

Cross Section of Old Age Activity: A Study on Sri Lankan Sinhalese

Welgama¹, W.M.J. & De Silva² M.W.A.

¹ *Sabaragamuwa University, Belihuloya*

² *University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya*

Introduction

Ageing is a socio-culturally reconstructed biological imperative. Sri Lanka is unique in ageing experience with the reported highest median age in the South Asian region by 2000 and 2050. The median age of 21.6 years in 1950 may increase up to 41.6 by 2050. Age sixty and above population of 9.8 percent in 2000 will increase to 21.5 percent 2030 (Siddhisena, 2005). The bulk of elderly population may not be viewed as a problem if they live a happy and independent life. Extended longevity leads to a set of issues and problems. The possible welfare burden on economical, physical and financial dependency increase in the demand on healthcare are just a few of them. In developing countries population has aged over a short period of time and the economies were not prepared to adjust to the needs of the aging population. (Butler 2008). On the face of this challenge, the potential of elderly engagement is stressed.

The two most vibrant theoretical strands in social gerontology propose contradictory options of 'disengagement' and 'activity' in old age. The proponents of disengagement thesis, Cummings and Henry (1961) proposed that both individual and society mutually withdraw from each other with the advancement of age. Although this incapacity coined in the disengagement theory is significantly a social construct, it has been powerful enough to disadvantage the contemporary elderly.

The theory of continuity (Atchley, 1989) developed the standpoint that older individuals continue their activities rather than disengage. In the light of activity and continuity theories of social gerontology, this research rejects the theoretical premises proposed by the disengagement thesis which is seen as insensitive to the context specific cultural reality of the Sinhalese elderly.

Ethnography is a unique research tool allowing an anthropological approach to capture the social reality in 'emic' perspective within which the

subject is not treated as a passive recipient of culture. Rather the subject is considered an active creator of culture (Lamb, 2000). The initiative for this research stems from the potential disparity between the suppositions of the disengagement theory of old age versus the observed context specific old age activity experiences of the Sinhalese elderly.

Research Problem

How far the concept of disengagement is a reality as far as the Sinhalese old age is concerned?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to investigate the dominant patterns of elderly activity and disengagement corresponding to the cultural-ecological zones identified.

Specific objectives of the study are as follows.

- Identification of the patterns of elderly activity engagement.
- Explanation of the meaning elders attach to their levels of activity engagement.
- The analysis of elderly activity in terms of gender and socio-cultural sectors of living.

Methodology

This study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data. Initial phase of the study is dedicated to address the ethnographical component of study. Sixty in-depth unstructured interviews enabled collecting a volume of qualitative data that capture work activity and related experience of the elderly. Especially the meanings old people associate with their work are focused on.

In the second phase of study, a survey was conducted on the elderly who live in five cultural- ecological zones. Structure of the questionnaire is developed using qualitative data obtained at the initial stage of the research.

Sample

A sample of 400 families were obtained representing five identified cultural- ecological zones namely, urban, sub-urban, rural paddy culture, colonized schemes and estate sector. These identified zones were identified from Colombo, Kalutara and Ratnapura Districts of Sri Lanka. A random sample of 80 families were selected from five *Grama Niladari* Divisions that represented above five zones.

Key Findings and Conclusion

The five dimensions discussed in this study are domestic, agricultural and other income earnings, religious, social and leisure activities of the elders. Data suggests that a majority of old people actively participate in domestic chores (See Table1). Out of all domestic activities childcare is the lowest attended activity (47.7%), although the percentage constitutes nearly half of elders in the sample. Childcare by the elderly within the family mostly occurred in a mutually beneficial manner so long as such activity is not considered obligatory and compulsory by the second generation. Involuntary work compelled by the situation leads to serious displeasure.

Table 1: Frequencies of Domestic Activity Engagement by Elders 60 Years and above

	Very often	%	Often	%	Moderately	%	Occasionally	%	Not at all	%
Cooking	55	14	76	19	111	28	46	12	105	27
Child caring	22	6	39	10	54	14	76	19	202	51
Washing	29	7	75	19	163	41	48	12	78	20
Cleaning	29	7	47	12	187	48	50	13	80	20
Gardening	10	3	73	19	113	29	12	3	176	46

Qualitative data revealed that the care giver role of the elders within families as not significant. Meantime a conclusion can be drawn that many elders engage in activities seemingly meaningless in the eyes of others, yet quite meaningful to the individual elder concerned. Qualitative data suggests that the motivation for specific elderly activities has a significant bearing on their behavioral patterns of middle age.

The results indicate that the elderly population in Sri Lanka constitutes a formidable workforce though they are not significantly represented by the formal sector of the economy. The elderly thus remains an invisible but a productive labor force.

Overall, agricultural activity engagement levels of elders are nearly proportionate to the agricultural labor force of the country which is 32.4 percent. The elders were least engaged in highly labor intensive agricultural activities requiring technological applications. The elders show a sharp decline in the labor intensive agricultural activities as they grow older. However the elders in traditional villages and colonized schemes contributed to agricultural activities late in to their old age until they become senile. The elderly engagement in agricultural activities reduces with age. Urban or semi –urban middle class elders earn an additional income that suits their level of educational and professional experiences. The research further reveals that technology has a mixed effects on elderly activity engagement having both positive and negative influences.

Asserting the above argument, rural Sinhalese female elders engage in a wide range of income earning activities closely bound with home or living ecology, though such invisible work is not counted as productive. Female elders in rural agricultural sector engage in wide range of such economic activities in comparison to their urban counter part.

Semi-urban elders show the highest percentage (25%) of participation in political activity while the lowest (7%) is reported from the traditional village. Variables of political activity (0.008) and social service involvement (0.000) are correlated with gender of the elder. The majority who are involved in political and social service activities are males in comparison to female elders.

A decline in social activities with the age is observed in this research. In spite of the declining action intensities across the old age, the participation of the Sinhalese elder in formal and informal social circles remains high. Meantime it is revealed that social activity is not always a rewarding experience in old age. Yet qualitative data strongly provides evidence to say that this trend is not a decline but rather a process in which activities are replaced, altered and shadowed meaningfully. The disengagement in senility is a reality though this relinquishment is not justifiable to all elders. However, it is interesting to note that overall leisure activity levels remain consistent

throughout the passage of old age. This research revealed that it is not disengagement which is important but a strategic adjustment to work environment on the face of natural incidence of declining physical power.

Key words: Activity; Elderly; Old Age; Sinhalese; Sri Lanka

References

- Atchley, R.C.(1989).A continuity theory of normal aging.*The Gerontologist*,29 (2), 183-190. doi: 10.1093/geront/29.2.183
- Butler, R.N. (2008). *The longevity revolution. benefits and challenges of living a long life*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Cumming, E., & Henry, W.H.(1961). *Growing old: The process of disengagement*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lamb, S. (2000).*White saris and sweet mangoes: Aging, gender, and body in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Siddhisena, K.A.P. (2005).The aging population in Sri Lanka and Japan: Socio-economic implications. *Social analysis*. 28,3-21. Oxford Institute of Ageing. Working paper number WP105.