	38.04					
Neutral	33	4.90					
Slightly positive	348	51.71					
Positive	21	3.12					
Very positive	0	0					

According to Table 2, students' attitudes tended to be slightly positive towards older people (mean: 138.49 ±17.27), "Slightly positive" attitudes were the most prevalent in this study. A little more than half of the students (51.71%) scored between 137 and 170 in the KAOP scale. "Slightly negative" attitudes came in the second place, with a percentage of 38% approximately. 4.9% and 3.12% of the participating students showed "neutral" and "positive" attitudes respectively, and only 2.23% of the students had "negative" attitudes. There weren't any "very positive" or "very negative" attitudes; as none of the students scored below 67 or above 205. The previous results are demonstrated in Figure 1.

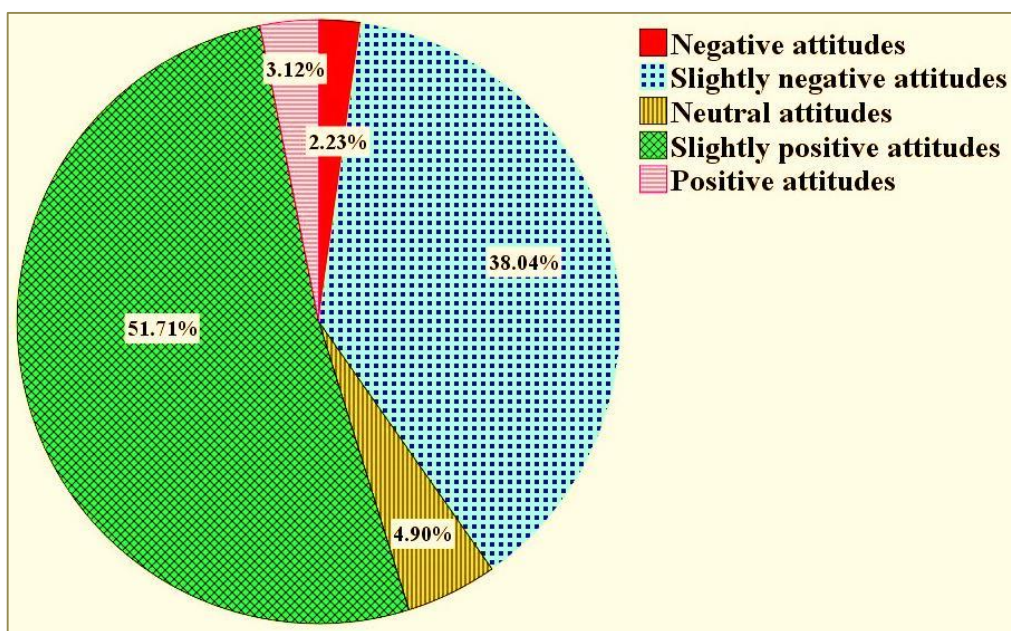


Figure 1 Attitudes towards older people among Syrian dental students during the ongoing conflict in the country and COVID-19 pandemic

Differences in attitudes towards older people according to gender:

The mean of male students scores in the KAOP scale was (138.16 ±16.69); a little less than that of the females (138.80 ±17.82). Mann-Whitney test was performed, and it revealed that the difference in students’ attitudes according to their gender was not significant (P= 0.957). (Table 3)

Differences in attitudes towards older people according to the students’ living status during the conflict in the country:

Students who were displaced and forced to move with their older relatives due to the nationwide crisis in Syria showed slightly more positive attitudes than those who were not (Means: 139.63 ±19.12 and 138.11 ±16.62 respectively). However, no statistically significance was found between these two groups (P= 0.204). (Table 3)

Table 3 Differences in Syrian dental students’ attitudes towards older people by socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic variable	Group	Students’ score in the KAOP scale (Mean ± SD)	Mann-Whitney test:				
			Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U value	Z value	P value
Gender	Male	138.16 ±16.69	336.58	108715.5	56389.5	-0.054	0.957
	Female	138.80 ±17.82	337.39	118085.5			
Living with older relatives	Yes	139.63 ±19.12	353.50	59388	39648	-1.27	0.204
	No	138.11 ±16.62	331.51	167413			

4. DISCUSSION

Attitudes are a major factor in influencing behaviors of individuals in various fields [18]. In dentistry, understanding attitudes towards the older individuals might enhance patient-dentist communications, thus reflecting on treatment outcomes [19].

This study is the first step to ensure that future dentists do not have ageist attitudes towards older patients in a society suffering from severe economic and living difficulties. It was revealed that despite the ongoing

conflict in Syria, and COVID related disruptions, the attitudes of dental students varied normally in nature and strength. Students' mean score in KOAP scale (138.49 ± 17.27) suggested that it was a little more likely for the undergraduates to have slightly positive attitudes.

This was consistent with other studies [15], [20- 24]. Personal experiences along with the learnt information throughout life; act as very decisive factors in forming attitudes [25]. The students in this study were similar in terms of being close in age, living within one city, and receiving identical academic education on gerontology without yet contacting with or caring for older patients.

Other studies found negative attitudes to be more prevalent using different psychological scales [5], [26], [27]; they investigated healthcare workers whose daily job responsibility was taking care of older patients, hence, their contact – especially with the chronically ill– was more frequent [27- 29].

Another study used the KAOP scale and found negative attitudes [30], but it examined first-year medical students most likely before they could have acquired sufficient information about gerontology from the curriculum.

During their last two years of university, approximately 51% of Syrian dental students showed 'slightly positive' attitudes towards older people. That rate was very close to the finding in Sri Lanka [6], and widely different from that among Malay undergraduate nursing students [20].

The 'slightly negative' attitudes reported in this study among dental students were less than those noted among nursing students [6], and quite more than the others reported in a studied sample in London [23]. None of the students showed extreme attitudes similarly to the findings of other studies [6], [31].

Students' gender didn't play a significant role in altering the attitudes of males/females. Attitudes have psychological components which are formed through learning information from the surroundings, then affected by multiple situations and stimuli throughout life [25]. This study assessed dental students who were almost at the same age when Syrian conflict outraged in 2011; since that both males and females have been living in a very challenging environment -that might have changed their personalities- but were simultaneously exposed to similar circumstances. Many studies found no significant differences in attitudes according to gender [6], [17], [20], [22], [26], [32], [33], but some researchers noticed that females were significantly more positive towards older people [24], [27], [34] while others confirmed significant differences in favor of males [5], [35].

Many Syrians due to the war in the country were forced to leave their homes and settle with their relatives, and despite that the attitudes of students who live with their older relatives were slightly more positive than of those who didn't, there were no significant differences between them. In consistency with other studies [20], [35], [36], it is suggested that having an old relative staying with the student was not considered in itself an effective factor to influence the attitudes towards all older people. Students frequently see their older relatives and they share bonds of affection with them. Therefore, that relationship could not impact the attitudes towards older stranger people. A systematic review found that the quality of communication with older people is more important than its frequency in terms of changing the attitudes towards the older [37].

On the contrary, significant positive attitudes emerged among some nurses and nursing students who lived with an older relative [32], [38]; but their percentages in the samples were 50% and 65.5% respectively;

which are greatly different than the one in this study (25%). Furthermore, that inconsistency of results could be attributed to the distinguished personalities of different individuals across societies. The prevalence of post-crisis personality disorders is high among Syrian students [10], [11]. In addition, the late global spread of coronavirus may have altered the psychological characteristics; as many personality changes were found in a sample in the U.S after COVID-19 pandemic spread [12].

5. CONCLUSION

This study assessed dental students and their attitudes towards older people during two highly stressful events that have led to serious personality disorders; a nationwide ongoing conflict, and the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The findings were promising as the undergraduates' attitudes tended to be slightly positive. Some selected socio-demographic factors (such as gender and living with older relatives) did not alter the attitudes or stimulate any significant changes between the students.

6. DECLARATIONS

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This research did not receive any funds from governmental, private or non-profit organizations.

Conflict of interest:

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare that could inappropriately influence this study.

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