

Attitudes of the Student Youth and Middle Aged Persons Towards the Elderly

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Two data sets obtained by administering the Tuckman and Lorge Scale (1953) to a sample of 75 university students and 114 rural, middle aged people are used to assess the attitudes of two age groups toward the elderly. The results indicate that the student youth, the respondents not living with old people in their families, men, respondents belonging to disadvantaged sections of the society, and those from low income groups hold more negative attitudes toward the elderly as compared to their counterparts. More specifically, poverty appears to be significantly associated with negative attitudes toward the elderly which may be the consequence of lack of enough financial resources to take care of them. It is recommended that programmes should be designed to integrate the aged into the family and social fabric, to bring the younger generations closer to them and to provide families with support services so as to enable them to take better care of the old people.

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INTRODUCTION

The problems of the elderly population in most of the developing countries, including India, have been growing alarmingly. Some of the major reasons responsible for this phenomenon are: weakening of family bonds, migration of the young to towns and cities, acceptance of small family norm, and increased entry of women into paid employment. Besides these, a general decline in adherence to traditional values, and growing individualism among the younger generation are also responsible to exacerbate the problems of the aged.

Though there is adequate documentation about the problems of the aged, certain areas of research in the field have received insufficient,

if not less, attention of the scholars. One such area is societal attitudes towards the elderly. Attitudes toward the aged play a significant role as a causal factor of treatment of the elderly. According to Giordano and Giordano (1984), negative attitudes of the caregivers towards the aged might cause or reinforce the patterns of elder abuse and neglect by devaluing their status in society. They argued that negative attitudes tended to dehumanise the elderly and made it easier for an abuser to victimise them without feeling remorse. Further, the devaluation of the aged increased their risk of being abused as a sub-category of individuals in the community (Levin and Levin, 1980).

Review of Studies

A few investigations into the attitudes of the student youth, and of the institutionalised elderly toward the aged have shown that most of the respondents held popular misconceptions and stereotypes about the aged. They perceived the old people as stubborn, touchy, and as being engaged in frequent quarrels with their kin (Golde and Kegan, 1959; Tickman and Lorge, 1952; 1953). Some researchers found that while modernisations and the western culture were characterised by an overall negative attitude towards the aged, eastern culture and the stable primitive societies were characterised by respect and value for old age (Eisdorfer, 1981). However, Sharma (1971), in his study, compared the attitude scores of Indian students with another attitudinal study conducted by Arnhoff, Henery and Lorge (1964), on student samples drawn from six nations. He pointed out that Indian and Greek students held more negative attitudes toward the elderly as compared to students from other nations such as the United States of America, Japan, Puerto Rico, Sweden and England. Interestingly, one study on children's attitude towards the aged revealed that culture was an important variable in attitude formation toward old people and old age (Seefeldt and Ahn, 1990). Drake (1957) found that physical proximity, frequency of contact, as well as intimacy of contact did not influence the stereotypes held by a sample of students.

Studies conducted on Indian youth about their attitudes towards their elderly family members revealed that a number of respondents agreed to such attitudinal statements as: 'Old people make one feel ill at ease'. Similarly, men, as compared to women, and educated respondents, as against less educated, reported higher negative attitude toward old people. Most of these respondents perceived old people as a

burden to their families and society (Praveen, Rajni and Praveen, 1987; Savita and Sharma, 1987).

A few other Indian studies have also reported about the negative stereotypes held by youth towards the aged (Anantaraman, 1980; Warty, 1970), and differences in the attitudes of rural youth and the middle aged toward the elderly (Narasimha Reddy, 1985; Sivasankar Reddy, 1983). Kullai Reddy and Rama Murthy (1988) found that individuals closer to old age held less negative stereotypes about the old people. The findings of another study on a sample of college students revealed that the students tended to evaluate an older person more negatively as compared to a middle aged person. The students perceived the elderly as being less involved, unsociable, unimaginative, less intelligent, and weak (Sharma and Karunanidhi, 1995).

Thus, extant research shows that while negative attitudes toward the old and old age may be widely prevalent, these attitudes seem to vary with culture, economic status, age, gender, educational levels, physical proximity and frequency of contact with old people. Further, the prevailing social attitudes about the role and status of the elderly in a society, appear to have a bearing on how the elderly are treated in the family and community context. That is the reason why people's attitudes toward the elderly assume significance as one of the explanatory variables of elderly abuse. Therefore, there is a need to understand the influence of age and gender, besides other variables, on the attitudes towards the elderly to find out their role as causal or contributing factors for elder abuse.

Purpose of the Study

From this point of view, data about the attitudes toward the elderly held by different groups such as children, women, youth and the middle aged will be useful and relevant. More specifically, a study of the attitudes of the youth and the middle aged will be relevant in terms of the generation-specific attitudes towards the elderly. In this light, while the attitudes of the youth toward the elderly reflect the view of the present generation, the attitudes held by the middle aged reflect, in general, the views of significant others who are currently providing care to the aged. These groups, comprising both genders, interact, care and manage old people in various life situations. Therefore, the data specific to these groups will be useful both in policy making and planning for the elderly.

Keeping these aspects in view, the present study was taken up to explore the attitudes of two generations, the youth and the middle aged, in terms of the relationship between different socio-demographic variables of the respondents and the nature of their attitudes toward the aged.

METHOD

The results reported in this paper are based on data sets drawn from two samples, the student youth ($n=75$) and the rural, middle aged persons ($n=114$). The student youth comprised 51 post-graduate social science students and 24 post-graduate science students of Andhra University, Visakhapatnam. The sample of middle aged persons comprised 114 respondents from three randomly selected villages of the north coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh (Rao, 1995). Of the total 114 middle aged respondents, 57 were caregivers in families, where at least one aged person was living at the time of the study. The remaining 57 respondents formed the comparison group, who were taken from families where no elderly person was living with them.

While the sample of the student youth was purposive, in the middle aged sample, the 57 caregivers were selected randomly from the sample villages and the other 57 respondents comprising the comparison group, were matched with the caregivers' group on variables such as gender, caste, family occupation and income. The purpose of using this comparison group in the second sample was to obtain reliable data about the relationship between the attitude towards the elderly and socio-demographic variables including contact with the elderly. These two data sets are, however, treated and analysed separately. Wherever similar relationships are observed between the attitudes toward the elderly, and other variables such as age, gender and family income, among the two sub-samples, they are highlighted.

Of the student youth sample, 49 respondents were men and 26 women. In the sample of middle aged persons, 100 respondents were men and 14 were women. Data were collected from the respective study samples during the period from June 1993 to November 1993.

Data Collection Instrument

Besides data on socio-demographic variables of the study samples, data on attitudes were collected from them by administering an attitude scale developed by Tuckman and Lorge (1953). This measure contains 137 statements regarding the predominant stereotypes, both positive

and negative, about the elderly. All these 137 items come under 13 categories such as personality traits, cleanliness, family, insecurity, activities and interests, sex, best time of life and attitude toward the future. Some of the statements are: the old people are lonely; they are kind; they are unproductive; they are stubborn; they like old songs on the radio; they are conservative; they are touchy and so on. Each statement carries two response categories, 'yes' or 'no'. The respondents are required to indicate whether each statement applies to old people by circling either 'yes' or 'no'. For each statement of 'yes', one score is given. Thus, the total 'yes' scores may range between 0-13. A sum of the 'yes' scores on the scale, indicates the degree of unfavourable attitude held by the respondents toward the old people. That is, the higher the 'yes' score, the greater the negative attitude toward the aged.

Reliability

The scale was found reliable and reported 0.96 for the test-retest reliability (Tuckman and Lorge, 1954). As the original scale was in English, a Telugu version of the scale was prepared. To ensure the aptness of Telugu version, the scale was given separately to two experts in the Department of Telugu, and to three experts in the Department of Psychology in the Andhra University. The Telugu version of the scale was finalised after taking into consideration the consensus of these five experts. Test-retest and split-half methods were used on 30 respondents to determine the reliability of the scale. The reliability of the Telugu version of the scale was $r = 0.97$ for the test-retest method and the split half method it was $r = 0.75$. Using the Spearman-Brown formula,¹ the co-efficient of internal reliability of the scale was computed to correct for attenuation in the split-half test. Thus, the reliability co-efficient came to be 0.86.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile

The Student Youth

Table 1 shows that, from the sample of the youth ($n=75$), about two-thirds (65.3 per cent) were men and the remaining 34.7 per cent were women. A little more than half (52 per cent) of the youth were from rural areas. However, by gender, more men (64 per cent) were from rural areas as compared to women who were mostly urban (69

per cent). Nearly half (50.7 per cent) of the respondents belonged to other caste category and the rest to backward caste (37.3 per cent). Scheduled Caste (SC) (8 per cent) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) (4 per cent). Regarding marital status, all students, except one, were unmarried. As regards the occupational background of the families of the youth, 38.7 per cent families, 8 per cent with agricultural labour and 38.7 per cent while collar occupations. About 14.6 per cent of the respondents' family occupation was business. While one-fourth (26.7 per cent) of the total respondents' annual family income was below Rs. 6,000, the annual family income for 40 per cent of the respondents was Rs. 24,000 and above. The size of the household of about two-thirds (64 per cent) of the families of respondents was between four and six members.

The Middle Aged Persons

As has already been mentioned elsewhere, half of the total sample (n=114) of middle aged persons lived in families where at least one aged family member (60+) is present, whereas the remaining respondents did not have an aged person living in their families. Table 1 shows that a majority (87.7 per cent) of the sample are men and a predominant number of the sample (79 per cent) belong to backward caste. Most of the respondents are married (86.8 per cent) with widowed respondents constituting 5.3 per cent of the sample. About two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of the middle aged persons are illiterate and the remaining have education upto the secondary level. As the sample was taken from villages, the family occupation of most of the respondents is either agriculture (63.2 per cent) or agricultural labour (33.3 per cent). A majority (62.2 per cent) of the sample respondents reported that their annual family income was less than Rs. 12,000.

However, the income range of 22.8 percent of the respondents was Rs. 24,001 and above. The household size for nearly half (51.7 per cent) of the respondents is between four to six members, and around 32 per cent of families fell in the range of household size of 7-15 members.

The Sample and Attitude Scores

The mean ages of the two study samples, the youth and the middle aged, are 23 years and 38 years respectively.

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of Attitude Scores of the Youth and the Middle Aged Samples by Socio-Demographic Variables

Variable	Youth (<i>n</i> =75)			Middle Aged (<i>n</i> =114)		
	Per cent	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Per cent	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender						
Men	65.3	88.12	16.95	87.7	82.78	15.60
Women	34.7	87.31	15.57	12.3	80.07	14.94
Caste						
Backward Caste	37.3	89.39	19.09	79.0	81.19	15.99
Open Caste	50.7	85.29	15.32	10.5	89.59	12.43
Scheduled Caste	8.0	92.50	9.39	10.5	84.75	12.44
Scheduled Tribe	4.0	96.33	5.56	-	-	-
Marital Status						
Married		1.3			80.00	-
Unmarried		98.7			87.90	16.42
Widowed		-			-	-
Education						
Illiterate	-	-	-	66.7	81.57	15.99
Primary	-	-	-	14.0	88.31	14.67
Secondary	-	-	-	19.3	81.19	13.41
Postgraduate	100.0	87.84	16.49	-	-	-
Family Occupation						
Agriculture	38.7	91.03	17.56	63.2	80.67	16.79
Agricultural Labour	8.0	97.67	10.96	33.3	85.87	16.69
White Collar	38.7	84.90	16.86	3.5	82.00	11.97
Business	14.6	81.82	9.35	-	-	-
Annual Family Income (Rs.)						
Below 6,000	26.7	91.45	10.69	17.5	88.55	12.86
6,000-12,000	26.7	85.60	19.27	44.7	83.80	13.11
12,001-18,000	5.3	98.50	6.22	11.5	87.92	14.54
18,001-24,000	1.3	88.00	-	3.5	63.00	12.85
24,001 & above	40.0	85.50	15.60	22.8	75.35	17.52

As can be seen from Table 2, the youth sample held more negative attitudes toward the old people. Earlier studies (Savita and Sharma, 1987; Sharma, 1971) have also indicated a similar trend in the attitudes of the youth toward the old people.

Living Arrangements of the Elderly and the Attitudes

It may be pointed out here that while the student youth sample was purposive, the sample of the middle aged respondents comprised a randomly selected group and a comparison group matched on variables, such as gender, caste, education, occupation and family income, thus controlling the effect of these variables on the attitudes towards the elderly. This attempt was made to ascertain the relationship

between the contact with the elderly and attitudes toward them. Interestingly, both the study samples revealed that the variable — living or not living with the elderly — did make a difference in the direction of attitudes held by respondents towards the aged.

TABLE 2: Mean Attitude Scores of the Youth and the Middle Aged Samples

Sample	n	Attitude Score	
		Mean	SD
Youth	75	87.84	16.49
Middle Aged	114	82.45	15.54

As can be seen from Table 3, in both the youth and the middle aged samples, respondents who were living with an aged person in their families held less negative attitudes as compared to those who were not living with an aged person in their families. Further, among the youth, the difference between the mean scores of the attitudes of those living with the elderly and those not living with the elderly is found to be statistically significant. The finding is the same with the sample of middle aged persons also (Table 3). These are significant findings supporting the view that contact with the elderly tend to promote positive attitudes toward them.

Influence of Other Demographic Variables

Table 1 provides information about the mean attitude scores of both the study groups shown against different socio-demographic variables such as gender, caste, marital status, education, family occupation and income. An examination of the data in Table 1, indicates that irrespective of the sample group, men, as compared to women, are found to be unfavourably disposed toward the elderly.

TABLE 3: Means and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Attitudes Scores of the Youth and the Middle Aged Samples by Living Arrangement

Living Arrangement	Youth ^a			Middle Aged ^b		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Living with Elderly	23	84.87	19.17	57	80.72	13.99
Not-living with Elderly	52	89.15	14.97	57	84.18	16.77

^bt = value = 6.38 (df = 113), p <.05

Moreover, the youth from the disadvantaged sections of the society such as, SCs, STs and Backward Castes are found to be more negative

toward the elderly as compared to those from other caste groups. Among the middle aged sample, those belonging to other caste category reported more negative attitudes. However, there are differences in the attitudes of the middle aged respondents in terms of their marital status. While unmarried respondents of this group reported less negative attitudes toward the old people, than the married the widowed were found to have more negative attitudes.

Our next question is how is education related to these attitudes? As has been mentioned earlier, the youth held more negative attitudes towards old age and the elderly. Coming to the sample of middle aged subjects, it appears (see Table 1) that the illiterate are found to be more positively disposed toward the elderly than the educated, indicating a trend that the higher the educational level, the more unfavourable the attitude toward the aged.

With regard to the family income of the respondents, there appears to be an inverse relationship between the income level of the family and negative attitude towards the aged. This trend is observed in both the youth and the middle aged samples. As can be seen from Table 1, the respondents belonging to lower income groups, with an income of below Rs. 12,000 per annum, held more unfavourable attitudes towards the aged as compared to those from middle and higher income groups.

Coming to rural-urban background of the student sample, it was revealed that the urban students were more positive in their attitude (Mean = 83.22, SD = 16.70) toward old people as compared to rural students (Mean = 92.10, SD = 15.52).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the two study samples indicate that the youth hold negative attitudes against the elderly. The attitudes of the middle aged persons are, however, less negative. It is further indicated from the two sets of data, that male respondents from lower income groups; those from the disadvantaged sections of the society, such as SCs, STs and BCs; and literates are more negative in their attitudes toward the elderly. Interestingly, however, in both the youth and in the middle aged samples, women and illiterate respondents seem to be more positive in their attitude toward the elderly. Even in earlier studies, it was found that women held positive attitudes towards the elderly as compared to men (Praveen and others, 1987; Savita and Sharma, 1987). Further, it is revealed that the living arrangement with the

elderly make a significant difference in the mean attitude scores of the respondents of both the study samples.

The study has also revealed that the respondents belonging to lower income groups hold more negative attitudes toward the elderly. Thus, the more unfavourable attitudes expressed by the respondents of lower income groups are possibly related to the economic hardships faced by the caregivers and other family members. The older person, in such a situation, is more likely to be seen as a burden and, the stress resulting from this, may be responsible for such a negative attitude. It is observed that such an attitudinal disposition is more likely to lead to the abuse and neglect of the elderly (Lau and Kosberg, 1979). Therefore, there is a need to supplement the economic resources and conditions of such families by providing necessary support services. Such support may result in developing positive attitudes among the members of the family who may feel that old people are not a burden to the family. This will also prevent ill-treatment of the old people in the family context.

Obviously, people living with an old person in their family, hold a more favourable attitude toward the elderly. So, it is better to design services and programmes which integrate the aged into the social and family fabric rather than segregate them in institutional settings. It is, moreover, encouraging to find that women hold more positive attitudes towards the aged as compared to men. Women, being the primary caregivers in the family, need supportive services when the family has an aged person living with them. Such supportive services will reduce the stress on the caregivers, especially working women.

It seems that education has little association with favourable attitudes towards the elderly. There is, however, a further need to explore this relationship by involving various sections of the society with larger samples. It is necessary to take up more studies by employing control and comparison groups to study the attitudes and stereotypes about old age held by different sections of the people. Studies exploring the relationship of different variables such as gender, income and culture to the formation of attitudes toward the old people are also needed at present. Such studies will help us to better understand the psycho-social factors responsible for elder abuse and neglect and the devaluation of the status of the aged in contemporary society.

NOTE

$$1. r_{xx} = \frac{2 r_{oe}}{1 + r_{oe}}$$

Where r_{xx} = reliability

r_{oe} = The correlation between scores on the odd and even items

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