



# Attitudes toward aging and older adults in Arab culture

## A literature review

As life expectancy rises, increasing numbers of people are reaching old age worldwide. According to the United Nation's World Population Prospects [60], people aged 60 years or over comprise 13% of the global population. This number is increasing at a rate of approximately 3% per year. By 2050, the number of older people is projected to be 2.1 billion, so that older people will make up nearly one quarter or more of the population of almost all regions of the world. In Europe, people aged 60 years or over already comprise 25% of the population [60].

Population aging is also noticed in Germany, especially when it comes to people over 80 years old. In 2013, 5.4% of the population were 80 years old or above. This number is expected to rise to 13% by 2050 [18]. As a result of these demographic changes, issues such as the appropriate distribution of societal goods, social participation of older people, as well as their productivity are gaining immense relevance [33]. Issues of power, financial resources, and justice all carry potential for intergenerational conflict [43]. Societal perceptions and expectations of older people and the aging process impact policy decisions on the one hand and the well-being of older adults on the other hand. Research about perceptions of aging and older people is therefore vital for a clear sailing through the challenges in an aging society [38].

### Objectives

Demographic changes brought on by population aging, coincide with demographic changes through migration. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),

there is currently the highest level of displacement since the Second World War [62]. Presently, the war in Syria causes one of the biggest refugee crises of this era. Germany plays an important role in this matter as one of the top 10 refugee-hosting countries worldwide [62]. In the past, Germany has witnessed several waves of migration and refugees, amongst others, from Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Lebanon [13]. Due to the acute relevance of the Syrian situation and the number of refugees from Syria and other Arab countries in Germany, this paper focuses on the perceptions of aging held in the Arab culture. The term Arab culture is commonly used to refer to the culture shared in the Arab World which comprises the 22 countries of the Arab League. The focus on Arab culture in this paper, however, does not disqualify the importance of research on other refugee and migrant cultures in Germany.

When the percentage of people over 60 years old in Germany (28%) is compared with other countries, such as Syria (7%), Turkey (12%), and Lebanon (12%) [60], refugees and migrants from these countries will encounter a higher proportion of older people than in their native countries. Additionally, the job market in Germany is characterized by a current shortage of and further increasing demand for professionals who are trained to work with seniors, most of all in the caregiving professions [55]. Individuals whose cultural background predestines them to hold older adults in high regard may be more easily recruited into caregiving professions than individuals who tend to consider older adults primarily as a burden (although culturally rooted positive perceptions of aging are certainly not

the only motivation to work in this field [54]). Furthermore, migrants and refugees carry certain cultural expectations regarding how they themselves wish to be treated as they approach older adulthood. Researching cultural differences in perceptions of aging, expectations regarding aging in general, older people, and one's own aging is vital to ensure better understanding and integration of migrant and refugee cultures.

This article first discusses definitions of stereotypes and attitudes as they relate to aging and older adults. It then characterizes three hypotheses that have been brought forward regarding cultural differences in age stereotypes and attitudes. Lastly, a review of empirical studies on cross-cultural differences with a focus on Arab cultures is provided.

### Age stereotypes, attitudes toward aging, and ageism

Stereotypes are commonly defined as a set of beliefs about the particular characteristics of individuals who belong to a certain social group and are used to categorize these groups. These beliefs could be both negative and positive [5]. Aging stereotypes can thus be defined as positive *and* negative beliefs about older people and the aging process. In fact, several studies found evidence that stereotypes can be positive or negative in different dimensions of aging [11, 17, 27, 34].

When reading about aging stereotypes, one will come across several constructs such as attitudes toward aging [7], and perceptions of aging [38]. Both stereotypes and perceptions are mainly related to cognition [15, 29], whereas attitudes have three major components: cognition,

affect, and behavior [12]. Similarities between age stereotypes and attitudes toward aging led to an interchangeable use of these terms by researchers [17]. This can be deemed as problematic, since the imprecise use of terms could lead to misinterpretation and possible inconclusiveness in research findings. This also holds for the term ageism. Iversen et al. suggested the following definition [29]:

*Ageism is defined as negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against (or to the advantage of) elderly people on the basis of their chronological age or on the basis of a perception of them as being 'old' or 'elderly'. Ageism can be implicit or explicit and can be expressed on a micro-, meso- or macro-level (p. 15).*

It should be noted that ageism can also be directed toward younger people [14]. Most research, however, focusses on ageism toward older people.

So where does culture play a role in all of this? One of the similarities between attitudes toward aging and age stereotypes is that both are related to culture and reflect the images a certain culture has about aging [25]. According to Tajfel [58], the categories to which we ascribe people when stereotyping them are linked to our culture. Additionally, social representations theory [42] states that everyday thoughts, ideas, and values are representations held by members of a society. These representations help us understand and construct our worlds and are related to culture. They also „determine the link between human psychology and modern social and cultural trends“ [42] (p. 225). Therefore, culture plays a role in shaping our ideas and values, and our attitudes toward aging are no exception.

## Culture

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regards culture as „the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs“ [61] (p. 4).

The influence of culture and humans is reciprocal, i. e. culture is shaped by humans, and humans are shaped by culture. Triandis [59] defined culture as all that is made by humans in the environment. He differentiated between objective and subjective culture. Objective culture embodying materials such as food or clothing, and subjective culture including attitudes, values, and beliefs [59]. In cross-cultural psychology, attitudes, experiences and behavior in different cultures are studied comparatively [56]. This article approaches the review of attitudes toward aging in Arab culture from a cross-cultural perspective.

## Cross-cultural comparisons concerning attitudes toward aging

Cross-cultural research on attitudes toward aging has been mostly concerned with East vs. West comparisons (for a review, see [44]). In previous literature, „the East“ referred to Asia, whereas „the West“ referred to Western Europe and the anglophone West (Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States, Canada) [44]. It is commonly believed that individualistic Western cultures are more youth-oriented and ageist (e. g., [46, 47]), whereas Eastern cultures are more collectivistic, and hold more reverence and respect for older people, for example due to Confucian values of filial piety (e. g., [26, 43, 57]). However, research regarding these differences has been inconclusive, which led to the emergence of three hypotheses: a culture hypothesis, a modernization hypothesis and a speed of population aging hypothesis [44]; see also [48]. This article reviews these hypotheses in the following paragraphs and then, as part of the literature review, evaluates whether these hypotheses apply to cross-cultural comparisons between Arab and Western cultures.

**Culture hypothesis.** This is the common perspective described above (see also [64]). According to this hypothesis, collectivistic cultures hold more positive views of aging and older people in comparison to individualistic cultures. Therefore, according to this perspective, East-

ern cultures hold more positive attitudes toward aging than Western ones [44]. This hypothesis is comparable with the value orientation perspective discussed in a study by Peterson and Ralston [48]. Arab cultures are heavily influenced by values of filial piety (e. g., [30]). Respect and reverence for older people is of great importance and caregiving of older people within the family is the norm [39]. Older people are also considered as a source of blessing in the Arab family, where their opinions are received with great respect and appreciation. It is also expected for the younger generation to care for and support the older one [63].

Additionally, religion is believed to play a role in shaping a culture's attitudes toward older people. Islam focuses on the importance of respecting one's own parents, taking care of them, and “honoring” them as they attain old age, as well as putting older people in high regard [51]. Since Islam is the predominant religion in Arab countries, this led to the assumption that Arab cultures would be reverent toward older people [8]. However, respect toward older people can be found in all major world religions, which led Peterson and Ralston [48] to criticize the fusion of religion with social structure in the value orientation perspective and believed it to be a matter of secularization instead of religion [48]. Furthermore, the culture hypothesis has been criticized for neglecting countries that are neither Eastern nor Western, for ignoring the differences between Asian cultures, and for confounding discrepancies in socioeconomic factors and value systems cross-culturally [38].

Even though this hypothesis is very common, empirical support is scarce (e. g., [38, 64]). Some studies did find evidence supporting the culture hypothesis (e. g., [37]); however, some studies found the opposite pattern, with more ageism in Eastern cultures (e. g., [20–23, 67]). A meta-analysis by North and Fiske [44] generally found more negative attitudes toward aging in the East, and that individualism predicted more positive attitudes toward aging. Furthermore, a study comparing Taiwan and the United Kingdom distinguished metaperceptions of a society about aging on the one hand and individual personal attitudes on the other. They

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**Attitudes toward aging and older adults in Arab culture. A literature review****Abstract**

**Background.** As population aging takes place around the world, research on attitudes toward aging and older people increases in relevance. With migration of people from the Arab world into countries with high percentages of older adults, attitudes toward aging and older adults held in Arab culture are of particular interest.

**Objective.** The article provides a review of the empirical literature on attitudes toward aging and older adults held in the Arab world and discusses the findings on the basis of the general literature on age stereotypes, attitudes toward aging, and ageism as well as their link to culture.

**Method.** A literature search was performed to find empirical studies on attitudes toward aging and older adults that include Arab samples. Studies published in Arabic or English were included.

**Results.** Studies on attitudes toward aging with Arab samples are scarce and do not show cohesive patterns of results. None of the hypotheses that have been brought forward to explain cross-cultural differences regarding attitudes toward aging (i. e., the culture, modernization, and speed of population aging hypotheses) can fully account for the results. Possible reasons for conflicting results include sociodemographic variables, regional

differences, lack of differentiation between meta-perceptions and personal attitudes, heterogeneity of measurement instruments and definitions of “older people” and possible confounds due to the usage of subjective Likert scales in cross-cultural studies.

**Conclusion.** Further research on attitudes toward aging in Arab samples are needed and should consider heterogeneity within Arab culture as well as variables other than culture.

**Keywords**

Stereotyping · Ageism · Cross-cultural comparison · Arab culture · Review

**Einstellungen gegenüber dem Altern und älteren Menschen in arabischer Kultur. Eine Literaturübersicht****Zusammenfassung**

**Hintergrund.** Durch weltweite Bevölkerungsalterung gewinnt die Erforschung von Einstellungen gegenüber dem Altern und älteren Menschen zunehmend an Bedeutung. Aufgrund der Migration von Menschen aus arabischen Ländern in Länder mit einem hohen Anteil älterer Menschen sind die Einstellungen zum Altern in der arabischen Kultur von besonderem Interesse.

**Ziele.** Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die empirische Literatur zu Einstellungen zum Altern und älteren Personen in der arabischen Welt und diskutiert die Ergebnisse auf Basis der Literatur zu Altersstereotypen, Einstellungen zum Altern und Ageism sowie deren kulturellen Bezügen.

**Methode.** Eine Recherche empirischer Studien

wurde durchgeführt, in denen Einstellungen zum Altern und zu älteren Menschen in arabischen Stichproben erhoben wurden. Es wurden Studien berücksichtigt, die auf Arabisch oder Englisch veröffentlicht wurden.

**Ergebnisse.** Die wenigen Studien über die Einstellung zum Altern mit arabischen Stichproben zeigen kein eindeutiges Ergebnismuster. Keine der Hypothesen, die zur Erklärung interkultureller Unterschiede in Einstellungen zum Altern vorgelegt wurden (Kulturhypothese, Modernisierungshypothese, Hypothese von der Geschwindigkeit der Bevölkerungsalterung), kann die Ergebnisse vollständig erklären.

Mögliche Gründe für widersprüchliche Befunde sind soziodemografische Variablen,

regionale Unterschiede, mangelnde Differenzierung zwischen Meta-Wahrnehmungen und persönlichen Einstellungen, Heterogenität von Messinstrumenten und Definitionen „älterer Menschen“ sowie mögliche Konfundierungen durch den Gebrauch von Likert-Skalen in interkulturellen Studien.

**Schlussfolgerungen.** Weitere Forschungsarbeiten über die Einstellung zum Altern und älteren Menschen mit arabischen Stichproben sind erforderlich und sollten die Heterogenität arabischer Kultur sowie weitere Variablen berücksichtigen.

**Schlüsselwörter**

Altersstereotype · Ageism · Interkultureller Vergleich · Arabische Kultur · Übersichtsartikel

found more positive metaperceptions in Taiwan, but personal attitudes were more negative in comparison to the United Kingdom [64]. Peterson and Ralston [48] compared 55 countries and found more negative views toward older people in Asian, Middle Eastern, and sub-Saharan African countries in comparison to the West. In fact, two of the top ten countries where older people were perceived as a burden were Arab countries, with Bahrain in first place, Lebanon in third, and Germany in sixth. Of the top ten countries who think that older people get more

than their fair share from the government three were Arab. Germany was among the ten countries to least agree with that [48].

Just as there are studies that spoke for or against the culture hypothesis, there are also studies that did not find any major differences (e. g., [10]). To make it all more interesting, there are also studies that found cultural variability between Eastern cultures [66], and between Western cultures [41], the latter successfully replicated in a recent study by Voss et al. [65]. This is in line with the criticism of Löckenhoff et al. [38] mentioned above re-

garding the negligence of differences between cultures.

**Modernization hypothesis.** This hypothesis connects attitudes toward aging and older people with the level of modernization and industrialization in a given country. It postulates that with growing modernization, people start moving away from the traditional extended family concept toward the modern nuclear family. With urbanization, the role of older people as family leaders and knowledge bearers diminishes [1]. According to this hypoth-

esis, attitudes toward aging are similar in the East and the West, when the level of industrialization is equal [44]. This is comparable to the economic and political structure perspective discussed by Peterson and Ralston [48], according to which cultures that are more industrialized and economically developed, have more negative attitudes toward aging. This perspective is in line with the finding reported by Kruse and Schmitt [33] of a tendency in people from rural areas to perceive old age as a time of developmental gains. However, the modernization hypothesis has been criticized for ignoring cultural influences on development [28].

There is also the issue of material constraints, which is regarded as an alternative explanation for the “abandonment” of older people in industrialized countries as opposed to the shift in family structure. According to the material constraints perspective, it is a matter of incapacity rather than unwillingness of younger people to care for the old. However, the approaches of modernization and material constraints go more hand in hand rather than against each other [1]. Furthermore, one should distinguish between modernization and modernity. Modernization refers to the society at the macro-level, whereas modernity is at the micro-level and refers to individuals and any modernizing factors they may have been exposed to, regardless of the level of their society’s modernization [6]. One would expect that being exposed to modernizing factors as an individual would lead to more negative perceptions of aging; however, an interesting finding by Bengtson et al. [6] showed that the greater the modernity, the more positive are an individual’s attitudes toward aging.

### **Speed of population aging hypothesis.**

As mentioned above, the world is aging, with the percentage of older people on a constant rise. But what about the speed at which a country is aging? According to the speed of population aging hypothesis, this is a very important factor and could serve as an explanation for the negative aging perceptions found in Asian countries. Countries in the East (especially East Asia) are experiencing population aging more rapidly and abruptly than the

West, where the change is more gradual. This could lead to a sense of devaluation of old age on the one hand, and to resentment toward older people on the other hand. Thus, according to this hypothesis, the East is more negative than the West due to dramatic rises in population aging [44]. According to North and Fiske [44], this hypothesis may seem to contradict a social contact hypothesis, according to which frequent contact with a certain group reduces prejudice and negative attitudes toward this group and encourages positive associations with the said group (see [49]). However, in order for frequent social contact to have a positive impact, the interacting parties need to have something in common such as shared goals or equal status [44].

The speed of population aging hypothesis is comparable with the competition over resources perspective by Peterson and Ralston [48], which speaks of how population aging can have an influence on the allocation of resources and as a result could lead to intergenerational conflict. However, depending on the social policies and safety nets a country has in place, population aging does not necessarily have to be viewed negatively [48]. This hypothesis is the least common one and needs further research.

There is no conclusive evidence regarding these hypotheses. It is unrealistic to view these perspectives independently, and to not expect them to interact with and influence each other. One can assume that culture, population aging and the resulting population structure, urbanization, as well as the interplay of all these factors influence perceptions of aging in a population. Moreover, North and Fiske [44] criticized the broad geographical categorization of East and West in comparative studies. Additionally, Löckenhoff et al. [38] found that differences between the East and the West were due to differences in population structure and called for further research to control for more socioeconomic variables. Furthermore, the approach of Vaclair et al. [64] regarding differentiating between metaperceptions and personal attitudes is highly encouraged. In the following review of empirical studies on attitudes toward aging and old-

er adults with Arab samples, these theories are evaluated in light of the results of these studies.

## **Studies with Arab Samples**

**Method.** In February 2018, the Web of Science and Google Scholar were searched for studies using both English and Arabic keywords. English keywords included: ageism/agism, attitudes toward ageing/aging, age stereotypes, ageing/aging stereotypes, cross-cultural comparisons, Arab culture, Eastern, Western. Arabic keywords included: المسنين، أنماط المسنين، أنماط التقدم في العمر، الوطن العربي، دراسات وأبحاث علمية. (translation: older people stereotypes, older people, aging stereotypes, Arab World, studies and scientific research). Due to the lack of a reliable database with Arabic literature, the search for Arabic literature was performed with the normal Google search engine. Furthermore, a backward and forward reference search was performed. The inclusion criteria were empirical studies with Arab samples. All years and reports that were either in the English or in the Arabic language were included. **Table 1** provides a list of the studies included in this review.

**Results.** The search yielded seven studies that fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Studies that include samples with Arabs are thus scarce and some of them were published in the Arabic language and are thus not easily accessible to the international research community. There are studies that found positive perceptions of aging held by Arabs, which is in line with the culture hypothesis. A study comparing Arabs and Jews in Israel found more tolerance toward older people among Arabs, as well as a stronger perception of older people as contributing members of society [8]. A study in the Netherlands compared Dutch, Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese, and Antilleans regarding their perception of filial obligations. In this study, a stronger sense of filial obligation was found in all immigrant groups in comparison to the Dutch, with Turks and Moroccans expressing the strongest opinions for filial piety [16]. Macia et al. [40] compared French and Moroccans and found positive

**Table 1** Overview of the reviewed studies with Arab samples

Author(s)	Year	Language	Country	Methods and Instruments	Number of Participants
Al-Badayneh [3]	2001	Arabic	Jordan	Arabic translation of an existing scale to measure attitudes toward older people [50]	Pilot: 30 students, followed by 300 students
Bergman et al. [8]	2013	English	Israel	Perceptions of aging measure [38] Short version [9] of the Fraboni scale of ageism [19] Anxiety about Aging Scale [35]	86 Jewish and 68 Muslim Arabs
De Valk and Schans [16]	2008	English	Netherlands	Participants were asked about their agreement to 3 different statements on a 5-point Likert scale	469 Dutch, 70 Turks, 73 Moroccans, 125 Surinamese, and 59 Antilleans
Khalifa [31]	1997	Arabic	Egypt	Self-developed scales to measure beliefs and attitudes toward older people	Pilot: 60 students, followed by 404 students
Macia et al. [40]	2009	English	France and Morocco	Perception of age stereotypes were measured asking two questions Self-perception of aging was measured with five items from the Attitudes Toward Own Aging in the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (PGCMS) [36]	260 older French adults and 239 older Moroccans
Peterson and Ralston [48]	2017	English	55 countries	Questions were obtained from wave 6 of the World Values Survey [68]	63,180 participants of the WVS
Shoqeirat and Al-Nawaiseh [53]	2002	Arabic	Jordan	Development of an attitudes toward older people scale with the help of pre-existing scales [32, 50]	911 health workers

as well as negative stereotypes of aging in both groups, with more positive stereotypes in Moroccans.

However, there is also evidence for negative attitudes toward aging in the Arab world. As mentioned above, the study by Peterson and Ralston [48] uncovered negative perceptions of aging in Arab countries, most of all in Bahrain, Lebanon, Egypt, and Qatar. Bahrain and Lebanon were in the top countries to believe that older people are a burden, whereas Bahrain, Egypt, and Qatar were in the top countries to believe that older people get more than their fair share from the government [48]. Gulf countries have experienced a strong increase in urbanization in the last 30–40 years, accompanied by several changes such as shifting from an extended family model toward a nuclear one, and transforming from a rural agricultural lifestyle toward a more urban one [4]. A similar shift in the family model can be observed in Lebanon [2]. Furthermore, Bahrain, Qatar, and Lebanon are among the Arab countries experiencing rapid aging [52]. Therefore, both the modernization as well as the speed of population aging

hypotheses could serve as an explanation for the negative attitudes in these countries.

Furthermore, there are studies that found both positive and negative attitudes toward aging in Arab samples. Khalifa [31] examined beliefs about older people and attitudes toward older people in university students in Cairo. Khalifa differentiated between beliefs and attitudes, with beliefs being the cognitive aspect, and attitudes the affective evaluative aspect. The study revealed positive and negative beliefs about older people, and mostly positive attitudes toward older people [31]. Al-Badayneh [3] conducted a study about the attitudes toward older people in a sample of university students in Jordan and found positive and negative attitudes. Another study in Jordan examined the attitudes of health workers toward older people [53]. This study found positive attitudes toward older people; however, the positivity of these attitudes was not pronounced. Several demographic variables such as gender, age, and occupation made a difference in the attitudes of health workers, whereas other variables such as level of education, place of work, experi-

ence, marital status, and the presence of an older person in the family played no role [53].

**Discussion.** This is, to our knowledge, the first review of studies on attitudes toward older people and aging in Arabs. The literature search yielded only seven empirical studies. Published research on this topic is thus scarce. It seems that only little research has been performed on this topic. Some of the published studies lack accessibility for the international audience because they were published in the Arabic language only and/or are not listed in international databases.

Regarding the valence of attitudes toward older people and aging, the studies found do not yield conclusive evidence. Several reasons could be responsible for the lack of cohesive results, which are discussed in the following sections.

Several sociodemographic variables could play a role such as gender, age, residence in rural or urban areas, and educational level. Bergman et al. [8] found more ageist attitudes and anxieties toward aging in Arab women in comparison to Arab men. They explained that since daughters

## Infobox Literature in Arabic language

- [2] أبو شوارب، مهى، حوري، عزام، نجا، نبيل. (2010). التقرير الوطني حول الخدمات المتوفرة لكبار السن في لبنان. لبنان: وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية. [3] البداينة، ذياب. (2001). تطوير مقياس للاتجاهات نحو كبار السن في المجتمع الأردني. مجلة العلوم الاجتماعية، 29(3)، 79-117. [4] الجابري، حمود بن سالم. (2011). المسنون في المجتمع العماني: المؤشرات الاقتصادية، الصحية والاجتماعية. سلسلة إضاءات، 23، 1-24. [31] خليفة، عبد اللطيف محمد. (1997). دراسات في سيكولوجية المسنين. القاهرة، مصر: دار غريب للطباعة والنشر والتوزيع. [53] الشقيرات، محمد عبد الرحمن، النوايسة، سمياً جميل. (2002). اتجاهات العاملين في القطاع الصحي الحكومي في محافظة الكرك نحو كبار السن وعلاقة ذلك ببعض المتغيرات الديمغرافية. مجلة العلوم التربوية والنفسية، 3(2)، 81-124. [63] صندوق الأمم المتحدة. (2017). فئة المسنين في المنطقة العربية: الاتجاهات الاحصائية ومنظور السياسات. القاهرة، مصر: صندوق الأمم المتحدة.

and daughters-in-law care for older people in the family, which entails many difficult tasks, they start forming negative associations with older people. Additionally, while caring for older people, women experience the aging process first-hand, which would lead to more anxiety toward their own aging [8]. This is in line with the gender differences found in the study by Shoqairat and Al-Nawaiseh [53] who reported more positive attitudes in men compared to women. Such gender differences were not found in the Jewish sample in the study by Bergman et al. [8]. Kruse and Schmitt [33] did not find any significant gender differences when researching aging stereotypes in a German sample either. Gender could play a role in Arab samples due to caregiving duties, since elder care within the family is less common in Western cultures. However, Khalifa [31] researched gender differences regarding beliefs about older people and attitudes toward them and found mixed results, where sometimes men had more negative beliefs, other times women had more negative beliefs, and sometimes no gender differences were found. Moreover, Al-Badayneh [3] found no gender differences regarding the attitudes toward older people in Jordan. Whether gender is an influencing variable in Arab samples and if it plays a role in Arab samples more than in Western ones is up to further research.

Additionally, Shoqairat and Al-Nawaiseh [53] found that health workers who were 40 years or older had more positive attitudes toward older people than both younger age groups (19–29 years and 30–39 years). According to the authors, when people age they start adapting to the idea of aging. Moreover, Kruse and Schmitt [33] found more positive age stereotypes in people living in rural compared to urban areas. An influence of educational level was also found, with less negative stereotypes of aging in adults with a higher education [45]. All of this indicates that more attention needs to be steered toward the role of sociodemographic variables in cross-cultural research on attitudes toward aging.

Another important aspect to consider is the difference between metaperceptions and the ideas a society holds, and the personal attitudes of an individual (see [64]). There seems to be some sort of cognitive dissonance for people in collectivistic Eastern cultures. People from these cultures find it very hard to express negative views toward older people and how straining elder care can be, when reverence for older people in their societies is put at such high regard. Therefore, when asked about older people as an abstract group, it was easier to express negative views [48]. It is possible that people in the Arab world feel obliged to care for older people in their family because it is the norm, even though they personally might not be completely convinced. It is also important to differentiate between attitudes toward older people in the family in comparison to older people who are strangers. It should also be researched if Arabs are willing to cater for older people who are a part of their family because they care about them and therefore hold more positive views toward them in comparison to older people they do not know.

A further explanation for inconclusive results as suggested by Khalifa [31] is the discrepancy in definition of old age in research. For example, some ask participants to express their attitudes toward older people who are older than 60 years, others define old age as above 75 years, other studies do not define an age at all and just ask about older people generally. This can lead to inaccurate inferenc-

es when comparing different studies with each other.

Moreover, the heterogeneity of measurement instruments could also lead to inconclusive results. Furthermore, the use of subjective Likert scales in cross-cultural comparisons has been criticized. People from different cultures compare themselves to reference groups from their respective cultures when they self-report values. The reference-group effect is problematic when comparing mean scores from different groups, which have different references and could therefore lead to inaccurate and confounded results [24]. Heine et al. [24] considered subjective Likert scales to be most valid when measuring differences within instead of between groups and suggested different strategies to avoid confounding results.

Last but not least, the studies were performed in different countries within the Arab world. Although there is a shared culture in the Arab world, there are also regional differences in culture. Thus, despite many shared aspects of culture, there is some cultural heterogeneity within the Arab world that may include differences in attitudes toward older adults and aging.

## Conclusion

Researching attitudes toward aging is of great importance, because positive attitudes toward aging and the aging process have many beneficial effects on older people. Cross-cultural comparisons of attitudes toward aging generally, and research on Arab attitudes toward aging specifically yield heterogeneous results and do not conclusively support only one of the major hypotheses that have been brought forward to explain cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward aging. Studies that include Arab samples are scarce and sometimes not easily accessible for the international audience. Therefore, further research on Arabs' attitudes regarding aging and older adults is needed. Such research should consider heterogeneity within the Arab culture and consider other possible influencing variables such as regional differences, reference group, and respondents' gender and age. In light of the current political and

social relevance, research with refugees from Arab countries could help further understand cultural differences and aid in the integration process.

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### Compliance with ethical guidelines

**Conflict of interest.** C.N. Ibrahim and U.J. Bayen declare that they have no competing interests.

For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by either of the authors.

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