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## **The multi-faceted meaning bound with the concept of elder among the Sinhalese**

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### **Abstract**

*Sri Lanka is unique in ageing experience both demographically and culturally. This research on Sinhalese old age is based on new paradigm anthropological assumption of a 'human actor' constructs the culture. The main objective is to capture the multi-faceted meaning bound with the concept elder. Twenty in-depth interviews clarified the meaning behind traits attributed to old age derived through the cultural domain analysis (n=100) followed by the techniques of free listing and pile sorting. Field work was carried out in Maharagama and Balangoda divisional secretariat divisions of Sri Lanka. Traits of elderly vary on the basis of age, gender, social class and living sector. Analysis proposed six not mutually exclusive elder types namely, Predominantly religious, Family centered, Socially integrated, Socially disintegrated, Disengaged sick and Life style oriented.*

**Key words:** Old, Elderly, Aging, Sinhalese, Culture.

### **Introduction**

Timing, sequence and life transitions of humans vary in historical and cross-cultural experience (Collins and Coltrane, 1991, p.631). Anthropological research specifies age as a structural feature in society (Keith et al., 1994). According to life course theorists, concepts of childhood, adolescence, youth,

middle age or old age get meaningful only if attached to social reality experienced by individuals in a society (Thomas and Snaniecki, 1918). All societies divide their membership in to different age based groups and allocate them a set of social responsibilities while expecting age specific behavior (Turner, 1985,p.276) and in that sense, any unique culture seem to have a specific way of defining and constructing old age. The main objective of this research paper is to capture the experience of the Sinhalese old age exposed to the dynamic forces of a global society.

This ethnographic analysis falls in to the stream of gerontology which is essentially viewed as a multidisciplinary construct (Jamieson, 2002, P.4). Social gerontology as a subfield focuses on nonphysical aspects of ageing (Atchley and Barusch, 2004, p.29). Social aspects of ageing can hardly be explained without recourse to interdependent biological, psychological, social psychological and demographic realities of the elderly.

Globalization in one hand deconstructs identities while making a platform for emerging new identities (Hettige, 1998). Ageing of population has become a pervasive universal phenomenon which has molded elderly as a specific social identity. Sri Lanka as a developing country follows liberal economic policies although it is still largely an agrarian economy with a majority of rural population. It is a multiethnic, multi- religious society where the Sinhalese majority constitutes 73.9% of the population (Statistical Abstract, 2009). Due to open economic policies introduced in 1977, Sri Lankan society is fast absorbing into the currents of globalization at an unprecedented pace. Subsistence agriculture has been significantly decreasing, and it is being transformed into a market oriented peasant economy (Perera, 1985). Still the family and kinship based intergenerational and intergenerational arrangements continue to be the mainstay of elderly care in contemporary Sri Lanka (Silva, 2004, p. 46). Above literature notify that 90% of elders even in the urban sample lived with their families. In spite of this secure outlooks, a smooth intergenerational or intra- generational caring relationships can be disturbed in circumstances where the total dependency ratio is increasing (Siddhisena, 2004,p.19) , and only a small minority of elders have permanent source of income or long term security plans. On this backdrop this study captures the culturally specific experience of Sinhalese elder.

### **Gero-anthropological perspective**

Different perspectives in social gerontology accommodate dynamic socio-cultural forces blend with the biological imperative of aging. A Gero- anthropological perspective emphasizes ‘the meaning’ or the experience of people than to biological mechanisms of life. Despite the limited number of scholarly attempts, ethnographies dedicated to capture the meaning of old age have coined the unique sub discipline of gero-anthropology. Anthropological emphasis on old age significantly arose in the latter half of the twentieth century. Old age in early anthropological literature reflected predominantly a fixed destiny in which elder silently faced what awaits for him. Yet a body of cross- cultural research on old age suggests elders make important adjustments, being socialized the norms and goals structured by the culture surrounds them(Clark 1968). In spite of the Freudian stand that bulk of human personality is fixed at early years of life, these adjustments to the culture is possible as the changes in personality is a lifelong process albeit individual differences(Neugarten, 1966; Mroczek, 2006).

Age stratification theory, once filtered in to the domain of old age enables understanding elder as ‘a particular status group in a structured social system and as an active participant in a changing society’ (Cox, 1993, p.39). Adoption of age as a structural feature of society has lead distinct theoretical and methodological approaches in anthropology. Most reiterated quest here was to capture the social function of the groups and life stages defined by age (Keith, et al., 1994). The same literature sees that capturing the life experience of older people as the other main concern in anthropological research on aging. The explanation or the interpretation of the meaning the elder in a specific cultural setting generates through his or her individual experience is emphasized in this perspective. Exploration of ‘the meaning of elderly’, has enabled deep understanding of the patterns of ageing and their meaningfulness in a cultural setting. Kaufman’s important study, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* in an anthropological approach captures “the interplay between change and continuity in the individual life” (1986, p.6). The individual elder experience has been considered primarily significant in the study rather than searching for specific research variables. The study widely discusses the structural sources of ‘meaning’ and stresses the fact that relationship between the structural factor and the identity can be fully understood only in the framework of the individual life. On this ground, old age related meaning is perceived as a less explored domain.

Old age is perceived as an ‘uncharted territory’ (Cohen, 1994), in which the individual actor; the elder generates sense whereas others have incomplete sense of old age. Those who follow in to the old age are compelled to explore this inadequately known domain as it benefits elders as well as the others. Contemporary anthropology experiences a paradigm shift in its perspectives of culture. Anthropology at the times of ‘modernity’ stressed culture as an internally homogeneous shared system of meanings (Brightman, 1995). Such a perspective promotes the view that the members of a particular culture more or less share the same experience. The ethnographer immersed in this perspective need not to be sensitive to the individual experience and voices of a particular culture Yet the new paradigm warrants seeing culture as a totality actively and continually constructed by the individual human actors who are privileged to perceive the individual differences of experience (Lamb, 2000). As viewed individuals often involve in a process of reproduction of their own ideology and culture in relation to an overarching cultural matrix of a particular setting. Application of this perspective in the studies of old age enables perceiving elderly not as passive recipients embedded in preset structures, but as active members who generate meaning.

## **Methodology**

‘Each cultural system creates a perceptual lens composed of potent symbols through which a particular version of reality is developed’ (Sokolovsky, 1990, p.2). Methods incorporated are based on the grounded approach enables capturing the specific experience of Sinhalese elders. This research in this perspective is intended to identify and analyze the views of elders and others (The persons between the ages of 18-60 years) towards old age.

Initially the research adopted the cultural domain analysis, in which the researcher is enabled to understand the way people think of and lists the contents of a certain cultural domain (Bernard, 2002,

p.280). Research techniques of free listing and pile sorting were employed in the cultural domain analysis. What is 'old' or 'elderly', or in native terms *Nāki*(not capable) was the domain which is considered as an ethnographic account. About one hundred subjects with age, sex, urban- rural and social class variations represented the sample (N=100). Purposive sampling technique was adopted. Urban sample was selected from two different locations in *Jambugasmulla GrāmaNiladāri* Division (GND) of *Maharagama* Divisional Secretariat Division(DSD) in Colombo suburbs represented both urban groups with middle class and working class backgrounds. Rural sample was selected from *Rāssagala*GND of *Balangoda* DSD in the central highlands of Sri Lanka. At the initial stage of the research, each subject was asked to list the traits, characteristics and signs of old age using local terms that they thought apt in explaining the concept of old age. This free listing exercise captured 78 local terms that explained different traits of old age. The free listing data was used to create a dataset that enabled to obtain the frequencies of local words used to describe the elderly and old age. The occurrence of frequencies was correlated with independent variables such as age, gender, urban –rural dichotomy, and the education levels of respondents. At the second step, frequencies of the above terms were calculated and terms stressed with more than five occurrences were considered significant and were taken in to further analysis. Thirdly, pile sorting as a technique was utilized by which the same subjects were instructed to identify the possible relationships between earlier listed terms piling them in to specific sets. Subjects sorted more than 20 piles out of which 6 main piles were identified as they were less overlapping and relatively exclusive. The expectation here was to identify the meaning people attach to old age. Following the pile sorts, as the fourth step, subjects were interviewed. Finally about 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with selected elderly people representative of urban-rural, male-female, and social class variations. Purpose behind these interviews was to identify the subtle realities behind the piles sorted. All interviews were tape recorded and they were highly informal in its style and used a flexible non- leading interview guide designed to preserve the original methodological stance of the research.

## Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis of the cultural domain of 'old age' is considered in the first half of this discussion focusing the meaning of old age as it is reflected by the respondents. Diverse, experienced, incapable(cannot or *Nāki*) , can work, angry, religious, know, like to live with children, patient, deserve respect, think of children, declining , stubborn, conscious of death, demand love and helpless are the terms most frequently used by the Sinhalese in defining characteristics of the elderly as a specific cultural group. It is rather paradoxical to note that although the generation gap is a vibrant phenomenon, the meaning (characteristics portray old age) do not significantly depend on the age of respondents.

Respondents in common see the elderly as a diverse group and 'diverse' as a trait of elderly reports the highest frequency in spite of the common myth that all elders are the same. Stereotypes or the composites of belief prevalent in the society lead individuals to presume that they belong to a single category despite of wide differences among them (Atchley&Barusch, 2004, p.430). Consideration that the elders are a homogeneous group can be harmful and may have a discriminating effect on them. The reality is that elders are highly diversified in terms of their physical, mental and social capacities. The

tendency to see the elderly as a diverse group does not depend on the variables of age, gender and social class, yet strongly related to the levels of education with a 95% of confidence ( $P=0.01$ ). The higher the levels of education, higher the possibility of perceiving the elders as a diverse group. Similarly respondents' perceptions towards the elder vary on the basis of gender.

The term 'physically strong' is significantly related with the urban-rural status with over 95% of confidence level ( $p=0.021$ ). Terms of 'can' ( $p= 0.000$ ) and 'healthy' ( $p= 0.010$ ) are correlated with urban-rural dichotomy. Data strongly support that above specified terms are more associated to the elderly experience at rural settings than to the extent they become meaningful in urban spheres. Physical strength, health and workability are more close to the experience of rural elderly. In overall experience rural community relatively less likely to see the elder male as invalid or incapable, yet a person who 'can' work, or who can stand physically demanding jobs unless senile. Closely matching with the above result, it is further revealed that more of working class respondents identify male elders as physically able ('can' or *hæki*). Obviously a larger proportion of rural male elderly as the majority of elderly population is engaged in manual labor.

Respondents with lower education achievements view elders as dependents ( $P=0.080$ ); the higher the level of education of the respondent, the lesser the potential of perceiving elders as dependents. This finding is further justified with the relationship revealed between the term 'independent' and social class ( $P=0.057$ ). Middle class respondents in both urban and rural backgrounds hold the view that elders are independent and 'like leisure' ( $P=0.046$ ). How people use leisure vary with their social class and older persons from the upper classes are more likely to be satisfied with their lives than those in the lower classes (Harris 1990:207). Above noted conditions assert how the attitude regarding old age is shaped by the social variables such as urban-rural status, gender, social class and education.

Below explained are the piles identified. Experience of any given elderly subject is more inclined to one specific pattern identified through the piles. Names given to piles depict the general meaning attached to the characteristics within each pile. I have assigned below category names to present the major piles identified by the subjects namely, (a). Predominantly religious (*Aāgamānukūla*), (b). Family oriented (Paul *jēvithayatanæmunu*), (c). Socially integrated (*samājayahābændunu*), (d). Socially disintegrated (*samājayenkonunu*), (e). Sick and disengaged (*Rōgēhudekalā*), (f). Life style oriented (*aluthpanayatabara*).

### **Predominantly religious**

Radcliff Brown in functionalist perspective sees religion as a form of expression denoting the sense in which individuals depend on power external to once self (Hamilton, 1995,p.114). The social construction of old age as a powerless status may tempt elder to relate themselves more with the powers external to them. Religion in numerous ways satisfies the fundamental psychological needs. Gombrich and Obeyesekere identify the predominantly religious elders.

The ten precepts are also taken by a few elderly people, one might say 'retired people', who then habitually wear white clothes, spend most of time in religious activities, usually at temples (1988,p.25)

Females strongly hold the view that elders of their sex are more religious than their counterpart males ( $P=0.01$ ). In spite of common religious propensity at old age, some elders run specific religious lives to the extent that religious inclination becomes the predominant engagement. In Vedic Indian backgrounds, elderly was identified as a specific phase dedicated to spiritual commitments characterized with the total disengagement from the other social roles. Theory of disengagement developed by Cummings and Henry (Quoted in, Jameison, 2002, p.13), comes up with the argument that society withdraws from the elder to the same extent elder withdraws from the society. This disengagement is seen as beneficial for wishes and expectations of both the older person as well as the society. Though such total disengagement is hardly observed, this research notified portion of elders run religious lives to the extent that it has become the predominant preoccupation and the concern in their lives.

So much to the sociological witness, religious rituals integrate people by which elder stands opportunity to be integrated with the society. Religiosity of Sinhalese Buddhist elders appear to practice religion in two implicit and explicit spaces of private and public, yet putting more weight on one of these. Elder with a profound understanding of the purpose and the philosophy of religion are inclined to make religious engagement more in a private space at their ease. In both private and public spheres, having religious knowledge and the knowhow of rituals give elderly a sense of self-worth and social dignity.

*'I am not happy with the way people observe precepts. They eat, fall asleep, and listen to religious talks (Bana). But there is no bana I digest. They gather and chat. Wait for food and tea. All this is greed. Why be showy? I chant holy verses by my own'. 68 Year, Male.*

Yet the little tradition of Sinhalese Buddhism allows a range of rituals and lay practices adding meaning to the religiosity of elders. They engage in religious activities like observing precepts at pōya days, alms, and tribute to sacred trees (bōdhipūja) rich with a ritualistic value. Merit earned through rituals resultant better rebirth expected appears to reduce death anxiety at old age. Highly religious elders verbalize that they have no fear towards death while some prefer a sudden death instead of bed ridden senility. In general, religion serves as a morale booster in elderly experience. Predominantly religious elder seems to have rather a positive outlook towards old age considering it as an opportunity. There is evidence that even when elders are physically weak religious commitment helps them to keep the psychological integrity. They bear the view that religious activities bring merit should be fulfilled before once physical debilitation due to natural senility. Physical weakness, pains and discomforts due to illness reduce their capacity to be abided by some of the religious precepts and practices demand higher cognitive functions. With this awareness, predominantly religious elders do not delay religious engagement; otherwise it might be a reason for unhappiness. The memory loss experienced by some elders (Feldman, 1992, p.345), has led worries and confusions related to their religious life. Elder with this problem finds it difficult to recall and synthesis religious facts they learnt, which is a reason for distress.

Predominantly religious elders are likely to interpret events of their lives in terms of their religious orientation. Uncertainty induced by the advancing illness seems to be a factor that encourages a sudden growth in religiosity. Similarly elders who had experienced major events of suffering, such as a death of child, long term loneliness tend to show high religious engagement as a coping strategy boosts of self-worth.

*Our Lord Buddha at eighty said his body was like a dilapidated jolting cart but his mind was clear, and I am eighty three and why not my body? Female, 83 years.*

Elders being influenced from the religious virtues incorporate modesty, generosity, patience philanthropic dedications and many such specific traits in their personalities. These make them easy going individuals often seen as kind hearted and understanding in the eyes of family members in peaceful family environments. Often religious females find alms giving (Dāna) a contented experience. The consciousness of death may increase through the passage of old age. Religious elders who are more conscious of declining body seem to be more conscious of death. Religious elder who is conscious of death does not like to see children spend too much on his or her funeral. In urban experience there are typical examples of elders come under this category make there will before death expecting modest and generous events at once own funeral such as donating the body to a medical college, donating eyes or coffin to be the cheaper.

Erik Erikson's theory on psycho-social development in old age (Collins & Coltrane, 1991) emphasizes on the psychological tension between the 'ego integrity' and 'despair'. As specified, elderly life contentment comes through a continuum of life accomplishments felt at old age. Negative sense of life achievements becomes a reason for 'despair'. Predominantly religious elder always align their achievements with their religious identity.

*Spiritual elder does not worry about old age, but see it as a blessing. He has no fear of death. If they haven't done anything wrong there is nothing to be worried of....Male, 77 years.*

Elders with a dominant religious orientation and obligations towards their families encounter a paradoxical situation in their family settings. In one hand religious values promote selfless dedications towards the family, and on the other hand it promotes withdrawal from the mundane acts of laity. Such elders complain that their religious commitments are hindered on the face of family demands.

### **Family oriented**

The salient characteristic of this type of elders is their strong continued attachment to the family felt as the center of universe. The attachment to the family can lead to more or less reciprocal relationships between the elder and other family members. A higher level of investment on offspring has led contentment or dissatisfaction. Based on this classification, two subtypes of elders can be identified as 'family oriented positive' and 'family oriented negative'.

In Sri Lanka, family and marriage are enduring unions while divorce rate remains markedly low (Caldwell, 1999). Taking care of elders and old parents is seen as a family obligation, majority of Sri

Lankan elders remain within their family during old age. While the family is considered the primary care unit of the elders and approximately ninety percent of urban elders live with families. The institutionalization of elders is seen negatively and regarded a 'bad practice' by the majority of Sri Lankans (Silva, 2004, p.46). The elder care traditionally has been a responsibility of family look after elders who live with physical, emotional and economic distress (Uhlenberg, 1996). Family oriented positive elders live in harmony with the family and are satisfied with the investment they made on children. Many elders have expressed their sentiments about financial and emotional commitments made on educational and economic success of the children.

*I used to skip meals as I had to feed my children. Never let them getting blamed for misdeeds. They all are doing well and take good care of us. Our world is children, no loneliness when you are with your children. Loneliness is a disease. Female, 67 years.*

They mostly live in strong and enduring marital unions. Strong monogamous marital bond is beneficial towards maximizing parental investment on children (Morris, 1967). Once children are married and run their own families, this investment will take a new shape. In both urban and rural sectors elderly grandparents take care of their grandchildren which can be viewed as an extension of their investment on young. Grandchildren become a very powerful source of happiness for family oriented positive elders. Elders as successful parents generate high satisfaction by recalling, expressing and even amplifying the gains of their children. Both urban and rural elderly parents prefer talking about the status, power and wealth of their children. This tends to boost positive self-image and social prestige likely to reduce as the individuals grow old in modern societies (Schaefer & Lamm 1998, p.358).

The positive parent-child relationship extends through the passage of elderly can be further viewed as a source of enriching family relationships particularly between the younger generations and the old which enables continuity of family traditions and culture. In a situation where formal child care institutions are less, and economically not affordable for many of the population, children are looked after by the grandparents. Dual income families find old parents as a relief as they care young. There is a slight increase in the number of children being raised by grandparents even in the developed economies like United States (Quadagno, 2010). Elders as grandparents do cooking, feeding, cleaning, educating, taking children to school and tuition and many more which can be viewed as 'invisible work', yet with a high economic value. Family oriented positive elder appears to generate immense satisfaction by taking care of grandchildren, despite physical fatigue encountered during such activities. Some elders are financially independent and still see caring of grandchildren as a source of happiness and an obligation. If not to senility, or physical weakness due to illness many elders are engaged in child care. In exchange, many old persons in child care and domestic chores make sure they are economically supportive to the family irrespective of their financial independence or dependence on family. Many families acknowledge and expect this supportive role of their elderly parents. Added to that, elders in childcare may get a lot of physical and psychological stimulation assuring a positive engagement beneficial in facing the challenges of ageing.

## Family oriented Negative

Elders attached to the family, yet dissatisfied and unhappy with the circumstances in the family are identified as family oriented negative elder type. Strong attachment to children may not always bring satisfaction and positive ends. Being in a family setting and living with one's own children during old age may not always assure a high quality of elderly experience. Intra familial relationship conflict is prevalent among this type of elders. Clark (1999) identifies six types of conflict possible between elderly parents and their adult children. Communication and style of interaction, life style choices and habits, parenting practices and values, religious ideology and politics, work habits and finally the standards of household maintenance found to be the commonest areas that generate conflicts (Clark, quoted in Dacey & Travers 2004, p.464).

The contemporary Sri Lankan society increasingly encounter problems with regards to providing elder care within the family, although elderly care is seen as an essential system of support within the family (Siddhisena, 2005,p.8). Increasing participation of women in employment ( local and foreign), decreasing fertility and shrinking family size , poor income security at old age and rising cost of living have made elder care a challenging responsibility of the family. Poor income security, illness, disability and isolation are factors that inhibit family based elder care. Old age dependency ratio in Sri Lanka has increased 'from 9.4 percent in 1946 to 15.4 percent in 2001 and projected to be as high as 48 percent in 2041(Siddhisena, 2005). These conditions affect negatively on the satisfaction of the elderly sometimes disrupting the intergenerational relationships within the family.

*Children!...they would take care for one or two months. Thereafter they would say it's a trouble. That's why a lot of old people engage income generation activities likeseeking 'security jobs'. If they remain at home they are going to die within two three years. Male, 73 years.*

Many elders bear dependent status due to senility, sickness, and lack of income opportunities. Elder who depends on adult children for daily expenses loses his or her autonomy within the family which is a reason for great distress. Elders in low income working class families experience constant uncertainty and show fear of possible low quality care, maltreatment or total rejection. Financial hardships of children has been a reason for constant distress for the elder and this can be due to many factors. First, elderly parents with sicknesses and disabilities worry being dependents who do not contribute the family income. Second, elders who can work yet idle are less tolerated in the low income family settings. This situation pushes elders to work despite their disabilities and other health issues which make them further sick and psychologically unstable. Elders with this experience purposely drop the preoccupations with sicknesses and develop a working mentality. Especially in working class family settings there is considerable degree of pressure on elders to earn and contribute to family income. Grandparents face the challenge of caring for children sometimes in two generations (Quadagno, 2010).This background constitutes a competition for resources between grandparents and grandchildren within the family setup, so much so that heavily struck elders verbalize the death before senility as a relief. Elderly parents' inability to treat all children equally on the face of economic hardships has outcome a cold war between elder parents and their children. In some family settings this condition develops in to a state of verbal abuse that can occur at both directions within child – parent relationship. In this circumstances elders

tend to hide their needs and worries while some verbalize their worries with defiance. The end result here is a family centered elder living with dissatisfaction. Yet it is noted that this possibility largely is dependent on the personality of both elders and their children.

Urban family oriented negative elderly in general stand the view that obligations and responsibilities towards their adult children are escalating. This increase in the responsibilities takes place in spite of the financial stability and the high social status of adult children. Urban middle class children seem to be highly dependent on their parents economically getting done their domestic chores. Especially the financially dependent adult children cause a high level of mental distress to the extent that elders worry how children would manage their lives later. This condition compels many elderly parents to be economically active that can be both positive and negative in elders' experience. Success is a powerful source of happiness and in the same token failures of adult children become a deep displeasure for elderly parents. Poor educational attainments, lack of decent employment or a permanent source of income, lack of home, dependency, addictions, and feuds among children, childlessness, unmarried children, criminality and incapacity for parental care are some of the conditions elders noted as failures of their children. The perception of elders in regard to the failures of children seems to lead two opposite emotional experiences in elders. Some elders appear to sympathize the condition contributing the family wellbeing despite of frustration and their own problems whereas for some it is a source of anger.

### **Active and integrated**

The identity of this elder type comes from the high work engagement and the high level of social interaction they maintain. Activity theory forwards the view that isolation in the old age is not normal so long as the psychological and social needs of elders are not different from those of middle aged people. Elder who is optimally engaged becomes capable of maintaining his or her social relationships. This gives the sense that maintenance of the activities of middle age to the maximum is rewarding in old age (Quadagno, 2010). Participation of elderly in the development process, expanding the economic opportunities for elders and the empowerment of elders remains a worldwide requirement at present. This argument stimulates elderly to share their accumulated experience through work for the benefit of others and themselves. As noted earlier, the labor intensive agricultural sector significantly absorbs elderly labor. Labor force participation rates for males and females of 60 years and above remained as 53.4 and 11.3 (Dissanayake&Kaluthanthri, 2004). It is obvious that substantial portion of elders is engaged in economic activities even in the life decade of seventies.

This category of elders negates the grand myth of 'incapable'. This study reveals that elders better experienced and specialized show high level of efficiency in one's own field of work even after the statutory boundaries of retirement. The quantitative analysis suggests the trait 'can' was more attributed to the rural elders. Human body in spite of its natural imperative of ageing shows a high capacity for work even in late years of life. Why 'active and integrated' elders continue to be efficient workers? How do they relate their work status bridging themselves with others constructing a positive life experience? These elders seems to have an intuitive knowledge that physically active are mentally sound. Social gerontologists today are most unlikely to see the 'withdrawal of older people from social roles and social

interaction as normal ageing' (Quadagno, 2010, p.28). Nonetheless, work engagement for this elder type becomes a positive experience so long as work is not forcibly assigned by others. They may not like work settings to be volatile and prefer smooth, less challenging work conditions that may not threaten the core values of their lives. Elders admit that work is not always a positive experience though they prefer work than to an inactive status.

These elders hold the opinion that engagement in positive activities is a reason for happiness. Some elders genuinely love work to the extent that they dread to experience a workless status. Disengagement appears to cause mental distress which entails adaptations in terms of alternative behavior or psychological engagement. Case studies conducted in this research bear evidence.

*A skilled technician in a tea factory was not allowed to leave work as the management has not found a better replacement. This elder in his seventies continued working seamlessly, ended work at the age 82, and was as fit as any other young worker, me a time was much superior with his wealth of experience. His family life was second to his work life and he could generate high level of satisfaction as a reliable and respected technician. He admits that there were days he worked around the clock even in his old age. Being sober has helped him to maintain his status and dignity at work. He was honored even by the top management in the Estate as he had a lot of expertise highly useful to the management. He complained of a psychological emptiness he developed soon after he stopped work. His hypertension was not a health issue while he was working. He fell sick and found himself happier to live in his work setting rather than staying at home. At the moment he is rather in a frustration as he says that 'I do not think of future. I wait for death'. Male, 83 years.*

This research shows that younger workers can hardly replace experienced elder workers although there prevails a social construct that older worker should recline. Activity oriented elders remain in work as it links them to the outer society by which they generate high level of social acceptance and esteem. While being at work and after the retirement as well, elders of this category generate contentment by recalling their past experience related to work with a sense of pride. Though work usually is with its inherent stresses, older people are with the knowhow of dealing with such conditions effectively rather enjoying and making work positively meaningful. It is noted that work serves as one of the promising ways of dealing with physical complains. Elders claim that they forget existing pains while at work they enjoy. Another reality is that elders parenting youngsters as a result of late marriages too are more dedicated to work and this is due to the family commitments should have been dealt at a much younger stage of life. Above all work gives elderly a financial security and the resultant independence with dignity. Independent working elder is more confident and more inclined to advice younger people.

Power behind a successful working elder is the accumulated knowledge and work experience. This experience should be viewed in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are acquired with age. Yet the experience of elders seems to be underutilized in urban setups in comparison. Opportunities that come up in an urban semi industrial labor market absorbs the younger people in both urban and rural sectors easily replacing old whereas such replacement is hard in rural experience. Active and integrated

elder in a rural setting hold multiple expertise. Their indigenous knowledge and skills related to the agricultural work, animal husbandry, water management, rituals and so forth set a value on elderly. The same experience makes the sage elder proud, steady, patient and conservative as less sensitive to the opinion of younger people. This less sensitivity is perceived as a form of stubbornness. Some holds an opposite view that experience makes them more humble in their thoughts and actions. Having more time for reading and thinking may intellectually stimulate elders. Love and respect from one's own children, neighbors and relatives is more likely to exist when others in the community respect the elder. Such a respect is sustained on the ground of contributions elders made earlier. Elders of this category earn respect due to the relative financial stability they experienced through high commitment for work.

Actively integrated elders and religious elders can be characterized with a specific environmental sensitivity. These elders seem to abide by environmental ethics cherished in their cultural setting. They show a least tolerance to witness environmental damage around them. Villages realize this quality as a part of their intuition which is relatively absent in present generations. Their repulsion against waste of resources and thrifty behavior may be identified with this environmental sensitivity. Their modesty, lack of materialism and less sensitivity for fashions have same roots.

### **Socially Disintegrated**

This elder type can be typified with the marked social isolation at old age. The social isolation occurs due to a number of macro level social factors encountered in the disengagement process along with the social responses to the individual personality. Isolation and the social disintegration of elder is possible even within their own living arrangements. 'In the developing world there is a growing awareness of the vulnerability of the family. Family support is being disrupted and eroded by demographic, social, cultural, economic and political change' (Harper, 2006, p.239). Changing family context has a bearing on the social disintegration effects on elderly. As argued earlier, institutionalization of elders remains markedly low in Sri Lanka in comparison to the west, mainly due to the prevalence of a formidable extended family. Most striking effect of social isolation is set, once the elders live away from their children or spouse. Global tendency of the nuclear family may isolate elders from their own children and the impact on elderly may be strongly felt in a cultural backdrop in which the relationship between old parents and children are more emphasized. The isolation of elders can happen physically as well as psychologically or both. Such isolation promotes 'psychological disengagement' in which elder keeps a social distance from others becoming more introverted, meantime 'shifting one's time orientation from future to past' (Quadagno, 2010).

Children in dual income families hold the view that they lack enough time to invest on their children and elderly parents due to the high career demands, problems of transportation and escalating educational demands of children. Resultantly these children spend less time with their elderly parents. Ego centered elder may perceive this as a form of purposeful negligence directed at them. Dependent older persons of this category may get the same perception when they are financially laid off. Elder face this condition may show diverse responses and some respond with negative emotions like anger and sadness. Such responses inside the family likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecies that can construct psychological

isolation of elders, and more the seriousness, it leads even physical isolation that can be initiated by either elder parents or their children. Elders in these family backgrounds who encounter incapability due to prematurely advancing illness or natural physical debilitation experience significant clash with their children or care givers. The slightest of a shortcoming in caring can be interpreted as mere negligence and elders of this category tend to respond with negative emotions that can exacerbate the conflict between caring person and the elder. Elder get the motive for being isolated as due recognition for his or her opinion is absent. The gap between old and other generations may be due to both individual personality traits and cultural experiences of two different times. As cultures diffuse at an unprecedented pace, the elder may find it difficult to adapt making the 'old' in the eyes of others. Aligning one's self with the constant cultural modification cause difficulties even for teenagers. Older people may not tolerate some of the cultural events of modern or postmodern youth which is a reason for conflict and intergenerational hatred. Younger people tend to interpret such intolerance of their culture as a form of jealousy or stubbornness in elder. Such intolerance from elderly is harshly responded by many younger people and ridiculing elder for that matter has been normalized. This cultural mismatch between two age groups has been signified through the cultural symbolism in mass media. Isolation may be more distressing especially when it happens inside the family.

In Sri Lankan experience, institutional care is hardly effective in providing an alternative engagement that could wipe out psychological isolation of the elderly. On this grounds majority live in homes for the elders experience a serious disintegration especially when they experience incapacities due to sicknesses. Children or relatives hardly keep close connections unless elders possess economic property. Recently it is observed that elders mostly in rural family settings experienced a high social mobility, run the risk of isolation. With the higher social statuses recently achieved, adult children adopt a highly mobile life and many migrate to the locations they find better infrastructure. Rural elder parents live alone in their native homes sometimes situated well away from a tar coated road. The modern communication facilities have curtailed psychological isolation of elders who live away from children. Yet, technologies of communication do not adequately cover rural locations of Sri Lanka, especially in rugged or isolated rural terrains.

Social disintegration of elders is possible due to a number of risk factors inside the family. Extreme poverty marginalize elders as they lose respect from others both inside and outside the family. Poverty imposes limitations on the amounts of money and time spent on elders by the caregiver children. Demanding elder may perceive the above as a form of negligence by children.

*I hardly talk with them. I eat if they boil something for me. I live in sadness. Male, 93 years.*

Long term terminal illness or death of spouse makes a turning point reduces their social interaction. Such reduction of relationships happens on the face of continued commitment as a care giver for a sick person. Death of a loved one in side family seems to construct an emotional barrier an elder struggles with.

Escalating tendencies of urban individualism promotes the social disintegration of elders. Disintegrated elder probably may be more of an urban phenomenon. Urban middle class elders are more prone to

experience social disintegration. Individualistic values as well as the urban landscapes have almost invalidated the presence of a friendly sensitive neighbor. High walls, locked gates, security offices, watch dogs, heavy traffic and unsafe road conditions for pedestrians significantly hinder the movements and contacts of elderly persons.

*I do not know new dogs. Gates are locked. It's difficult even visiting known people. Male, 64 years.*

Elders generally are stuck in a deep attachment to their living environment. One reason for isolation is that they dread living away from the circumstances they used to live in. They have a deep sense of possession with regards to their home, and real estate. Anything which is likely to change or impede the natural rhythm may be harshly dealt. They are reluctant to live permanently near their children settled away from home. This isolation is aggravated when the inter-generational property transference is delayed. Even if they transfer, many elders legally keep partial ownership of property till death (*prānabukthiya*). This sense of possessiveness of elder is often perceived as miserliness. Respondents related this elder type with the attributes of anger, cruelty, frugal, selfishness, conservative and rigid. Their lives are less controlled by closer social circles and tend to be labeled as mysterious and mentally ill. They tend to be labeled as childish and sentimental with the fading aspects of cognition. Usually the blame goes to the elder holds negative personality traits.

### **Sick and disengaged**

Sickness and the resultant disengagement is the cardinal characteristic observed among the elders of this category. People in elderly years are more likely to experience chronic illness and disability. Age related 'muscular degeneration', relative impairment in vision and audition, slowed reaction time and less efficient coordination are some of the noted physical changes accompany aging. Long held habit of exercise seem to enhance the chances of staying healthy at old age (Papalia et al., 2004). Yet when sicknesses overpower and govern range of life activities, it makes these elders a separate group undergo a unique experience.

Qualitative inputs suggest that sickness prematurely struck can be coupled with the addictive behavior elders adopted as a social appetizer. Addicted elder may seek a sense of self-worth developing new associations in experiencing the disengagement process. Consumption of alcohol and tobacco seems to be one of the prime reasons for premature sickness and death of elder in this category. Except to addictive history, this elder type seems to have experienced long term displeasure due to lack of meaning they could generate. In another words, they do not find much happiness in family or work settings. Frustration comes due to unfulfilled life expectations. It is noted that elder with serious chronic illness has a history marked with one or more shocking incidences triggered illness. Deaths of spouse, death of children, and serious negligence from children, retirement and maladjustment appear to make elders more vulnerable if poorly adapted.

Mental and physical incapacities due to sickness lay the grounds for disengagement or vice versa. Disengagement from the established patterns of routine work seems to create a vacuum which is hardly

refilled. This causes an alienating effect on sick elder as they encounter discrimination in the economic opportunity structure. Sick elder related social attitudes have generated a set of conditioned responses coated with the emotions of sympathy directed at elder. People with these attitudes and responses presume sick elder is disabled, unfit or even retarded. Such responses can impact as negative reinforcements on sick elder neglecting his or her capacity for a normal social life. Sorted piles very well prove that sick body and sick mind are interdependent. Chronic illnesses such as orthopedic problems, hypertension, diabetes, asthma, cardio-vascular diseases are amongst the most commonly noted and they affect the workability of the person. Age related visual and hearing impairment contributes the alterations in their perception. Physical instability aroused by the illnesses seems to develop psychological characteristics like indolence and anger.

Despite illness some elders are forced to be engaged in economic activities in informal settings supporting their children financially. Work despite of sickness is a reason for unhappiness, frustration and resultant anger. Elder with chronic asthma can angrily react to a demanding grandchild. Sick and disengaged elders experience a high level of instability. Obviously the sick body makes the elder psychologically unstable. This instability is pervasive altering the quality of remaining social relationships. Disengagement due to physical and psychological incapacity in a less supportive family environment makes them non-earning, financially dependent or impoverished. Socially they are forced to depend on close social networks and government welfare. As Sri Lanka still does not have a wide institutional care system, many urban and rural elders with advancing illness face profound instability. They are with the fears of being bed ridden, disabled or a burden on care givers. Some sick elders even wish an instant death without moving in to a bed ridden senility.

*Every night I need to go to toilet many times. Now the life is so difficult for me. Not sure whether I live a few more years or whether I die tomorrow. If there is anything I earned I can eat. If a child worries I could be fed. Who else would care? Male, 78 years.*

Property ownership of sick and disintegrated elders may bring both positive and negative outcomes. Property is held as a form of ransom or liability getting the care at needy moments of sickness. Yet especially in rural experience, sick owners of real estate are victims of deception probably at the hands of one's own children and constantly by share croppers. Well adapted sick elders fight against the compulsion for disengagement engaging in paid or unpaid work. Many male and female elders in urban set ups are in non-paid volunteer work or in honorary services. Some sick elders are too conspicuous neglecting their medical conditions and engage in paid or non-paid work. Yet they are with the opinion that as long as they find contentment in work, individual may not give in to illness. Irrespective of urban and rural backgrounds sick elders are active in welfare societies, micro finance schemes and religious engagements. Sick elder tend to project their experience to similar others. Physical exercise is favored as a coping strategy predominantly among urban elders where as physical exercise in a formal sense is almost absent among rural working class elders, yet they engage in more or less similar laborious manual work.

## Life style oriented

Mainly in the urban experience, old age for some individuals has become a display of certain life style and this as a trend initiated in the west by the 20th century. Life style oriented elders have become a marked category in the urban Sri Lanka although a full blown life style of elders in the western sense is hardly obvious. Life style oriented elders are a minority which represent the upper and middle class layers of Sri Lanka keeps the identity through relatively a high level of consumption being direct clientele of specially tailored services cater for elders in urban centers. High level of leisure activities such as clubs, walking or mild exercise in public spaces, films, music, television, internet, reading, traveling, pets and acts of philanthropy remain attractive to elders of this inclination. Elder with a hobby of pets makes it another form of self-expression. Leisure has been possible as they keep and love to have good paid domestic helpers. These elders express their elder identity associating class symbols. Senses of pride goes with them as they are significantly positive about their elder status and identify themselves as relaxed compared to their rural, working class counter parts.

*I doubt whether an average rural elder is relaxed as they have extreme worries and commitments towards children .I am responsible for my happiness. In the modern world there are so many things that can amuse you. I am not bitter with myself. I have friends in face book. It's so much of fun! My niece put pictures in the face book. Female, 71 years.*

Along with the financial security, single life, divorce or early death of spouse and children living abroad seem to be the push factors of a specific life style in old age. Their independence on children is highlighted and such independence leads its own problem of loneliness. Life style oriented elders hardly accept that loneliness being away from children is replaced by their way of living. However the same loneliness seems to promote social contacts with neighbors and friends though many of such relationships are superficial in nature. It's rather a psychological phenomenon that some life style oriented elders simply deny their elder identity receding back to a much younger age psychologically. These elders appear to be more romantic in their relationships in spite of age. Having a much younger spouse for an elder seems to generate the same psychological effect. An old gent married to a young wife is with the opinion that he has forgotten his age because of his wife. Nonetheless, in Sri Lankan experience such life style appears to be largely restricted to the urban experience, and in a way partially deviates from the mainstream elders.

## Conclusions

The prime objective of this research paper was to capture the experience of Sinhalese elderly in regard to the old age considering the variations of meaning. Using the ethnographic approach, qualitative inputs investigated how the 'old age' is perceived among Sinhalese. Attitudes towards old age, how old age is perceived as well as the elderly experience of old age vary across a wide range. By mapping the experience of the elders, this study captured both conditions in which elders abide by the structures as well as marginalized in the same structured relationships. Some of the key conclusions are as follows. The meaning people attach to the concept old age may not significantly differ on the basis of age of the

individuals nonetheless vary on the basis of gender. Workability and health is more attributed to the rural elder in comparison and more of working class elderly see elders as a capable group. Educated people are less likely to see elders as a dependent group. Qualitative data analysis identified six elder types and elderly experience is explained under these six elder types. Leisure of elder is found to be a middle class phenomenon. Predominantly religious, family oriented, socially integrated, socially disintegrated, sick and disengaged and life style oriented are the six elderly types identified in conclusion. These elderly types are not mutually exclusive and elders seem to be either relatively stable or making shifts within these specific elder types. However it is noted that elders in their experience show a high propensity to be predominantly in one of these identified elder types.

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