

PROPERTIES OF POSITIVE AGEING AMONG RURAL SINHALESE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Human lifespan is programmed by a biological clock which makes the ageing process both natural and inevitable. In spite of this natural imperative, ‘elderly’ is a socially constructed phenomenon. Socially constructed age-related cultural symbolism and sense of people regarding how “old” they are, may vary in the cross-cultural experience. Ageing as a physical, psychological and a social process gradually influences the functional capacities of the individual (Atchley & Barusch, 2004). In spite of the natural degeneration, the incapacity is significantly a social construct and has been powerful enough to disadvantage the contemporary elderly. The way people negotiate their old age is closely phased with the culturally induced social currents in specific social settings.

Out of five identified elder types, four can be directly related with positive ageing; ‘predominantly religious elder’, ‘family oriented positive elder’, ‘socially integrated elder’ and ‘life style elder’ can be linked with positive aging experience (Welgama, 2012). This study aims to capture the culture-specific combination of traits which constitute positive ageing experience of Sinhalese.

Ageing of the population has gained currency to be a main social problem in this century. Two most vibrant sociological theoretical strands on old age propose contradictory options of work engagement versus disengagement for old people. Based on the basic dichotomy of internal and external ageing processes, the theory of continuity (Atchley, 1989) developed the standpoint that older individuals continue their activities rather than disengage. Internally the psychic structures such as hitherto familiar effect, experiences, and ideas are continued whereas externally their skills, activities, roles and relationships persist. Disengagement theory of old age posits the opposite emphasizing old age as a life phase

within which people give up their social roles gradually. On the basis of these theoretical perspectives this study will investigate disengagement, engagement or continuity dimensions of Sinhalese elderly of Sri Lanka.

United Nations (2010) appraisals highlight major trends in population ageing. Ageing as a social problem gathers momentum reaching unprecedented rates. By the year 2045, the number of older persons may exceed the number of children. South Central Asian region represents a bulk of the world's population. Ageing of population has evolved into a first rank problem within the region. Within the South Central Asian perspective Sri Lanka is unique with its profile of ageing.

By the year 2000, Sri Lanka had a markedly high proportion (9.2%) of over-sixty population compared to other countries within the South Asian region. This proportion is expected to increase to 27.8% by 2050. The highest median age within the region is reported from Sri Lanka for both 2000 and 2050. The median age of 21.6 years in 1950 is expected to increase to 41.6 by 2050. The total population in Sri Lanka by the year 2041 is expected to be 22.7 million and the elderly population by then is expected to be 5.9 million which is equal to the total population of Sri Lanka in 1931. Being the fastest ageing society in South Asia, Sri Lanka is already in the process of a rapid demographic transition. Declining fertility rates, steadily declining mortality rates with enhanced longevity have led the trend of increasing elderly population since the 1950s (Siddhisena, 2005; de Silva, 2007). Sri Lanka is prone to a number of old age vulnerabilities such as lack of income security and health care issues.

The basic research problem is to explore the properties of positive ageing in relation to the meaning of old age as experienced by the Sinhalese elderly. Specific objectives were aimed at revealing the meaning generated by Sinhalese elders along with identifying the traits of Sinhalese old age that can be associated with positive ageing.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative preliminary research study conducted with the aim of supporting followup quantitative investigations of positive ageing. The *Emic* perspective of anthropology allows an internal focus that helps to comprehend the native's view with regards to a social phenomenon.

Sri Lankan Sinhalese have a unique cultural endowment and this culture is relatively vibrant as far as elderly are concerned in spite of global influences. A qualitative approach helps in understanding the specific experience of Sri Lankan Sinhalese elderly along with their parameters of positive ageing.

Fieldwork was carried out in five rural villages in Ratnapura district of Sri Lanka; namely, Nelliwala, Budunwella, Budugala, Hiramadagama and Puwakgahawela GN divisions representing three selected DS Divisions of Balangoda, Imbulpe and Godakawela. A purposive sampling technique was employed identifying 10 cases of positive ageing representing older elders of both genders. Identification of the cases of positive ageing was possible after the initial interviews with selected key informants in each village. Unstructured observation and in-depth unstructured interviews were the methods employed in case studies. Unstructured interviewing was carefully planned so as not to lead the views of the elder. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to qualitative analysis. Each subject was interviewed for a minimum of two hours of time with a second round of interviews.

Results and Discussion

The study results suggest that a wide range of variables and hypotheses should be checked for their relationships with positive ageing. As perceived by the Sinhalese rural elderly sample studied, the identified parameters generally associated with positive aging include: high integrity with past work life, high religiosity (eg. attendance in collective rituals, knowledge of spirituality, meditation), modesty values, independence, sense of economic security, sharing good intra-familial relationships (eg. long-held marital bond, availability of a caring spouse, good relationships with children), availability of grandchildren, social esteem, belief in dead parents, feeling of debtlessness, possession of indigenous knowledge and relevant skills, living in native home, high social engagement, good health/forgetting health issues with proper medications, sense of helping others, not being drug dependent, high coping ability, sensitivity towards nature, dissolved death anxiety and experience of leisure.

Conclusion

Each case study which was subjected to qualitative data analysis included many of the characteristics associated with positive ageing. Based on this ground evidence, the study concludes that positive ageing is not necessarily being devoid of life problems but is more determined by the way elders cope up with stressors. Some factors of positive ageing apparently influence other factors of positive aging so that the propagation of a few of these traits would have the impact of expanding the chances of positive aging.

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