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Characteristics of Prospective Partners in Elderly Care Facilities

Amber Sinclair[1], Birgit Pianosi[2], Cynthia Whissel[1], Charlotte Aelick[1] and Paul M Valliant[1, 2*]

[1]*Department of Psychology, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Canada.*

[*2]*Department of Gerontology, Huntington University, Sudbury, Canada.*

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ABSTRACT

With the increase in the aging population it is becoming progressively more important to identify those best suited to work in care facilities with the elderly. Identifying individuals with positive attitudes toward the elderly is an important step in achieving this goal. The purpose of the current study was to determine which personal characteristics are indicative of positive attitudes towards older adults. The 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire [1] and the Attitudes Towards Old People scale [2] were administered to evaluate these factors. Characteristics examined included age, gender, and level of education and personality. Participants between the ages of 18 to 50 years old were recruited in Northern Ontario. The results indicated that gender and personality factors (warmth, reasoning, vigilance, privateness and openness to change) were predictive of positive attitudes towards older adults. These results have implications for identifying individuals who are best suited to work with the aging population.

Keywords: Older adults, Personality, Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

With the aging of the baby boomers, many of whom are now 65 years and older, has come an increase in the aging population during the last decades. This increase in older adults has placed greater demand on social services and geriatric care [3]. In 2016, 16.7% of the Ontario population was 65 years or older and in Northeastern Ontario 20.9% were in this age group [4]. One problem faced by older adults is negative attitudes that others have toward them. Attitudes consist of personal beliefs, feelings, and behavioral inclinations towards objects, people, or groups. Attitudes can be learned by observing others, through conditioning, or projected by the media [5]. Negative attitudes toward older adults held by medical professionals, care partners, or older adults themselves may negatively impact the quality of services and care provided to them [6,7]. Many older adults report feeling neglected by their family physician because of their age, a phenomenon referred to as the 'invisible minority' [8,9]. Ageism in assisted living facilities can leave older people feeling they have lost control over their living situation [10]. This attitude causes the elderly to feel less significant and makes them more vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and abuse [11].

Personality traits have been found to influence attitudes toward older adults. Kogan [2] found the trait nurturance was positively correlated with more optimistic attitudes towards older adults whereas authoritarianism and anomie were negatively correlated with attitudes towards older adults. Similarly, Thorson and Perkins [12] identified high nurturance, high endurance, and low aggression as positively related with positive attitudes towards older adults. Others, including Cornwell [13], found the personality traits empathy, reasoning ability, and emotional reserve to be related to positive attitudes towards older adults.

Researchers [14] assessed the attitudes and personality correlates of undergraduate students towards older adults. The results of this study indicated that participants in general had overall positive attitudes towards older adults [14]. Students with high rule-consciousness, low tension, and high emotional stability scores had more positive attitudes towards older adults than the general sample. Furthermore, females were found to have significantly more positive attitudes towards older adults than males, a result which has often been observed in the literature [15-20]. A comparison of the 16

Corresponding author: Paul M Valliant, Department of Psychology, Laurentian University, Sudbury Ontario, Canada, Tel: 705-675-1151; E-mail: pvalliant@laurentian.ca

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personality factors (16PF) of males and females demonstrated that females had significantly elevated scores on the warmth scale which correlated with more positive attitudes towards older adults.

Age may also influence attitudes towards older adults, although results are mixed. Some studies have indicated that there is no effect of age on attitudes towards older adults [21,22] while others found people who are middle aged and beyond to have more positive attitudes towards older adults. [18,20,23-25]. Furthermore, it is possible that the personality traits which correlate with positive attitudes towards older adults differ from one age group to the next because dominant personality traits among various age groups have been found to differ. A study by researchers [26] found that older people have higher levels of conscientiousness, a personality trait that researchers [14] found to be correlated with positive attitudes towards older adults.

Finally, it has been speculated that level of education may also influence attitudes towards older adults. A study conducted by Thorson, Whatley and Hancock [27] found that higher education was associated with better attitudes towards older adults. Research has indicated that level of education does influence attitudes of other various subject matters. For instance, found that higher levels of education were positively correlated with attitudes towards mental health. It is important to consider that dominant personalities may also vary based on level of education. Some studies have found that personality influences the level of education sought by individuals as well as their academic achievement [28] while others suggest that the education people receive influences their personality [29].

Multiple variables such as age, gender, and level of education influence attitudes towards older adults. These variables may also affect the personality traits related to positive attitudes towards older adults. Thus far, research has not sought to identify one set of personality traits among the general population which are associated with positive attitudes towards older adults. The current study evaluated the relationship between age, gender, and level of education on attitudes toward older adults. It is our belief that understanding personality characteristics and associated positive attitudes toward older adults may improve the hiring of appropriate care partners. Demographic variables of age, gender, and level of education were used in this study to provide an understanding of the personality factors in the general population which are predictive of positive attitudes towards older adults. Controlling for demographic variables also helped identify one set of personality traits which are conducive of positive attitudes towards older adults so that this personality construct is more easily applicable. It was expected that personality traits would be identified as being related to positive attitudes towards older adults regardless of age, gender, and level of education. It was also expected that female participants, participants older in age, and those with higher levels of education would have better attitudes toward older adults.

METHODS

Participants were recruited using word of mouth and convenience sampling in which posters were displayed on Face book. Individuals who expressed an interest in participating were provided with the questionnaire, including an instruction page, consent forms, a demographics questionnaire, the Kogan Attitude toward Old People scale (KAOP) [2] and the Cattell 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire [1].

Participants

A total of 92 people between the ages of 18 and 50 completed the survey; however, five did not indicate basic demographic information such as age and were therefore removed from the dataset for subsequent analyses (N = 87). Of the 87 participants, 40 were males (46%) and 47 (54%) were females, with a mean age of 35.06.The majority of participants had a high school diploma (n=33; 37.9%), 29 people had a college degree (33.3%), and 23 had a B.A. degree or higher level of education (26.4%).

MEASURES

Demographics

The demographic questionnaire included specific questions pertaining to age, gender, and level of education.

Attitudes towards older adults

The Kogan's Attitudes Towards Old People (KAOP) [2] is measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) with 34 items which are used to determine how negative or positive a person's attitudes towards older adults are. With a maximum score of 204 on the KAOP, scores ranging from 120 and higher are considered, to be indicative of positive attitudes towards older adults. The KAOP is the most commonly used test, to assess attitudes towards old people and has consistently been found to be a reliable and valid measure [30].

Personality

The Cattell 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF) [1] is a 185-item inventory that is regularly used to indicate the test taker's dominant personality characteristics [31]. All 16 personality factors are assessed on a bipolar scale, indicating those with a high score strongly demonstrate this dimension and those with a low score demonstrate the opposite of this dimension. Since the 16 PF has already been established as a useful screening tool for employers to use when hiring new staff, it is an adequate tool to be used in the current study as the implications suggest that the results could be utilized during the screening process for employees [32].

Analysis

All continuous predictors and outcome variables were assessed for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test and by visually assessing histograms and Q-Q plots. To reduce variance between groups, KAOP scores were log transformed. Both univariate (crude) and multivariate (adjusted) General Linear Models (GLM) were used to determine which variables significantly predict positive attitudes towards older adults. To conduct the analysis age was considered a continuous variable (from 18 to 50). Because of the small sample size, education was excluded from the analyses. Gender was coded as dichotomous variable.

RESULTS

Once the data were log transformed, GLMs, both unadjusted and adjusted for age and gender was used to determine if there were any significant predictors of positive attitudes towards older adults; these results are presented in **(Table 1)**. Age was found not to be a significant predictor of attitudes towards older adults in the current sample, regardless of ethnicity or gender ($p > 0.05$).

Table 1. Results of the General Linear Model Adjusted and Unadjusted.

	Unadjusted			Adjusted [a]		
Variable	**β (SE)**	**η^2**	**p**	**β (SE)**	**η^2**	**p**
Age	0.0003 (0.001)	0.001	0.74	0.0003 (0.04)	0.001	0.77
Gender	-0.05 (0.02)	0.07	0.02	-0.05 (0.02)	0.07	0.02
PF A (Warmth)	0.02 (0.01)	0.16	0.0001	0.02 (0.01)	0.11	0.001
PF B (Reasoning)	0.02 (0.01)	0.07	0.01	0.02 (0.01)	0.11	0.001
PF C (Emotional Stability)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.30	-0.004 (0.01)	0.003	0.59
PF E (Dominance)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.48	-0.002 (0.01)	0.002	0.72
PF F (Liveliness)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.41	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.38
PF G (Rule-Consciousness)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02	0.16	0.01 (0.01)	0.03	0.10
PF H (Social Boldness)	0.002 (0.01)	0.003	0.64	0.004 (0.01)	0.01	0.45
PF I (Sensitivity)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.37	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.29
PF L (Vigilance)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.06	0.02	-0.02 (0.01)	0.07	0.02
PF M (Abstractedness)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.34	0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.31
PF N (Privateness)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.07	0.01	-0.01 (0.01)	0.06	0.02
PF O (Apprehension)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01	0.46	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02	0.25
PF Q1 (Openness to Change)	0.02 (0.01)	0.06	0.02	0.01 (0.01)	0.05	0.03
PF Q2 (Self-Reliance)	0.003 (0.01)	0.002	0.67	0.003 (0.01)	0.003	0.60
PF Q3 (Perfectionism)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.03	0.13	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02	0.15
PF Q4 (Tension)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.03	0.11	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02	0.18

Note[a] = Adjusted for age and gender

Results of the multivariate adjusted GLM showed that gender was a significant predictor of attitudes towards older adults. These results suggest that males (M = 136.26, SD = 12.03) have significantly worse attitudes towards older adults compared to females (M = 143.9, SD = 16.19; β = -0.05, p = 0.02) with an effect size of η^2 = 7%.

Five of the 16 of the personality factors were found to significantly predict attitudes towards older adults. The first significant factor was warmth (β = 0.02, $p<0.01$) with an effect size of η^2 = 11%. This suggests those who are warm, and caring have more positive attitudes towards older adults. Reasoning was also found to be a significant predictor (β = 0.02, $p< 0.01$) with an effect size of η^2 = 11%. People who are bright, abstract thinkers seem to have more positive attitudes towards older adults. Vigilance was found to be another personality factor to significantly predict attitudes

towards older adults (β = -0.02, p = 0.02) with an effect size of η^2 = 7%. This result implies those who are trusting and accepting of others have positive attitudes towards the target population. Privateness was another significant predictor (β = -0.01, p = 0.02) with an effect size of η^2 = 6%. Individuals who tend to be forthright and genuine seem to have better attitudes towards the older population. Finally, openness to change was found to be associated with positive attitudes towards older adults (β = 0.01, p = 0.03) with an effect size of η^2 = 5%. This result suggests that people who are open to new things and are not overly traditional seem to have better attitudes towards older adults [1].

Overall, it was found that attitudes towards older adults were positive throughout the current sample as indicated by an average KAOP score of 139.71 (SD = 14.82), which surpasses the minimum cutoff score of 120 [30]. The variables which were found to be the best predictors of attitudes towards older adults were gender and personality factors including warmth, reasoning, and openness to change, vigilance, and privateness.

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to identify characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and the 16 personality factors identified by Cattell) [1] associated with positive attitudes towards older adults. No association between age and attitudes towards older adults were identified. This is consistent with past research which has found no relationship between age and improved attitudes toward older adults [21,22]. However, some studies have suggested those who are middle aged and older have better attitudes towards older adults than the younger population [18,20,23-25]. Research by Runkawatt, Gustafsson and Engstrom [25] suggested that the difference in attitudes towards older adults between older and younger subjects can be attributed to the amount of time spent with the older population. In the study [25], which evaluated attitudes of nursing students towards older adults, it was found that as age increased so did positive attitudes towards older adults. One exception was noted among students who identified as belonging to cultures in which multigenerational homes are the norm. These students had positive attitudes towards older adults regardless of age [25]. This finding suggests that young people who interacted with older adults on a regular basis formed positive beliefs and positive attitudes towards older adults [25]. Thus, reaffirming the belief that time spent with older adults' influences attitudes to a greater extent than age alone.

Gender was the only demographic indicator in the current study which was found to influence attitudes towards older adults. More specifically, females in the current sample were found to have better attitudes towards the older population than males. This is a trend that seems to appear repeatedly in the literature [14-20]. This phenomenon may be the result of society assigning the role of caring exclusively to women [33,34]. Though men are beginning to take on a caring role, women predominantly assumed caretaking roles [35]. Given that women typically spend more time caring for older adults, this may be a factor contributing to better attitudes [33-35].

Finally, the personality factors warmth, reasoning, vigilance, privateness and openness to change were found to be predictive of positive attitudes towards older adults. The current study and the research study [14] identified warmth as a personality factor to significantly predict positive attitudes, indicating that caring and warm individuals have better attitudes towards older adults. Moreover, the present study and the earlier study [36] found reasoning to correlate with positive attitudes, suggesting that individuals who tend to think more abstractly have better attitudes towards the target population. Though the similarities between the studies are minor it is important to keep in mind that they were not observing identical populations. The sample compiled [14] was composed of undergraduate students, the majority of which identified as Caucasian, whereas recruited those from the Indigenous culture [36]. The current study sought to obtain a more representative sample of the Northern Ontario population. All participants were of working age (18 to 50), and there was an array of different ethnic participants.

Results of the current study suggest that having specific characteristics, including warmth, and caring could be used by Agencies to hire employees for to work with the geriatric population. These characteristics could lead to positive attitudes towards older adults. People would these traits would allow for acceptance of the elderly population.

IMPLICATIONS

Evaluation of the general population in the current study and adjusting for basic demographic information it allowed for a more thorough understanding of which individuals are best suited to work with older adults. The current model indicates there are ideal personality factors, regardless of age or gender, which can assist in the hiring process of caregivers. In theory, this should assist with the quality of services and care for older adults. Previous research has found that attitudes held by care partners have towards their patients influences the treatment they provide [6,7]. Furthermore, with the information that has been gathered in the current study, we can begin to develop insight regarding specific personality factors that can be used in the evaluation of prospective candidates in caretaking roles among elderly populations.

This could also be applied in vocational interest tests to screen for people, most suited to care for older adults. It is well known that there is a shortage of people to work in the geriatric field [37]. It is not uncommon for high schools in Canada to utilize various vocational interest tests when helping students decide on a career [38]. This could be used to evaluate prospective students to pursue a career in gerontology/geriatrics.

LIMITATIONS

The most significant limitation of the current study was sample size. First, the sample was not diverse enough to analyse level of education as there were limited subjects who had pursued more than a bachelor's degree. Because of the lack of variation in the level of education of the participants we were unable to take this variable into account when analyzing attitudes towards older adults. A study conducted [27] found that level of education significantly predicted attitudes towards older adults. Though the study by Thorson and Perkins [12] is the only one of its kind, it would follow that with increased education, attitudes towards the target population would become more positive as prejudice in general has been found to reduce with education [39]. Level of education may be a factor which significantly influences positive attitudes towards older adults and, therefore, merits evaluation.

Another limitation of the current sample is the face validity of the measure used to assess attitudes towards older adults. The KAOP is a self-report measure that makes no attempt at concealing its intentions in assessing attitudes towards older people. It is possible that social desirability played a role in participants' responses. Social desirability bias is a limitation that many researchers encounter when using self-report measurements, even more so when the measures have strong face validity such as the KAOP [40]. Ideally, by ensuring the participants that their results will remain anonymous, participants would respond truthfully. Unfortunately, social desirability can sometimes override the assurance of anonymity [40]. It is therefore difficult to insist that all responses on the KAOP are true.

Finally, though this research is relevant in ensuring that those who care for our older adults have positive attitudes towards them, it fails to take their perspective into account. Determining what is best of someone is not always an easy task and much thought must be used in consideration. Though this research has identified various characteristics which are associated with positive attitudes towards older adults and sound prospective partners in care, older adults should be asked their opinions. This research focused on evaluating positive traits toward older adults. What emerged are a set of factors which now provide us with greater insight into this conundrum.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future examination of attitudes towards older adults should consider using implicit measures of attitudes as opposed to explicit ones such as the KAOP. This would significantly reduce the chances of social desirability influencing the scores and would thus provide a more reliable score. On self-report measures that are as explicit as the KAOP it is easy to respond in a socially desirable way; some might even do it unconsciously as they are unaware of their bias towards a particular population such as older adults [40]. In the future, an implicit measure of attitudes could be used to determine the validity of the results found in the current study and could be used in future research on the topic. For instance, the Implicit Association Test (IAT) on aging has been found to be a particularly reliable measure [41]. Lin, Bryant and Boldero [41] found that participants' scores on the IAT to be significantly lower than those on explicit measures, suggesting that attitudes measured implicitly may be more representative of the participants' true attitudes towards the target population.

Furthermore, implicit tests such as the IAT can be completed online which may increase recruitment and variability within the sample. Utilizing an online questionnaire, may facilitate recruiting people with more diverse educational backgrounds. Finally, it has been suggested that a variable which may lead to positive attitudes towards older adults is time spent getting to know the elderly [20,22,25,42]. Future research should include questions aimed at assessing the amount of time and quality of time spent with older adults into the demographics questionnaire in order to assess if there is an interaction between this variable and positive attitude towards older adults.

CONCLUSION

The current study was unique in that it evaluated people in the general population to determine what characteristics lead to more positive attitudes towards older adults. Overall, it was found that gender and personality were the only factors in the current sample that significantly predicted positive attitudes towards older adults. More specifically, it was found that females, and those high in personality factors of warmth, reasoning, and openness to change, and low in personality factors of vigilance and privateness, exhibited more positive attitudes towards the target population. It was reasoned that females may have more positive attitudes as they are more likely to take on caring roles, likely leading to more caring and compassionate views towards older adults.

Though age was not found to be a significant predictor of positive attitudes towards older adults, many previous studies found that it is a significant predictor. It was theorized that the mediating variable leading to this difference is time spent and quality of time spent with older adults and, therefore, it is not necessarily the age of the participants that is leading to the positive attitudes rather it is the amount of time spent with them which typically increases with age. Therefore, there may be an extraneous variable, such as time spent with older adults which was not considered in the current study.

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