

## INVESTIGATING THE ATTITUDES OF HEALTH SCIENCES FACULTY STUDENTS TOWARD PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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### **Abstract**

**Objective:** The objective of the research is to investigate the attitudes of students in the Faculty of Health Sciences toward individuals with disabilities.

**Methods:** The descriptive study's sample included 348 students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences at a foundation university in Istanbul. Data were collected between March 21 and May 31, 2023. "Introductory Information Form" and "Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Disabled People" were used as data collection instruments.

**Results:** The research findings indicate that the students' mean age was  $20.67 \pm 1.65$  years, with a female proportion of 89.4%. The mean score on the "Multidimensional Attitude Scale Toward Disabled People" was  $113.12 \pm 14.25$ . Notably, female students, those who expressed an interest in working with individuals with disabilities, and those who reported having completed a course related to disability exhibited significantly higher scores on the scale compared to their counterparts ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** In accordance with the research findings, students from the Faculty of Health Sciences demonstrated a positive attitude toward individuals with disabilities. It is recommended that inclusive courses and educational approaches focusing on disability awareness be incorporated into university curriculum.

**Keywords:** Attitude; disabled persons; students, vulnerable groups.

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## SAĞLIK BİLİMLERİ FAKÜLTESİ ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN ENGELLİ BİREYLERE İLİŞKİN TUTUMLARININ İNCELENMESİ

### **Öz**

**Amaç:** Araştırmanın amacı, sağlık bilimleri fakültesi öğrencilerinin engelli bireylere yönelik tutumlarının incelenmesidir.

**Yöntem:** Tanımlayıcı tipteki araştırmanın örneklemini İstanbul'da bir vakıf üniversitesinin sağlık bilimleri fakültesinde öğrenim gören 348 öğrenci oluşturmuştur. Veriler 21 Mart-31 Mayıs 2023 tarihleri arasında toplanmıştır. Veri toplama aracı olarak “Tanıtıcı Bilgi Formu” ve “Engellilere Yönelik Çok Boyutlu Tutum Ölçeği” kullanılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Araştırma bulgularına göre öğrencilerin yaş ortalamasının  $20,67 \pm 1,65$  olduğu ve çoğunluğunun kadın (%89,4) olduğu belirlendi. “Engellilere Yönelik Çok Boyutlu Tutum Ölçeği” puanı  $113,12 \pm 14,25$  olarak belirlendi. Kadın engelli bireylerin hizmet aldığı kurumlarda çalışmak isteyen ve engellilere yönelik ders aldığını belirten öğrencilerin ölçek toplam puanı ve alt ölçek puanlarının diğer öğrencilere göre anlamlı düzeyde yüksek olduğu belirlendi ( $p < 0,05$ ).

**Sonuç:** Araştırma sonuçları doğrultusunda sağlık bilimleri fakültesi öğrencilerinin engellilere yönelik tutumlarının olumlu olduğu belirlendi. Üniversite müfredatlarına engellilik farkındalığına odaklanan kapsayıcı derslerin ve eğitim yaklaşımlarının dahil edilmesi önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Engelli kişiler, hassas gruplar, öğrenciler, tutum.

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### **Introduction**

Disability is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, arising from the interplay between health conditions or impairments, such as dementia, blindness, or spinal cord injuries and various contextual factors. These factors include environmental and personal elements like societal attitudes, access to infrastructure, discriminatory policies, as well as age and gender (WHO, 2022). Throughout history, disabled individuals have continued their existence as a group that has been excluded and marginalized in society. They have faced negative perspectives and attitudes and struggled with the difficulties they experienced (Buz & Karabulut, 2015). In the past, disabled individuals were forced to live in the same environment as people with diseases such as plague and leprosy (Öztürk, 2013). With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the idea that disabled individuals could not contribute to production in factories made it very difficult for people to participate in business life (Özgökçeler, 2012).

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Although significant improvements have been made, individuals with disabilities continue to face challenges on a global scale. Currently, around 1.3 billion people, or roughly 16% of the global population, live with a disability. This figure has grown significantly over the past decade due to demographic and epidemiological changes, such as population growth, aging, and the rise in noncommunicable diseases. As a result, more individuals are living longer but facing functional limitations (WHO, 2022). This estimate highlights that the disability community is one of the largest minority groups globally, with individuals with disabilities being an integral part of all our communities (Swenor, 2021).

Positive and negative attitudes toward disabled individuals are important for both disabled individuals and society (Karademir et al. 2018). These negative perspectives and attitudes toward disabled individuals have limited their self-respect and independence in society. To change the unfavorable perceptions of disabled individuals, it is essential to view them as integral members of society and the workforce, fostering the sustained enhancement of their contributions to societal productivity (Kutunis & Ulu, 2016). Policies aimed at protecting the rights of disabled individuals became an important agenda in the 1970s (Çaha, 2016). Since then, numerous initiatives have been carried out around the world to ensure the active and productive participation of disabled individuals in society. The primary objective of these initiatives is to create a society in which there is no discrimination and marginalization against disabled individuals (WHO, 2022). Policies designed to safeguard the rights of disabled individuals are created and put into practice. The primary goal of these policies is fundamentally to safeguard the rights of disabled individuals and eliminate barriers hindering their involvement in both social and professional spheres (Çaha, 2016). It is important for disabled individuals to be informed about these policies, to know and use their rights, in order to exist in society (Şişman, 2014). To enable disabled people to actively participate in social and professional life, negative attitudes toward disabled individuals must change in a positive direction. Universities play an important role as an area where this change can take place. University students are expected to make valuable contributions to future policies aimed at addressing the negative attitudes and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities (Kaldık, 2022).

The World Health Organization has established eliminating obstacles to healthcare as one of the three objectives of its 2014-2021 global disability action plan (WHO, 2015). People with disabilities are more likely to experience denial of healthcare compared to those without disabilities, and they often encounter unique barriers and stigma when trying to access healthcare services (WHO, 2022; Lezzoni et al. 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of disability with other social determinants of health, such as gender and socioeconomic status, can intensify the adverse effects of these attitudes. For example, women with disabilities in Ghana have reported facing distinct challenges in accessing maternal healthcare services, primarily as a result of the negative attitudes and practices of healthcare providers. This

intersectional approach underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that address both the attitudes of healthcare providers and the systemic barriers faced by individuals with disabilities (Ganle et al. 2020). Hence, to enhance the care for individuals with disabilities, it is crucial to instill favorable perspectives on disability in healthcare professionals during the initial phase of their professional development, particularly during their undergraduate education (Peiris-John et al. 2020). The attitudes of healthcare professionals who actively interact with and provide services to people with disabilities play an important role on the quality of healthcare services and the quality of life of disabled individuals. Hence, evaluating the attitudes of students enrolled in the field of health sciences regarding disabled individuals is crucial to cultivate a more inclusive, compassionate, and ethical approach among future health professionals. Based on this information, this research aims to investigate the attitudes of the Faculty of Health Sciences students toward persons with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

- What is the "Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities" score of Faculty of Health Sciences students?
- Is there a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the attitude scale toward individuals with disabilities based on the descriptive characteristics of the students within the Faculty of Health Sciences?

### **Methods**

This study has a descriptive design. The study was carried out between 21.03.2023 and 31.05.2023 at a Faculty of Health Sciences affiliated with a foundation university in Istanbul. The population of the study comprises a total of 774 students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences during the 2022-2023 academic year. The sample size was determined as a minimum of 257 students with 95% reliability and  $\pm 0.05$  margin of error, taking into account the sample size table. The sample for this study comprised 348 students chosen through a voluntary sampling method from the overall research population. Participants were included in the study based on the following criteria:

- Voluntary willingness to participate in the research,
- Completion of the data collection instruments in their entirety,
- Not having any disability

Data Collection Tools: "Introductory information form" that prepared by the researchers and "Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities (MAS)" were utilized as data collection instruments. The Introductory Information Form consists of questions related to socio-demographic characteristics and experiences with individuals with disabilities. These questions cover the presence of individuals with disabilities in their immediate environment, whether they have received education related to disabilities, their encounters with individuals

with disabilities in clinical practice, and their desire to work with individuals with disabilities in institutions (Aşık et al. 2021; Çakırer Çalbayram et al. 2018; Şahin & Bekir, 2016).

The Multidimensional Attitudes Scale toward Persons with Disabilities (MAS), developed by Findler et al. (2007), was employed. Its Turkish validity and reliability study were conducted by Yelpaze and Türküm (2018). The scale consists of three sub-dimensions and 31 items. The scale consists of affection, cognition and behavior subscales. The affection part consists of 14 items, the cognition part consists of 9 items, and the behavioral part consists of 8 items. The scale's Cronbach's alpha values were 0.90 for the total score, 0.88 for the affection sub-dimension, 0.89 for the cognition sub-dimension, and 0.84 for the behavior sub-dimension. The five-point Likert-type scale comprises five options: These options ranges from strongly agree (+5) to strongly disagree (+1). In the scoring of the scale, 11 (1,2,3,4,5,9,10,11,12,14,15) negative items in the emotion dimension and 6 (1,2,3,4,5,6) negative items in the behavior dimension were reverse coded. Scores can be calculated for each dimension and the total scale. Scores ranging from 31 to 155 points can be obtained from the scale. Higher score suggests the existence of a favorable mindset. In this research, value of the Cronbach alpha was found to be 0.84, 0.71, 0.96 and 0.83 for the scale total score, affection, cognition and behavior sub-dimensions, respectively.

Since online education was switched between March 21 and May 31, 2023 due to the earthquake, the data collection form was applied online with the google form "[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScvN69fWXDAatGF1QNeRiWIX\\_eJ4zShKqbX\\_AQzNNt\\_AWISrfPQ/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScvN69fWXDAatGF1QNeRiWIX_eJ4zShKqbX_AQzNNt_AWISrfPQ/viewform?usp=sf_link)" link. Consent was obtained via Google form from students who consented to be part of the study. The completion of the form took an average of 5 to 10 minutes. The form was distributed to students at the relevant university through their student representatives on the WhatsApp platform. A total of 348 students fully completed and submitted the form.

The outcomes were analyzed with SPSS 22.0 program. Since the Shapiro-Wilk test result was found to be  $p < 0.05$ , it was determined that the data were not normally distributed, and non-parametric tests were employed. The significance level was accepted as  $p < 0.05$ . Percentage, mean and standard deviation were used as descriptive statistical analysis methods. Non-parametric Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests were utilized to compare the total score averages of the scales and their subscales with descriptive characteristics.

Prior to commencing the study, ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee under the decision number E-54022541-050.05.04-101238, dated March 7, 2023 (2022/405). Those students who indicated their willingness to partake in the study received information about the research electronically via an online survey conducted through Google Forms, and their consent was obtained.

## Results

The mean age of the students is  $20.67 \pm 1.65$  (Range: 18-29) years and 89.4% are female. 21% of the participants stated that they had taken courses on disability and 43.7% indicated willingness to work in institutions serving individuals with disabilities (Table 1).

The students' average total score of the scale was determined as  $113.12 \pm 14.25$ . Data regarding subscale score averages are included in "Table 2". Total scale scores, cognition, and behavior subscale scores of female students were significantly higher than those of their male counterparts ( $p < 0.05$ ). It was established that the scale total mean score, affection and behavior subscale scores of the participants of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Audiology and Health Management were significantly higher than the students of the Nursing Department ( $p < 0.05$ ). It was found that the cognition subscale scores of the students who stated that there was a disabled person in their close circle were significantly higher than the other students ( $p < 0.05$ ). It was identified that the scale total score and behavior subscale scores of the students enrolling in courses addressing disabilities were significantly higher than that of their counterparts who did not ( $p < 0.05$ ). It was found that the scale total, cognition and behavior subscale scores of the students who answered "definitely willing" to the question of their desire to work in institutions where disabled people receive service were significantly higher than the other students ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 3).

## Discussion

In this research, the high scores of the students indicate that they exhibited positive attitudes. Similarly, other studies conducted in the literature have found that Health Sciences Faculty students have positive attitudes about individuals with disabilities (Aşık et al. 2021; Çakırer Çalbayram et al. 2018).

In this study, women's total scale scores were found to be higher than men's. While no significant difference was observed between men and women in the emotion sub-dimension, but it was found that women had more positive attitudes than men in the behavior and cognition sub-dimension. Similar to these results, some studies have reported that females exhibit favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in compared to males (Bania et al. 2023, Aşık et al. 2021; Çakırer Çalbayram et al. 2018). The fact that women have more positive attitudes compared to men is associated with women's gender characteristics such as being more sensitive to others' thoughts and feelings, being compassionate, caring, and emotional.

In this study, when students' attitudes were evaluated according to their departments, the total scores of the Health Management, Audiology, and Nutrition and Dietetics departments were found to be higher, whereas the total scores of the Nursing department were lower. While there was a significant difference in the affection and behavior sub-dimension, there was no significant difference in the cognition sub-dimension. Different results have been reported in

the literature about the relationship between the department students study and their attitudes toward disabled people. Similar to the findings of this study, another research showed that nursing students received lower scores compared to students from other departments within the Faculty of Health Sciences. (Şahin & Bekir, 2016). Contrary to these results, different studies have shown that nursing students have more positive attitudes than other departments (Sarantaki et al. 2021; Çakırer Çalbayram et al. 2018). In a different study, it was reported that students in the physiotherapy and rehabilitation department had the lowest score on the attitude scale (Aşık et al. 2021). Bania et al. (2023) conducted a study with students from various health disciplines and found no significant difference between the department the students studied and their attitudes toward the disabled. Although variations exist in the viewpoints of health sciences students toward individuals with disabilities across departments, the literature does not show a consistent agreement on this matter. The differences between departments have been attributed to the content of the educational program in various studies. For example, Sarantaki et al. (2021) reported that medical students had the lowest scores, attributing this to the lack of education on the needs of individuals with disabilities. Similarly, Aşık et al. (2021) found that the lowest scores in the Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Department were due to first- and second-year students. These students had not yet participated in the internship program, which is required for fourth-year students according to the curriculum. The findings of current study further emphasize the importance of incorporating disability-focused education into curricula, as students who had taken courses on disabilities demonstrated higher scores. Therefore, integrating comprehensive disability education across all health disciplines may improve attitudes and better prepare students to work with individuals with disabilities.

In this study, when the attitudes of the students who stated that there was a disabled person in their immediate environment were evaluated, it was determined that the thinking subscale score was higher than the other students. Having a disabled individual in the students' close circle helps these students gain more experience with disability. And it is thought that these experiences will enable students to have more empathetic and deep thoughts toward disabled individuals. Another study stated that regular interaction of students with disabled individuals contributes to the adoption of better behaviors and attitudes (Sarantaki et al. 2021). However, there are also results in the literature reporting that when the attitudes of students who have a disabled person in their immediate environment are examined, there is no significant difference compared to other students (Çakırer Çalbayram et al. 2018; Gençtürk & Korkut, 2020). This may be related to the small number of participants in the studies who had disabled individuals in their close cycle. In future studies, it may be suggested to conduct studies with a larger sample group on this subject.

It was determined that the scale total and behavior subscale scores of the participants taking courses for the disabled were higher than the other students. According to the study findings, it can be said that the training provided for the disabled creates a significant difference to the

attitudes of students studying in the field of health sciences. In the literature, other studies report that receiving education about disability correlates with more positive attitudes, supporting this finding (Bania et al. 2023; Ertemoğlu Öksüz et al. 2023; Yılmaz & Kitis 2024). Sarantaki et al. (2021) found that 77.9% of health sciences students had not received education regarding disabilities and 64.3% felt uninformed in this field. In a research endeavor involving students from the faculty of sports sciences, findings indicated that the theoretical 14-week special education course did not create a significant difference for the students' attitudes toward disabled people. Researchers have suggested that practical studies and empathy training programs for disabled individuals, where theoretical education is not sufficient, should be included in the education (Top, 2018). A study by Carlson and Witschey (2018) highlights that undergraduate students who engaged in service-learning projects involving direct interaction with people with disabilities demonstrated significant improvements in their attitudes over the course of the semester. The students' experiences in a structured environment, where they learned about various disabilities and participated in hands-on activities, contributed to a more positive outlook toward individuals with disabilities (Carlson & Witschey, 2018). Another study also emphasized the importance of clinical training alongside comprehensive education on disability. The increase in positive attitudes following clinical training clearly demonstrated the impact of direct clinical exposure to this population. A comprehensive clinical education can enhance students' comfort and confidence, foster empathy, and deepen their understanding of the needs of individuals with disabilities (Edwards & Nash, 2023). Findings from a randomized controlled study revealed that a disability-focused health course utilizing an affective learning method based on transformative learning theory significantly improved nursing students' attitudes toward disability. However, no statistically significant difference was found in empathy levels. In this context, researchers suggested that, in addition to the disability-focused course, providing individualized support to foster empathy, respect, sensitivity, and a deeper understanding of others' experiences could be beneficial (Dinçer & İnangil, 2022). While research has shown a relationship between education and attitudes toward disability, randomized controlled trials examining the impact of educational interventions on disability attitudes and empathy among healthcare students remain limited. This situation highlights the need for further research and underscores the importance of conducting more robust trials to identify effective interventions that can enhance students' attitudes and empathy toward individuals with disabilities (Evans Lisiecka & Farrell, 2023).

It was determined that the students who stated that they wanted to work in institutions where disabled individuals receive service had better attitudes toward disabled individuals than other students. It was thought that students' positive attitudes toward disabled people may have made them feel more comfortable about working in these institutions. This situation can be associated with the students' motivation for the profession, their individual experiences and their awareness of disability, since they are educated in the area of health sciences. One study found that students with positive attitudes toward disabled people reported feeling significantly more



confident in performing disability-related activities compared to those with negative attitudes. This heightened self-efficacy not only influences their attitudes but also translates into a greater desire to engage with individuals with disabilities in a professional context (Culp et al. 2017). Similarly, a qualitative study involving nursing students revealed a widespread lack of confidence in working effectively with individuals with disabilities, stemming from concerns about causing harm or appearing patronizing (Willis & Thurston, 2015). Another study reported that clinical education focused on individuals with disabilities improves students' attitudes, ultimately increasing their motivation to work with individuals with disabilities (Edwards & Nash, 2023). In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that developing positive attitudes toward working with individuals with disabilities is important in increasing the willingness to work in such environment.

**Limitations of the Study:** Since the research was executed in a single center, it cannot be generalized to larger groups.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research, it was noted that students within the health sciences faculty generally demonstrated favorable attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Moreover, it was discerned that female students, in particular, exhibited more positive thoughts and behaviors. The presence of disabled individuals in the students' close cycle contributed to these students having more positive thoughts and was associated with their high scores in the thinking subscale. It has also been determined that education is a factor influencing attitudes. A significant increase has been observed in the attitudes of students taking courses for the disability compared to others. This situation reveals the need to emphasize the issue of disability more in training programs, increase practical experiences and include empathy training. By incorporating real-life encounters and providing opportunities for students to engage with people with disabilities, healthcare training programs can cultivate more inclusive, compassionate, and competent professionals who are better equipped to deliver high-quality care to diverse patient populations. Additionally, it was recommended that future research investigate the short- and long-term effects of different educational interventions on attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

### **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical permission was received from Bezmialem Vakıf University Non-Interventional Ethics Committee with the decision dated 07.03.2023 (2022/405) and E-54022541-050.05.04-101238.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflict of interest related to this article.

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1. Designing the study
2. Collecting the data
3. Analysis and interpretation of the data
4. Writing the manuscript
5. Critical revision

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