

Attitude of an Egyptian Sample of Medical Students Toward Psychiatry in Comparison to Previous Studies Using the Attitudes Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30) Questionnaire

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Abstract

Objective This study aims to determine the attitude of medical students toward psychiatry at the College of Medicine, Menoufia University, Egypt, and to compare it with previous similar studies in other countries.

Methods Four hundred medical students, randomly selected from four different years, completed the Attitudes Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30) in a cross-sectional study.

Results The mean ATP score was 99.31; 76.3 % of the students had favorable attitudes toward psychiatry and 29.5 % considered psychiatry as a potential career choice.

Conclusions A generally positive attitude toward psychiatry was found among medical students in Menoufia University. Consistent with this positive attitude was the relatively high percentage of students who considered psychiatry as a potential career.

Keywords Attitudes · Medical students · Psychiatry

The attitudes and opinions expressed by medical students toward psychiatry are getting more attention. This attention is due, in part, to the lack of medical students choosing psychiatry as their future career in some countries [1]. Psychiatry is attracting fewer medical graduates, with associated shortages of qualified doctors in some high-income countries [2].

Results concerning medical students' attitudes toward psychiatry are mixed and sometimes contradictory [3]. Before the early 1980s, research instruments most frequently used in studies on students' attitudes toward psychiatry were non-validated self-assessment questionnaires. Comparisons

between universities or countries were difficult, if not impossible. This changed in 1982 with the development of the Attitudes Towards Psychiatry (ATP-30) questionnaire by Burra et al. [4]. Since then, this questionnaire has been used worldwide. With the help of this instrument, research has shown that attitudes toward psychiatry are generally moderately positive and that attitudes of female students are more positive than those of male students [5]. This study aims to determine the attitude of a sample of Egyptian medical students at Menoufia medical school toward psychiatry using the ATP-30, in comparison with previous studies from different countries.

Methods

Participants

This cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study was conducted with 400 medical students at the University of Menoufia, Egypt, during the 2012–2013 academic year. Because the number of third year students was only 60, in comparison with figures of around 400 students in other years (due to a change in the primary scholastic system years before), the author did not include students of all years. One hundred students, randomly selected, of each of the second (22.5 %), fourth (26 %), sixth (22.8 %), and seventh (27.4 %) years completed the questionnaire. The author distributed the questionnaire before or after lectures on multiple occasions and during training at different hospital departments for the seventh year students. The students were informed about the nature of the study and that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Students study medical psychology during the second year, and during the fifth year, they study theoretical and clinical

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psychiatry. Seventh year students rotate in different hospital departments for clinical training, which is obligatory in certain departments, like general surgery and internal medicine, but optional in others, like psychiatry. The author selected years to represent students before and after studying medical psychology and psychiatry to investigate the effect of studying these curricula on students' attitudes toward psychiatry and also to compare their attitudes before and after contact with psychiatric patients during the clinical training in the seventh year. At the time of the study, neither first nor second year students studied psychology or psychiatry, whereas fourth and fifth year students studied psychology but not psychiatry. Thus, only second and fourth year students were selected for the study. Sixth and seventh year students had studied both psychology and psychiatry, and seventh year students also had started their rotations in different departments for clinical training.

Questionnaire

The ATP-30 consists of 30 questions about attitudes toward psychiatry in the format of a five-point Likert scale. The author reversed positively phrased items (i.e., questions 4, 5, 9–12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 23, 25, 27–29) by subtracting the score from 6. The author calculated a total score by adding all item scores (minimum score 30, maximum score 150). A high score indicated a positive attitude toward psychiatry. Scores above 90 indicated a favorable attitude; scores below 90 signified an unfavorable attitude, whereas a score of 90 indicated a neutral attitude. An Arabic version of the questionnaire has been used [6].

In addition to responding to the questionnaire items, students specified their gender and age.

The author analyzed the data using SPSS version 16. Between-group differences were analyzed using χ^2 tests.

Ethics Approval

The author obtained permission to conduct this study from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The mean age of the study participants was 21.18 years, with a standard deviation of 2.101 years. Participants were 222 females (55.5 %) and 178 males (44.5 %).

ATP-30 Scale

The mean ATP score was 99.31 (SD=15.898). The minimum score was 34, and the maximum was 141. Out of the study participants, 76.25 % had favorable attitudes toward psychiatry, 21 % held unfavorable attitudes, and 2.75 % were undecided. No statistically significant differences occurred between males and females' general attitudes toward psychiatry ($p=0.276$) (Table 1).

The attitudes of students in different years of study varied significantly. The percentages of students in their second and fourth years of medical study who reported favorable attitudes to psychiatry were higher than those in their sixth and seventh years, who had been exposed to psychiatry. The sixth and seventh year students had higher percentages of students with unfavorable attitudes (34 % in 6th year, 23 % in 7th year). Those who reported to be undecided were mainly second and fourth year students.

Students' responses showed favorable attitudes to many items concerning psychiatric knowledge, teaching, and psychiatry as a future career. Regarding the responses to item 4 ("I would like to be a psychiatrist"), 118 students (29.6 %) considered psychiatry as a career choice (Fig. 1). Among those, 60 % were females and about 58 % were sixth and seventh year students.

Responses to the ATP-30 by Gender

Although no statistically significant difference occurred between male and female students' general attitudes toward psychiatry, more female students scored above 90 (Table 1). When a significant difference was found between male and female students' responses to ATP-30 items, females usually showed more favorable attitudes than males, except in a few occasions (Table 2).

Table 1 Students' response to ATP-30 by gender and study year

	ATP-30 score			χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<90	90	>90		
Gender					
Female	18.5 %	2.3 %	79.3 %	2.572	0.276
Male	24.2 %	3.4 %	72.5 %		
Year of study					
2nd year	14.0 %	1.0 %	85.0 %	22.357	0.001
4th year	13.0 %	5.0 %	82.0 %		
6th year	34.0 %	4.0 %	62.0 %		
7th year	23.0 %	1.0 %	76.0 %		

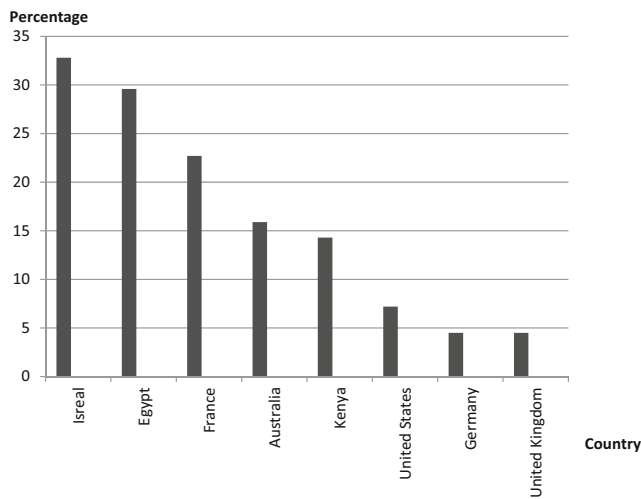


Fig. 1 Percentages of medical students selecting psychiatry as a career choice [5, 10, 14–16]

Discussion

Comparisons to Previous Studies Using the ATP-30 Questionnaire

In a systematic review of 32 papers from 22 different countries assessing attitudes of medical students toward psychiatry and

psychiatry as a career [7], 12,144 students from 74 medical schools were surveyed. A mix of positive and negative attitudes toward psychiatry was identified, and attitudes were found to be positive overall. Psychiatry as a career choice was rated poorly, however, and found to be unpopular for many students.

In a study assessing the attitudes of first and sixth year medical students toward psychiatry in Cairo University, Egypt [8], 42 % of first year and 43 % of sixth year students would not exclude psychiatry from their three most interesting medical branches. Twenty-six percent of first year and 23 % of sixth year students thought of becoming psychiatrists.

At the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences, Arabian Gulf University, 122 medical students from years 1, 4, and 7 completed the ATP-30 scale [9]. The attitude toward psychiatry was moderately positive (mean ATP score=105.79, SD=13.34). The study revealed that 22 students (16.2 %) intended to choose psychiatry as one of the top three career choices; only four selected psychiatry as the first choice. Of these students, 20 (90.9 %) were females.

A study investigating medical students’ attitude toward psychiatry using the ATP-30 at the University of Nairobi Kenya [10] stated that 75 % of 479 students had favorable attitudes. It found that whereas only 14.3 % considered psychiatry as a potential career choice, 66 % of students reported that they would not choose psychiatry as a career, and 19.7 %

Table 2 Differences between males and females responses to selective items of ATP-30

ATP-30 items	Responses	Males	Females	χ^2	<i>P</i>
Psychiatry is unappealing because it makes so little use of medical training	Strongly agree/agree	96	86	9.439	0.009
	Neutral	18	26		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	64	110		
Psychiatrists talk a lot but do very little	Strongly agree/agree	82	82	6.885	0.03
	Neutral	38	39		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	58	101		
Psychiatrists seem to talk about nothing but sex	Strongly agree/agree	27	15	9.342	0.009
	Neutral	48	52		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	103	155		
The practice of psychotherapy is basically fraudulent since there is no strong evidence that it is effective	Strongly agree/agree	35	20	11.519	0.003
	Neutral	29	29		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	114	173		
Psychiatry has very little scientific information to go on	Strongly agree/agree	44	35	8.537	0.014
	Neutral	53	55		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	81	132		
Psychiatric hospitals have specific contribution to make to the treatment of mentally ill	Strongly agree/agree	41	44	10.652	0.005
	Neutral	47	93		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	90	85		
Psychiatry is so unscientific that even psychiatrists cannot agree as to what its basic sciences are	Strongly agree/agree	55	50	8.005	0.018
	Neutral	83	95		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	40	77		
Psychiatry is so amorphous that it cannot be taught effectively	Strongly agree/agree	79	91	7.409	0.024
	Neutral	72	73		
	Disagree/strongly disagree	27	58		

were not decided. Students at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, also showed a positive attitude toward psychiatry, with an ATP-30 score of 103.6 [11].

In a study conducted at an Indian university [12], female medical students had more positive attitudes than male students on many items of the ATP. Of a sample of 247 students, 51 (20.6 %) stated that they would like to be psychiatrists, whereas 97 (39.3 %) were definite that they would not. Significantly, more women than men students expressed a desire to consider psychiatry as a career. The attitude of final year female students was also more positive than males in a Pakistani study [13].

In Germany, 508 medical students in semesters 2, 5, 9, and 10 completed the ATP-30 (the studies in German medical school are 12 semesters long) [5]. Attitudes were found to be generally positive (ATP-30 score 106.85), with no difference among the results from the four semesters. Female students had a significantly more positive attitude than their male colleagues.

Psychiatry as a Career Choice

Recruitment into psychiatry is an issue that has increasingly been the subject of multiple publications over the last years. Authors from various countries have looked closely at what students' views of psychiatry are and why those who do look favorably on the specialty as students do not choose to follow it as a career [14]. Despite the generally positive attitudes, the proportion of medical students indicating they would choose psychiatry as a career is often low with few exceptions [3]. For example, in an Israeli study, 32.8 % of the students in the preclinical years considered residency in psychiatry [15]. Also in a French study, 22.7 % of medical students in their last year considered choosing a career in psychiatry [16].

In the western world, the number of psychiatry residents has been in steady decline over the last decades of the twentieth century. In recent Danish and UK surveys, medical students viewed psychiatry as the least desirable clinical specialty for their future career [17, 18]. Similarly, in Hungary, the number of students willing to enter the psychiatric workforce is critically low in relation to the growing demand [19]. As a result, there is a shortage of psychiatrists in many countries. For example, 12 % of all available psychiatrist positions remain vacant in the UK, whereas in the USA, the percentage is 7.1 % [17]. Also in Germany, a shortage of medical specialists for the care of the mentally ill was observed following the reunification, especially in rural areas of the former East German states [5].

Medical students often do not view psychiatry as an intellectually challenging career choice and see it as a profession with low job satisfaction and limited fulfillment [5]; they have negative perceptions of psychiatry as being unscientific and somehow different from mainstream medicine in training and

outcomes. In a study looking at Australian undergraduates late in their course, factors that caused students to reject psychiatry as a career choice included a perceived lack of scientific underpinning and the attitudes of peers in other branches of medicine [16]. The impact of students' families on their attitudes and their decision to aim for a career in psychiatry, plus financial aspects, such as low pay and lack of government funding, which are not encouraging, are other influential factors [3].

Interestingly, attitudes toward psychiatry among medical students and the consideration of psychiatry as a future career improved after psychiatric clerkship or attachment in many studies [18, 20, 21]. This finding brings to light the role and responsibility of faculty members teaching psychiatry in changing old, incorrect, and still-present concepts about psychiatry and psychiatrists among medical students.

The pattern of dissonance between positive attitudes toward psychiatry and the choice of psychiatry as a future career that has been found in previous studies is not the same in the present study. For example, in the Kenyan study [10], there was a dissonance between positive attitudes (74.9 %) and career choice of psychiatry (14.3 %); the same dissonance was reported in a study in Spain [10], with the figures 51.7 and 6 %, respectively. In Germany, Kuhnigk et al. [5] also found a discrepancy between basically moderate positive attitudes on one hand and the minimal desire to pursue psychiatry as a career on the other (4.5 %). In the present study, the mean ATP score was 99.31 and 29.6 % of the students who considered psychiatry as a career choice, which is a good indicator for the future of recruitment to psychiatry in Egypt.

Nonetheless, a preference for psychiatry as a specialty at the time of study does not necessarily translate into eventual choice of psychiatry as a career. As seen in an Israeli study [19], even though 32.8 % of the students considered psychiatry as a future career, only 6 % entered residency in psychiatry. An encouraging finding in the present study is that 58 % of those choosing psychiatry as a future career were of sixth and seventh year students, reflecting a serious choice.

According to Kuhnigk et al. [5], psychiatry, psychotherapy, and interaction with mentally ill patients are considered important and relevant factors to students on an abstract level, whereas the concrete implementation of this knowledge (e.g., reflections on their roles as physicians and their limitations) is hardly ever used or desired as a profession.

In Egypt, the image of psychiatrists in the media has changed to some extent during the last few years. After being presented as being as odd as their patients (which still occurs sometimes), they are now regular guests on talk shows to discuss every detail of the Egyptian life, from family problems to social problems like addiction and politics, and to reply to patients' questions. This exposure might help improve the attitudes of students toward psychiatry. Also, the recent trend in Menoufia and other Egyptian medical schools to present psychiatry as a branch like other branches of medicine and to

emphasize the biological aspects of psychiatric disorders can play a positive role in supporting medical students' positive attitudes toward psychiatry.

In Egypt, the governmental funding for medical branches other than psychiatry is not so superior to attract medical students as residents. Also, the low number of psychiatrists offers a good chance to have a residency in one of the Ministry of Health hospitals, which gives some privileges for those seeking a psychiatry residency, like a shorter stay in primary care units plus working in big cities. Many Egyptian doctors, seeking better financial situations, work in Arabian Gulf countries, where psychiatry offers a good position with a high salary, because the Arabic language makes a barrier for other doctors and the familiarity with culture helps an Egyptian psychiatrist to work there.

The present study was done in only one Egyptian medical school and at one time point, which limits the generalization of its results. Other limitations include sampling only the preselected four years and not including first, third, and fifth year students. These limitations do not minimize the generally positive attitude of Menoufia medical students toward psychiatry.

Finally, working on causes making students view psychiatry as less scientific or be unwilling to choose psychiatry as a future career should be a common goal in all medical schools for next years. This should be in light of understanding the culture of each community and its degree of civilization.

Disclosure

The author of this work has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interests in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Implications for Educators

- Focusing on what is shared with other branches of medicine when teaching psychiatry—especially biological aspects—bridges the gap between psychiatry and students' negative attitudes.
- Psychiatric clerkship, lectures, and meetings should be considered opportunities to change students' attitude toward psychiatry.
- Each community has its own perspective toward psychiatry, which should be respected when planning to improve students' attitudes.

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