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PREVIEW

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EGO-DEFENSIVENESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO ATTITUDES OF
REGISTERED NURSES TOWARD THE ELDERLY

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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PREVIEW

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**EGO-DEFENSIVENESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO ATTITUDES OF REGISTERED NURSES TOWARD THE ELDERLY**

by

Barbara Wharton McCabe

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Community
and Human Resources

Under the Supervision of Professor Steven A. Eggland

Lincoln, Nebraska

December 1984

TITLE

Ego Defensiveness and its Relationship to Attitudes of

Registered Nurses Toward the Elderly

BY

Barbara Wharton McCabe

APPROVED

DATE

Dr. Steven A. Egglund

December 10, 1984

Dr. Willis Moreland

December 10, 1984

Dr. Margaret Johnson

December 10, 1984

Dr. John W. Creswell

December 10, 1984

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

PREVIEW

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**EGO DEFENSIVENESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO ATTITUDES OF REGISTERED NURSES TOWARD THE ELDERLY**

Barbara Wharton McCabe, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1984

Advisor: Steven A. Egglund

The purpose of this research study was to determine the relationship between ego defensiveness and attitudes of female registered nurses toward the elderly. This research study was designed to explore the relevance of Katz's Functional Theory of Attitudes in furthering the understanding of factors which may influence the attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly.

The primary questions which were addressed are as follows: (1) What are the attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly? (2) Is there a relationship between ego defensiveness and attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly? (3) Is there a relationship between certain demographic and personal characteristics and the attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly?

The Kogan Old People Scale, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, and a Personal Profile Questionnaire were mailed to 318 randomly selected registered nurses residing in the State of Nebraska. A total of 255 usable questionnaires were returned and comprised the final sample for this study.

Using multiple regression analysis a regression equation was developed which accounted for 29% of the variation in attitudes. Analysis of the data revealed a significant positive relationship

between the denial component of the Marlowe-Crowne scale and attitudes as measured by the Kogan Old People Scale. This finding implies that responses on the Kogan Old People Scale may be biased by the degree of ego-defensiveness of the respondents. That is, highly ego defensive individuals may respond in a positive socially acceptable manner; thus their scores may not reflect their true attitudes. Other significant variables were respondents' age, whether or not they had previously had a close personal relationship with an elderly person and their perception of that relationship.

The results obtained in this study call into question the conclusions of previous studies which used the Kogan Old People Scale and which found primarily positive attitudes toward the elderly. Further research should be directed at replicating this study with another sample to validate the findings.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The context of the problem

The provision of adequate health care for the older segment of our population is one of the most pressing issues in our society today. Service organizations and service providers are coming under increasing social pressure to recognize and respond to the needs of those individuals who have reached that period of life designated as old age. In order to respond to the diversity of needs which characterize those individuals over the age of 65, persons who are involved in the delivery of care must not only be aware of, but capable of refuting the negative images which have been attributed to the elderly. Individuals who practice nursing represent the largest number of health care providers and, consequently, have the greatest opportunity for contact with the elderly who seek health care. The attitudes which nurses hold toward the elderly may have a critical impact on the type of care that is given to the elderly person. In addition, attitudes which nurses convey toward the elderly may influence the elderly person's inclination to seek needed health services, as well as the person's willingness to actively participate in health promoting behaviors.

Although not specifically focusing on the elderly client, research by Fogel and Rosillo (1969) and Yunker, Block, and Young

(1970) document the positive relationship between staff attitudes and patient recovery rate. In a 1977 study, Hatton attempted to determine the relationship between the attitude of the nurse toward the elderly and nursing care provided. The comparisons in this study showed no statistical significance. Hatton reported that for five of the seven nurse participants, there appeared to be a relationship between attitude and positive nurse-patient interaction.

Acknowledging the potential impact of the attitudes of nurses on the general well-being of the elderly, it seems essential that every effort be made to ascertain the manner in which those engaged in the practice of nursing view the elderly person.

Current literature supporting the problem

Interest in identifying the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly dates back to the 1960's when Brown (1966-67) conducted the first comprehensive study in this area. The findings of this three-year study revealed that nursing personnel preferred younger persons and younger patients to old people and old patients. The 1970's marked a renewed interest by nursing researchers about the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly. The studies conducted during this period are characterized by the following approaches: (1) Those studies which focused on the different categories of nursing personnel; (2) Those studies which attempted to isolate variables which influence the attitudes of the nursing personnel; and (3) Those studies which attempted to produce a change in the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly.

Categories of nursing personnel. Participants in attitudinal research of nurses toward the elderly were representative of the three levels of nursing personnel: registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nursing assistants. Some of the studies compared the attitudes of different nursing personnel (Brown, 1966-67; Campbell, 1971; Gillis, 1973; Devine, 1980; Smith, Jepson, and Perloff, 1982), while other studies focused on subjects who were registered nurses (Hatton, 1977; Taylor and Harned, 1978; Meyer, Hassanein, and Bahr, 1980; Brower, 1981; Huckstadt, 1981). Most of the early studies reflected the negative attitude which prevailed in society, while some recent studies appear to indicate a neutral or slightly positive attitude toward the elderly (Taylor and Harned, 1978; Meyer, Hassanein, Bahr, 1980; Huckstadt, 1981; Smith, Jepson, and Perloff, 1981).

Student nurses are another group of nursing personnel who have been the focus of research concerning attitudes toward the elderly (DeLora and Moses, 1969; Gunter, 1981; Heller and Walsh, 1976). The analysis of the data reveals that the students held attitudes similar to their licensed counterparts. Care of the elderly person was seen as less desirable than the care of the younger individual. DeLora and Moses (1969) report that the students used such adjectives as "depressing", "dull", and "slow" to describe the care of the elderly. Following a course on gerontology, Gunter (1971) found that fewer students expressed an interest in working with the elderly than at the beginning of the course.

Influencing variables. Over the years nurse researchers have attempted to identify those variables which influence the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly. Some of the more common variables which have been examined include those of age, educational level, area of clinical practice, type of employing agency, and the amount of time spent in the direct care of the elderly, as well as the amount of contact with the elderly at a personal level. Despite the number of studies that have been conducted there seems to be agreement that there is no variable or set of variables which has consistently been identified by researchers as having a significant influence on the attitude of nurses toward the elderly (Brower, 1981). One trend in this area of research appears to deserve further consideration because of its potential impact on the care of the elderly person. Research conducted by Campbell (1971); Gillis (1973); Meyer, Hassanein and Bahr (1980); Brower (1981) appears to indicate that those nurses who have less frequent contact with the elderly on either a professional or personal level, as well as those nurses who are employed in settings other than long-term facilities, tend to exhibit more positive attitudes toward the elderly. Brower (1982) contends that the finding is related to the organizational setting, but when one reviews the findings of her research, as well as the findings of others, it appears that the amount of time spent with the elderly cannot be ignored as an influencing factor.

Attempts to produce attitudinal change. A study which was designed to induce attitudinal changes in nursing personnel toward the

elderly has been implemented with student samples. Gunter (1971) reported that following a course in gerontology the number of students who expressed an interest in working with the elderly had actually declined. A study by Tollett and Thornby (1982) demonstrated that for this particular sample the amount of geriatric and gerontology content did not appear to influence the students' attitudes about the elderly. A study conducted with a group of registered nurses enrolled in graduate study caused Dye (1979) to conclude that the attitudes held by the participants caused them to be powerfully resistant to change. There are, on the other hand, those researchers (Hart, Freil, and Crowell, 1976; Heller and Walsh, 1976; Wilhite and Johnson, 1976) who have demonstrated some success in changing the attitudes of the subjects toward the elderly in a positive direction. Although there has been considerable interest in measuring the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly, no one has attempted to determine which factors influence the resiliency of these attitudes. In addition, little effort has been directed to identify those conditions which lead to success in changing attitudes toward the elderly in a positive direction.

As one reflects on the research which has been conducted, one is immediately confronted with the lack of clear and consistent findings regarding not only the variables which appear to influence the attitudes of nurses toward the elderly but also with the lack of agreement regarding what the prevailing attitude of the nurse is toward this segment of the population. Despite the fact that many of

the attitudinal studies conducted have been plagued with sampling, instrument, and methodological problems, the importance of pursuing research into this area cannot be overemphasized when one considers demographic projections which indicate that by the year 2030, individuals over the age of 65 could account for 20 percent of our total population (Barrow and Smith, 1983).

Theoretical framework. The functional approach to attitude formation developed by Katz (1960) provides a theoretical framework for investigating the attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly. Katz proposes that attitudes can be viewed as serving four basic functions: (1) an instrument or utilitarian function which enables an individual to obtain rewards and avoid punishment, (2) the ego-defensive function which serves to protect the individual from both internal and external threats to one's self-image; (3) a value-expressive function which facilitates the development of one's self-concept as well as membership with a particular group; (4) a knowledge function which enables one to develop a sense of meaning out of life and the world in which one lives. Katz's functional approach to attitudes represents an attempt to understand the reasons individuals hold the attitudes they do. The significance of differentiating the functional basis of attitudes is addressed by Katz (1960):

Unless we know the psychological need which is met by the holding of an attitude we are in a poor position to predict when and how it will change (p. 170).

Other theorists such as Smith, Bruner, and White and Kellman have been identified as having developed similar theoretical approaches to attitude change (Insko, 1967).

In the process of explaining his theoretical perspective, Katz (1960) makes the point that the techniques and conditions for attitude change will differ depending upon the function which the attitude performs for the personality. He states:

The usual procedure for changing attitudes and behavior has little positive effect upon attitudes geared in our ego defenses. In fact they may have a boomerang effect of making the individual cling more tenaciously to his emotionally held beliefs (p. 182).

Katz suggests that many of our attitudes serve the function of defending our self-image. Perhaps this very point can explain in part the inconsistent findings that some researchers have reported when attempting to produce a positive change in the attitude of nurse subjects toward the elderly. If, in fact, attitudes which serve an ego defensive function require techniques which are different from attitudes which serve the other functions identified by Katz, it would seem important to explore the extent to which attitudes of nurses toward the elderly are related to ego defensiveness.

Despite the recognition by some (Menzies, 1961; Dye, 1979; Miller, 1979) of the possible relationship of ego defensiveness and attitudes of nurses toward patients, little research has been done to provide empirical support of this relationship. Bonaparte (1979)

examined the relationship between ego-defensiveness, open-closed mindedness and nurses' attitudes toward culturally different patients. Analysis of the data revealed that lower ego-defensiveness was found to result in more positive attitudes toward only one of the three culturally different target groups. Bonaparte speculated that this finding could be attributed to the fact that for this particular sample, Cattell's 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire demonstrated the construct of anxiety rather than the variable of ego-defensiveness. The findings of this study imply that further efforts should be made to explore the possible relationship between ego-defensiveness and attitudes of nurses toward different groups of patients.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between ego-defensiveness and attitudes of female registered nurses toward the elderly.

The primary questions which were investigated in this study are:

1. What are the attitudes of female registered nurses toward the elderly?
2. Is there a relationship between ego-defensiveness and attitudes of female registered nurses toward the elderly?
3. Is there a relationship between certain demographic variables and the attitudes of registered nurses toward the elderly?

Definitions

The following definitions were assigned to terms and concepts utilized in this study:

Attitude: The predisposition of the individual to evaluate some symbol or object or aspect of his world in a favorable or unfavorable manner (Katz, 1960, p. 168).

Attitude toward the elderly: The predisposition of an individual to evaluate an elderly person in a favorable or unfavorable manner. For the purpose of this study the score obtained on the Kogan Old People Scale (Kogan, 1961a) will serve as an indicator of an individual's attitude toward the elderly.

Clinical practice area: For the purpose of this study, the clinical practice categories will be utilized: medical; surgical; pediatrics; obstetrics; psychiatric-mental health; intensive/coronary care; geriatrics; community health; general practice.

Direct nursing care: The act of directly ministering to the needs of a patient or client on a one-to-one basis.

Ego-defensiveness: The mechanisms by which the individual protects his ego from his own unacceptable impulses and from the knowledge of threatening forces from without, and the methods by which he reduces his anxieties created by such problems (Katz, 1960, p. 172). For the purpose of this study, ego-defensiveness will be measured by the Crowne-Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (Crowne-Marlowe, 1964, p. 23-24).

Elderly: Those individuals who have reached or surpassed the chronological age of 65.

Registered nurse: An individual who has completed a course of study in either an associate degree, diploma, or baccalaureate nursing

program and has successfully passed the state board licensure examination to practice nursing.

Assumptions

The following assumptions provide a frame of reference from which to interpret this study:

- (1) Attitudes are measurable.
- (2) The Kogan Old People Scale was an appropriate instrument for the measurement of relative attitudes toward the elderly.
- (3) Ego-defensiveness is measurable.
- (4) The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale was an appropriate instrument for the measurement of ego-defensiveness.
- (5) The items included in the demographic questionnaire were appropriate and relative to the investigation being conducted.
- (6) The procedure used to select subjects for this study provided a representative sample of the population.
- (7) The subjects who comprise the sample provided valid responses to the instruments used in this study.

Delimitations and Limitations

- (1) The population for this study was restricted to female registered nurses who were licensed in the state of Nebraska at the time this study was conducted.
- (2) Conclusions of this study would only be applicable to the population of female registered nurses from Nebraska.
- (3) This study was subject to the inherent weaknesses in survey designs.