ATTITUDES OF TURKISH STUDENTS TOWARD ELDERLY RELATIVES

ABSTRACT. A sample of 152 Turkish university students responded to a questionnaire regarding their attitudes toward their elderly relatives. Attitudes toward elderly relatives and their presence in the home were generally positive, as would be expected in a traditional society. However, students' plans for their own old age indicated an orientation toward personal freedom and independence, rather than tradition. Males were more likely than females to foresee living with their children in old age, and females were more likely than males to mention a desire for independence. It was concluded that the extended family is losing its status as the ideal family type in Turkey, although close, cooperative family relations are still regarded as the norm.

Key Words: Turkey, attitudes, intergenerational relations, three-generation families, elderly relatives.

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As the proportion of the population of the industrialized world which is past retirement age has increased, the interest of social scientists in the aging process and its psychological and social correlates has also been on the rise. One area of interest comprises a group of separate but interrelated questions revolving around living arrangements for older adults and the attitudes of younger people towards their elderly relatives and their living arrangements.

Despite the impression which is easily picked up from popular culture that aging and older people are held in generally low regard in American society, a number of studies indicate that attitudes toward the elderly tend to be positive (Culbertson and Margareta 1981; Salter and Salter 1976; Thomas and Yamamoto 1975), and that younger and better educated people tend to have more positive attitudes (Gordon and Hallaner 1976; Thomas and Yamamoto 1975; Thorson 1975). To be sure, other studies have indicated the existence of negative attitudes toward the aged (e.g., Collette-Pratt 1976), so that it cannot be asserted that attitudes toward the elderly are entirely positive. However, there is evidence that at least some of the inconsistencies in findings may be attributable to the different instruments used in different studies (Hicks, Rogers, and Shemberg 1976) — a conclusion which also suggests that these attitudes are not easily captured in a positive vs. negative duality.

If attitudes of Americans toward the aged are complex, it may be
anticipated that cross-cultural studies will demonstrate further variation. In contrast to the emphasis on “independence” in old age which seems to be so prevalent among Americans in general, ethnic groups in the U.S. such as the Italian or Polish communities may prefer the three-generation household as the solution to caring for aged relatives (Fandetti and Gelfand 1976). Hong Kong Chinese, despite the onslaught of decades of rapid modernization, maintain ideals of filial piety and positive attitudes toward the three-generation household — although the latter appears to be on the decline (Ikels 1975). Culbertson and Margaona (1981) found that a relatively high proportion (26%) of their sample of 100 Mexican university students reported that they had elderly relatives living in their homes, and that the attitudes toward these relatives were almost uniformly positive. In contrast, the same investigators found that only 2% of a sample of 70 American students had elderly relatives in the home, although attitudes in this sample were also positive.

Informal observation of Turkish urban families suggests that they may be less likely than the Mexican families described by Culbertson and Margaona to include elderly relatives or to be unconditionally positive in their attitude toward such relatives. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Turkish students would match the low rate of contact reported by these authors between American students and their elderly relatives.

The Turkish culture is one which has traditionally emphasized paternal authority and family loyalty, and in which children are typically expected to take care of parents in their old age (see, e.g., Kâğıtçibaşı 1982). The extended (three-generation) family has often been cited as the ideal household type in Turkey. Although survey evidence indicates that this form is not statistically dominant, even in rural areas, the “transitional” extended family (in which either the adult son and his wife and children are temporarily present in the parental home, or the aged parents of the father or sometimes the mother join the nuclear family) is very frequently encountered as a stage in the life cycle of many families (Timur 1979).

Although the nuclear family appears to be the dominant family form, the family relationships typical of the extended family are still regarded by many as the norm or ideal of family life. Thus, traditions such as the father’s influence over his married sons, the mother-in-law’s power over the daughter-in-law, and a general norm of family help, cooperation and solidarity may persist even where households are separate (Sunar, Sunar, Pamuk, and Pamuk 1979; Duben 1982; see also Kâğıtçibaşı 1984, who describes Turkish family culture as a “culture of relatedness”).

On the other hand, Turkey has experienced an extraordinarily rapid urbanization over the past several decades. At the time of the founding of the Republic in 1923, and in fact up until the early 1950’s, less than 20% of the population lived in cities, while at the last fully reported census (1980), over 50% of the population lived in cities. Thus an overwhelm-