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## **Knowledge and interest in ageing: a study of final year social work students**

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**Objective:** To evaluate social work students' knowledge of older people's issues and their level of interest in working with older people in the future.

**Method:** Cross-sectional design. Fifty-five final year students completed a questionnaire, including a 12-item knowledge/myths instrument and a 10-point interest scale.

Independent variables included measures of students' prior contact with older people and their exposure to a course on ageing.

**Results:** Students achieved an average 70.4% success rate on the knowledge/myths instrument; no student got all answers correct. Interest levels were moderate with an average score of 5.13 on the 10-point scale. Prior participation in courses on ageing issues was positively correlated with knowledge of older people's issues and interest in working with older people. No relationships were identified between type of prior relationship with an older person and knowledge or interest levels.

**Conclusions:** Correlations between course attendance and students' knowledge and interest are in line with international findings. Such courses should challenge common myths associated with ageing and should promote social work with older people as skilled practice within complex health, welfare and family systems.

**Key words:** social work education; ageing knowledge; gerontology courses, gerontology careers

## **Introduction**

Social work with older people is often characterised as low status when compared to other areas of practice, such as work with children [1]. However population ageing suggests the need for more social workers to be able to work effectively with older people and respond to the diversity of older people's lives [2,3]. This is important whether or not they are employed in ageing-related work: in their US study Cummings et al. [4] identified that the majority of social work graduates not in ageing work reported contact with older people (77%) and needed gerontology knowledge in their jobs (63%). Lack of interest among social workers has been linked to a failure to understand the complexity of issues facing older people [3], personal and professional ageism, and a lack of organisational supports [2]. Hugman [5] argues that because social work in aged care is characterised as indirect – mobilising supports and resources rather than initiating change – it is not always perceived as 'real social work'. Of similar concern are myths around the capabilities (or lack thereof) of older people and consequent assumptions about the capacity of older people to be involved in what may be stereotypically seen as more innovative social work, such as conflict mediation, family therapy or social action.

International research suggests that where students undertake a course on gerontology, particularly where contact with older people is included, they tend to view older people

more positively and to be more interested in working with them in the future [4,6-8]. Gorelik et al. [6] argue particularly for the development of more stand-alone modules on ageing issues. Knowledge about older people's issues can be gained not only from attending gerontology courses, but also from exposure in personal and work contexts to older people themselves [4]. For example, in a controlled study of undergraduate social work students in the United States, personal contact with older adults was significantly related to initial and substantial interest in ageing; the latter characterised by taking further gerontology courses and planning to work with older people [6]. Similarly literature on student attitudes suggests that students are more positive toward older people where there has been a close personal relationship [8,9].

The present study examines social work students' knowledge of ageing issues and interest in working with older people in the future. A particular focus is students' prior exposure to a course on ageing issues and the nature of their previous contact with older people in personal and work settings. In the year before the study some students completed an optional course entitled 'Reflective Practice with Older People' run by the authors in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales. This course aimed to challenge students' attitudes toward older people and dispel some of the myths about ageing. It included direct observations of older people in aged care service settings.

## **Methods**

### Sample

The sample comprised 55 (84.6%) of the 65 final year students undertaking fieldwork in the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of New South Wales. The research was conducted during a university-based fieldwork seminar. All but one of those who attended agreed to participate in the study. The remaining nine missing students did not attend the seminar for reasons such as illness or because their fieldwork was located in rural or overseas settings.

### Instrument

Data were collected through a self-completion questionnaire comprising fixed-choice questions. Two dependent variables were examined. The first variable – examining knowledge of ageing issues – was measured by a 12-item knowledge/myths instrument adapted from one developed in the United States by Olson [7]. This TRUE/FALSE quiz addresses common myths of ageing (e.g. family members are too quick to place an older relative in a nursing home) as well as practice knowledge (e.g. memory problems may be a sign of depression in older age). Correct answers on this instrument were scored 1 and incorrect scores were recorded as 0, meaning that the maximum score any student could achieve was 12. The second dependent variable – examining interest in working with older people – was measured by a 10-point scale where 1 equalled ‘I never want to work with older people’ and 10 equalled ‘I definitely want to work with older people’.

Independent variables included students’ personal characteristics, such as age and gender, as well as having attended a course on ageing issues. Students were also asked if they

have had at least one prior (self-defined) close relationship with an older person and whether this was a personal relationship (cohabiting or non-cohabiting) or a work-based relationship (paid work, volunteer work or student placement).

### Analysis

In addition to frequency distributions, analysis was conducted by a comparison of mean scores on both the knowledge/myths instrument and the interest scale, and by employing t-tests and ANOVA. The eta correlation coefficient was calculated as appropriate for interval dependent variables and nominal independent variables. Correlational analysis involving the age variable employed Pearson's r correlation coefficient.

### **Results**

Most students in the study were female (49 or 89%), with an average age of 25.3 (SD  $\pm$  5.48, range 21-41). In terms of a prior close relationship, most students (52 or 94.5%) reported at least one such relationship. Most commonly a non-cohabiting personal relationship was reported (40 or 72.7%), followed by a cohabiting personal relationship (17 or 30.9%). A smaller number of students reported a close relationship in a work context: 13 (23.6%) while on a student placement, 10 (18.2%) in paid work, and 5 (9.1%) while doing volunteer work. Less than half (23 or 41.8%) the students had previously attended a course on ageing issues. Most commonly (18 or 32.7%) students had attended the course 'Reflective Practice with Older People' run by the School of Social Work.

Five others (9.1%) had attended a course on ageing issues run either as part of their work or by a non-government organisation.

Out of a possible 12, the average score on the knowledge/myths instrument was 8.5 (SD  $\pm$  1.62, range 5-11). This represents an average 70.4% success rate. It is notable that none of the students got all answers correct. Table 1 presents the percentages of correct answers for each of the items of this quiz, reordered from lowest number of correct responses to highest. On the 10-point interest scale (where 10 equals definitely interested in working with older people) the average score was 5.13 (SD  $\pm$  2.45, range 1-10). Six students (10.9%) recorded 1 or 2 at the lowest end of the scale while five students (9.1%) recorded 9 or 10 at the upper end.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

No significant relationships were identified between students' age, gender or type of prior close relationship with an older person and their scores on the knowledge/myths instrument or their scores on the interest scale. Significant relationships were however identified between exposure to a course on ageing issues and students' results on the quiz and their scores on the interest scale. The average score on the quiz for those who had not been exposed to a course on ageing issues was 7.8 (out of 12), compared to 9.4 ( $F=16.80$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.49$ ) for those who had attended any ageing course, and 9.6 ( $F=18.09$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.53$ ) for those who had attended the course 'Reflective Practice with Older People'. The eta scores indicate a moderate positive relationship between exposure to a

course on ageing issues and students' success on the knowledge/myths instrument, with the relationship being slightly stronger for those who attended the course run by the School of Social Work. The average score on the interest scale for those who had not been exposed to a course on ageing issues was 4.4 (out of a possible 10), compared with an average of 6.4 ( $F=5.27$ ,  $\eta=.41$ ,  $p<.01$ ) for those who had attended any course and 6.8 ( $F=14.67$ ,  $\eta=.49$ ,  $p<.001$ ) for those who had attended the course run by the School of Social Work. Again, these eta scores indicate moderate positive relationships.

## **Discussion**

While nearly all students in the sample reported at least one close relationship with an older person, overall they demonstrated only about a 70% understanding of ageing issues, as measured by the knowledge/myths instrument. The average score of 7.8 (out of 12) or 65% success rate for those who had not attended an ageing course is comparable with rates found in undergraduate social work students in the United States prior to taking a gerontology course (pre-test) [7]. The average score of 9.6 or 80% success rate for those who had attended the course 'Reflective Practice with Older People' is slightly lower than 85% post-test success rate reported by Olson [7]. Although it should be noted that the present survey was conducted about a year after completion of the course and that this course did not specifically seek to address the issues covered in the knowledge/myths instrument.



The average interest score of 5.13 in this study suggests only a moderate interest in working with older people among social work students at the University of New South Wales. Nonetheless this result is slightly higher than the interest rate reported by Gorelik et al. [6]. That interest levels were positively correlated with prior participation in a gerontology course is in line with international studies [4, 6]. However, while this is an important finding, without the use of a randomised controlled design it is not possible to establish whether interest is affected by the course or whether selection of the course was based on prior interest levels or other intervening variables. The study is also limited by its small sample size and by focusing on only one School of Social Work. Nonetheless the use of internationally recognised instruments means that this study has the potential for replication in other settings and with non-social work students.

The present research supports the findings of international studies that exposure to stand-alone gerontology courses correlates well with knowledge of issues affecting older people and levels of interest in working with them. An important aspect of these courses should be the challenging of myths associated with ageing (such as older people being unwilling to change). They should also be concerned with imparting an understanding of the health issues affecting older people and their experience within social and political systems (e.g. the proportion of older people who are institutionalised). Social work practice with older people should be promoted to students as skilled and requiring the negotiation of complex health, welfare and family systems [3]. Although in this research no correlations were identified between type of prior relationship with an older person and students' knowledge, on the basis of international research [4] the relevance of

students having direct contact with older people in the classroom and while on placement should still be emphasised. Berkman et al. [3] identify the lack of integrated aged care content on US social work programs. Similarly an audit of ageing content on Australian social work programs, like the recent national audit of mental health content [10], would be valuable.

### **Key points**

- Exposure to gerontology content on a social work program is related to a greater understanding of ageing issues and interest in working with older people.
- Social work courses need to dispel myths and stereotypes associated with ageing and promote social work with older people as highly skilled and requiring an understanding of the complexity and diversity of older people's lives.

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**Table 1: Correct responses to knowledge/myths quiz (n=55)**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Correct answer</b>	<b>Number correct</b>	<b>Percent correct</b>
People become more resistant to change as they get older.	FALSE	15	27.3
The percentage of older people who live in nursing homes has been decreasing in the last two decades.	TRUE	22	40.0
Memory problems may be a sign of depression in older adults.	TRUE	23	41.8
Older people who are admitted to nursing homes are older and sicker than they used to be.	TRUE	27	49.1
Life satisfaction is at least as high among older people as among young people.	TRUE	37	67.3
Families are generally too quick to place their elderly relatives in nursing homes.	FALSE	37	67.3
The majority of older people live independently without assistance with activities of daily living.	TRUE	42	76.4
Alzheimer's Disease usually has a sudden and severe onset.	FALSE	51	92.7
Tactile communication, or touch, is less appropriate with older clients than with younger ones.	FALSE	52	94.5
Women & men are just as well off financially in their older age.	FALSE	52	94.5
When older clients have cognitive impairment, it is unnecessary to obtain their involvement in decision-making or problem-solving.	FALSE	53	96.4

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The risk of developing dementia increases with advancing age.	TRUE	54	98.2
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