
Modernization, ‘New aging’ and Successful Aging Experiences of Sinhalese Senior Citizens

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Abstract

Since Sri Lanka is the fastest ageing society in South Asia, it forms a fitting context to test the impact of modernization on aging. Modernization theory posits that key processes such as industrialization, urbanization and the resultant pressure on developing countries follow the same trajectory of western development. Changing family systems, institutionalization, integration by means of the market and the resultant elder isolation is an expected reality in the aftermath of modernization. Therefore, the overall objective of this paper was to investigate whether the forces of modernization have made a significant impact on the successful aging of Sinhalese senior citizens while contrasting the concept of Sinhalese aging with the ‘new aging’ paradigm of the West. Following the mixed method approach, I have gathered empirical data using 20 in-depth qualitative interviews and a structured questionnaire (n=400). The study was carried out in five cultural-ecological zones in Sri Lanka viz. urban, semi-urban, estates, traditional villages and agricultural colonization schemes identified in the districts of Colombo, Kalutara, and Ratnapura. It was found that 87.9% of elders live in extended family settings in which elderly care is considered a filial obligation. Informal work such as engagement in domestic and agricultural spheres has positively promoted seniors’ social engagement, stabilizing old age security against a backdrop in which institutional care for senior citizens is discouraged. Effective coping, leisure activities, religiosity, independence, positive self-image, value compliance, social capital, a continuum of positive life memories, good health, positive intra-familial relationship, and activity engagement constitute the successful aging repertoire of the Sinhalese. However, successful aging among Sinhalese differs, in many ways, from the manner in which the ‘new aging’ enterprise takes place in the West, though successful aging parameters remain more or less the same in both socio-cultural contexts. Thus, successful aging has been found to be culture sensitive. Making an ‘age irrelevant society’ and the rhetoric of ‘new aging,’ remain a distant reality for Sinhalese senior citizens.

Keywords: Successful aging, Elderly, Modernization, New aging, Sinhalese

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Introduction

The pervasive trend of population aging in the west is probably the most highlighted demographic transition in the 20th century. Aging as an academic concept is an outcome of the process of modernization, with the ripple effect taking place in most developing nations experiencing rising socio-economic conditions. This unprecedented and universal demographic transition has changed the overall ways of life, probably segregating old people as a separate social category. The overall objective of this research study was to examine the relatively culture-specific adaptations of Sinhalese senior citizens in response to the process of modernization in terms of attempts at *positive aging* by elders as active agents, not as *passive victims* of the aging process. In the first part of this paper, I introduce the socio-cultural context of aging in general. In the second part, I explain the research methods followed in this study. The third section makes an attempt to theorize the concepts of modernization, successful aging and 'new aging'. The discussion presented as the fourth section focuses the reader's attention on two sub themes, namely, elderly activity and co-residence, as they were found to be the two major pillars of successful aging among elders in the sample. The fourth section elaborates the contrast between the process of aging among the Sinhalese and the 'new ageing' process.

The proportion of elderly people who live in developing countries has increased dramatically (United Nations, 2015). Sri Lanka is unique as the fastest aging nation in South Asia due to its regionally better indicators of social development. The median age of a Sri Lankan (21.4 years) by the census year 1981 has increased to 30 years by the last national census of 2011. The elderly population in Sri Lanka has doubled within the reference period. Thus, the 12.4 % elderly population revealed in the census year 2011 may become 24.8% by the year 2041. The aging index that was 14.5 in the year 1946 has increased to 49.1 in the year 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). The life expectancy of Sri Lankan males by the year 2020 was 73.4 years and for females it was 80.1 years (World Bank, 2021). Life expectancy has been consistently increasing, while the mandatory age of retirement was extended in 2021. According to the above life expectancies, a male elder retires by the age of 60 and lives an additional 13.4 years, while a female elder lives an additional 20.1 years after retirement.

This information demonstrates that Sri Lanka has experienced a clear demographic transition between the two census years. Sri Lanka holds the 72nd position (2015) in the world ranking of the highest over-60 population (United Nations, 2015). The Global Age Watch Index positions Sri Lanka 46th due to its comparable development particulars. The index considers income status, health status, capability (education and employment), and enabling environment as developmental parameters. Only 17% of the population over 65 years enjoys pension coverage. According to the same aging index, Sri Lanka is at the lowest (78th) ranking, and performs abysmally as well, positioning below the regional average in the income security ranking. Despite this reality, it is rather paradoxical to note that the country does well in the domain of an enabling environment being ranked 25th while reporting relatively high levels of social connectedness (79%), safety (71%) and civic freedom (81%). This study poses the question as to how Sri Lankan elders enjoy a high world ranking in some aspects of their social lives while under-performing in economic achievements.

Proponents of the modernization theory of aging believe that the status of elders in western countries remains inferior to the status of old people in more traditional societies,

highlighting that modernization affects the elderly negatively (Balkwell & Balswick, 1981). For them, modernization and the resultant social changes tend to disrupt the family and other elder supportive networks in developing countries, changing the social fabric in ways not conducive to the well-being of senior citizens. The dynamics of modernization are characteristic of concurrent processes such as urbanization and industrialization, and signify shifting technologies, revolutionized modes of communication, the socially constructed urge for social mobility and direct consequences for the lives of old people. The resultant structural changes inside the family and in corresponding relationships have had negative impacts on aging.

Since they are positioned in the global economic system, non-western societies appear to have no choice other than aligning themselves with the West and following the same model of development. Though the prowess of modernization theory is almost lost in contemporary western societies, peripheral agricultural economies like Sri Lanka that are slow to become transformed and modernized, can still be investigated with the use of modernization theory. An analysis on the current employed population using the primary industrial groups in Sri Lanka, indicate that the agricultural sector employs 25.3% of the labor force, while the industrial and service sectors employ 27.6% and 47.1%, respectively (Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey, 2019). In contrast, a mere 1.01% of agricultural sector employment, 17.6% and 81.3% of industrial and service sector employment, respectively, are reported in the United Kingdom (Plecher, 2020). If evaluated by western standards, it is reasonable to say that Sri Lanka is not a modernized economy, rather, being one in a transitional phase. The impact of modernization tempts individual disengagement or certain role loss outcomes in the face of compulsory retirement laws. Only 25.4% of Sri Lankan senior citizens were employed (Senanayake & Sisira kumara, 2015). Volunteerism in old age, which is characteristic of developed economies is a noticeable exercise in Sri Lanka as well, yet more charity or community oriented. A high percentage of those unemployed or those whose status is inactive does not mean that the elderly population is totally inactive, since old age activity can hardly be captured through formal surveys. While Western senior citizens enjoy successful aging with work, seniors in peripheral societies may show unique, culturally constructed adjustments. In an economic environment within which a vibrant infra-structure for elderly welfare is slow to bloom, the existing social structures and the senior citizens of the relevant country negotiate their activities in such a way as to make their lives meaningful and successful.

Against this backdrop, the anthropological assumption about cross-cultural variations in adapting to the impact of modernization motivated me to undertake this study. The study analyzed how the elderly cope with the impact of modernization, and compared their coping mechanisms with those related to the western concept of ‘New aging,’ particularly with respect to the successful aging experiences of Sri Lankan Sinhalese senior citizens.

Theorizing modernization and ‘New aging’

Modernization is a macro social theory that emphasizes the gradual social transformation that takes place when a society moves from a pre-industrial to an industrialized society. Since it began at the ‘center’ of the West, modernization is recognized as the western model of development. The theory is based on the primary assumption that all undeveloped and less developed countries are expected to go through the same trajectory of development

followed by industrialized nations that have now achieved economic prosperity. Urbanization, economic development, increased spread of education and the widespread reach of mass communication and literacy were highlighted as the outcomes of modernization (Cowgill, 1974; Cowgill & Holmes 1972; Inkeles & Smith, 1974). In that sense, prosperity, in materialistic terms, is expected as a potential of all human societies. Harris (1990) portrays modernization as a combination of key processes such as industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization. Shifting of the place of work from home to factories, migration to cities, abandonment of rural farming, and the emergence of large-scale social organizations are some of the developments that took place due to modernization. In line with this reasoning, social gerontologists attempted to understand how the increasing proportion of elderly citizens in a population responded to their ages and social conditions.

It is generally agreed that elders have traditionally experienced greater power and status in non-industrialized, agricultural societies. In their application of the modernization perspective to explain the status of elders, Donald Cowgill and Lowell Holmes (1972) noted that the more industrialized the culture, the less became the status of the older people. They held the belief that the elderly had a high social status in traditional, pre-literate societies, whereas such a social status fell lower and became more uncertain in industrialized societies. The theory outlines how the elderly lose their social dignity due to four important factors. Health technology, economic technology, urbanization and mass-education are considered to be the main contributory reasons for the loss of status of elders in an industrialized country (Cowgill in Quadagno, 1999). Modernization has continuously led to advances in health-related technology, which has resulted in increased life expectancy and the demographic revolution of aging.

Despite the admirable empirical grounds of the modernization theory of old age, some historians criticize it for not considering the broader cross-cultural reality in which many pre-industrialized societies that did not promise a revered status for elders. Some form of uncooperative and disobliging treatment meted out to elders was reported from more than 60 percent of the 41 non-industrialized societies studied by Glascock (1997) and these acts ranged from simple insults to killing. Despite this reality, elders were respected in many of the above-mentioned societies. However, as mentioned earlier, these elders had been treated in contradictory ways in many primitive, ancient and medieval societies. They were sometimes abandoned and at other times assigned power, and according to a historical point of view, such variations in treatment had taken place due to the intervention of race, gender, social class and culture (Moody, 1988). The debate over the myth of a harmonious extended family that always served the needs of older family members is justified by this line of argument as well. Martin and Kinsella (1994), reviewing family-related demography in developing countries, revealed that multigenerational families are decreasing. These extended family groupings increasingly appeared to serve the needs of the younger family members more than they did the older members or even the elderly. These findings pose a question as to whether the standpoint of the modernization theory of the elderly can be used to describe a universal human experience or whether it is, in fact, context-specific.

Modernization theory and its different persuasions tempt us to see similar oriental cultures to assimilate the values of western industrialized societies in an irreversible manner (Reyes, 2001). As posited in the theory, if modernization and role loss is the reason for a vast

number of Sri Lankan senior citizens remaining unemployed or inactive, it becomes necessary to answer the question ‘what fills the vacuum left by loss of occupation? ‘Do senior citizens remain totally disengaged from activity? If not for the involuntary disengagement established with the advent of modernization, the older person can be assumed to have the desire and will to perform certain social roles. Activity theory, which is the pivotal theoretical camp in social gerontology, proposes that senior citizens have essentially the same psychological and social needs they were once familiar with in middle age, despite certain natural biological changes that take place in old age (Havighurst, et al.1968). This theory, in response to the disengagement thesis, emphasizes the vitality of role engagement and social interaction as a positive aging experience. A well-adjusted older person is supposed to play productive roles in society, and the loss of such roles is seen as a sign of decline. ‘The essence of this theory is that there is a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction and that the greater the role loss, the lower the life satisfaction’ (Lemon, Bengtson and Peterson, 1972). Activity theory promotes an active life by means of continued familiar roles. Kaufman (1986) in his ‘The Ageless Self’” reveals that work activity and productivity are closely related with the self-esteem of senior citizens, although each work role is not considered meaningful for all. This stance of the activity theory is justified by the maxim which states that “it is better to wear out than rust out” (Harris, 1990). Theories on activity and successful aging stress the importance of activity for a positive aging experience replete with health and well-being (Luoh and Herzog, 2002). Based on these theoretical arguments, this paper assumes that Sri Lankan senior citizens demonstrate alternative means of work engagement, and that these experiences are positively related to their successful aging experiences.

The definition of successful aging is challenged by the cross- cultural diversity of the aging experience. The definition of this multi-dimensional concept has shifted from a biomedical view to a more holistic view, considering the subjective aspects of the aging process. Early research investigations on successful aging have been based on the action theory of Parsons and the life span development theory of Erikson (Ford, 2000). ‘Adding life to years’ (Havighurst, 1961), ‘avoidance of disease and disability’, ‘involvement in society’ and ‘high cognitive and physical function’ (Rowe & Kahn ,1997) are some of the slogans constructed to capture the essence of successful aging. Elders’ cognitive abilities, physical, and social capacities were tested with some follow up studies (Seeman, 1999; Guralnik & Kaplan, 1989; Katz,1983). Value orientations in an atypical culture may decide what successful aging is, while there can be intra- cultural variations in the perceptions of successful aging. It is further noted that there is a clear resemblance between the preferred value orientations of people and their understanding of successful aging (Torres, 2001). There has not been a consensus over the definition of successful aging, however, as it encompasses the domains of physical, functional, social and psychological health. Most efforts at defining successful aging can be considered as operational definitions sensitive to the above highlighted domains (Annele et al.,2005). Since it is open to context-specific reality, this study was not based on any of the prior definitions of successful aging. Subjects’ points of view on successful aging captured through qualitative analysis were further investigated through the questionnaire in this empirical investigation. Since it was based on qualitative inputs, this study captured subjective perceptions of senior citizens regarding successful aging.

As far as the problem of theorizing old age is concerned, the industrial west has advanced considerably since modernization. Generally speaking, in social gerontology, which is of western origin, old age is regarded as a socially molded identity determined by its connectivity to the forces of production. The embodiment of ageing in the western theoretical premises has allowed 'new ageing' to emerge as a novel paradigm. 'New ageing' should be perceived as an initiative that involves creative thinking and new strategy positively rethink the potential of the aging phenomenon. 'New ageing' signifies the moderation of the ageing experience by closely focusing on the latest developments in technology, care and ageing trends. By considering the strengths of aging against its weaknesses, an optimistic outlook on the aged as a treasured and valuable resource that can be tapped through work and volunteerism, can be considered. Aging as a socially constructed branded experience, the consideration of an 'age irrelevant society', acting against all forms of ageism and a high level of group cohesion among elders are some of the key principles that explain 'new ageing' (Moody, 2010). These parameters may be useful in understanding how far the concept of 'new ageing,' which is a byproduct of modernization, has become a reality among Sinhalese senior citizens.

Corporeality (focusing on the material body) has become an important concept that explains the aging body in the context of market forces and consumerism. Featherstone (1982) mentions that 'within consumer culture, the body is proclaimed as a vehicle for pleasure'. The exchange value of the body increases with the idealized outlooks of youth, health, fitness and beauty. The existence of a consumer culture and values has been possible with the 'high standards of living, abundance of goods and services, and cults of objects and leisure' (Lipovetsky, Quoted in Gilleard, 2013). The corporeality of recent times has been further motivated by the growth of democratized markets and media, higher levels of individual freedom, and the liberalized far-reaching fashion and leisure industry (Gilleard, 2013). These forces together have enabled a post-modern culture in which the perfect body is increasingly focused upon and valorized.

Methods

Every culture focuses a different perceptual lens on reality (Sokolowsky, 1990). Brightman (1995) points out that anthropology at the era of modernity was inclined to see a culture as an internally homogeneous shared system of meanings. This new paradigm of anthropology enabled the perception of culture as an entity actively and continuously constructed by the individual human actors who are capable of experiencing individual differences of experience (Lamb, 2000). This theoretical premise warrants the perception of an elder not as a passive recipient of modernity, but as an active creator of his or her destiny in a meaningful manner. Against this backdrop, the gathering of qualitative data in the first half of the research enabled an understanding of the diverse and context-specific responses of the elderly against contemporary socioeconomic and cultural transformations. Thus, slow adjustment to modernization and the resultant social transformations can be seen as a matter of cultural resistance. Elders' response to the said socio-cultural transformations and their successful efforts to come to terms with aging were investigated using the perspective of cultural relativism.

This theoretical lens makes the study rely primarily on qualitative data, although the study adopted the mixed method approach. In the first phase, twenty in-depth, unstructured

interviews enabled the collection of a vast volume of qualitative data capturing the successful aging experience of senior citizens. Interviews represented five cultural- ecological zones in which senior citizens lived. Urban, semi-urban, traditional village, estate and colonized schemes were the cultural- ecological zones represented the purposively selected districts of Colombo, Kalutara, and Ratnapura. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the subjects. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using ATLAS qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted which enabled the refinement of eleven major ‘code families’ that were helpful in explaining the successful aging experience of Sinhalese senior citizens in the sample. Each code family included a number of sub codes characteristic of the successful aging efforts of senior citizens.

On the basis of the initial qualitative inputs, a questionnaire (n=400) was employed in the second phase of the study that covered elders who lived in the above said five cultural-ecological zones of Sri Lanka. These three districts were purposely selected as they encompassed the expected cultural-ecological variations. This representation was chosen with the idea that senior citizens might show variations in their successful aging efforts on the basis of the sector they lived in. Cultural-ecological zones were taken as five clusters and each cluster comprised 80 families selected from five *Grama Niladari* Divisions located in the respective districts. These families were selected on a random basis, using the list of households that included senior citizens of age 60 and above available at the relevant *Grama Niladhari* units. *Jambugasmulla* of the Colombo district, *Alubomulla* of the Kalutara district, *Kumbalgama*, *Rāssagala*, *Budhugala* and *Welipothayāya* of the Ratnapura district are the corresponding *Grama Niladhari* Divisions for the sectors representing the urban, semi-urban, traditional village, estates and colonization schemes. Two *Grama Niladharai* divisions were selected from the colonization schemes for the reason that the required 80 senior citizens were not available in a single village. In the case of the non- availability of an expected senior citizen in the household list, the nearest family (in terms of distance) that met the requirement was taken as part of the sample.

Modernization and successful aging experiences

Qualitative analysis of interview data enabled the identification of themes and sub-themes indicative of successful attempts at aging. High level of activity, effective coping skills, high religiosity, independence and positive self-image, value consistency, social capital, positive life memories, good health and sound intra-familial relationships were noted as the major themes that emerged on refinement of data. Sub themes served as the constituents of the above themes. For example; physical, emotional and cognitive stimulation at work, volunteerism and attitudinal consistency with work appeared to be the constituents of a positive aging experience in terms of activity. The diagram presented below (Figure 01) was developed using the qualitative data output.

Figure 1. Repertoire of successful aging among Sinhalese senior citizens



Activity, economic modernization and successful aging

As depicted in the above Figure, activity in old age becomes a major constituent of the successful aging experience. Domestic engagements, economic work leading to independence, religiosity and leisure are noted as separate domains within which senior citizens' activities are represented.

Traditional elders in Sri Lanka had long been familiar with a significantly self-contained village economy in which exchange and cooperation were valorized, despite the urge for monetary gains characteristic of modernization. Modernization and the resultant novel socio-economic order appear to have redefined economic relationships, alienating the elderly significantly from their formal work spheres. Nonetheless, modernization-induced changes may not have been equally experienced by all elders due to location, culture and individual-specific variations revealing resistance to change.

The speed of modernization in Sri Lanka may have varied in response to the level of cultural resistance. Kandyan Sinhalese villages preserved a vibrant feudal order which later was gradually incorporated into global capitalism (Bandarage, 1983). Widespread traditional irrigational systems and long held indigenous knowledge of water management apparently played a dominant role in the resistance of traditional villagers to an infiltration of the industrial mode of production sustaining an overwhelming majority of the agricultural labor force. According to the 5% sample of 2011 national survey, about 18.3% of Sri Lankans live in the urban sector while the rest of the 77.3% live in the rural sector. About 10.8% of the Sri Lankan urban population enumerated by the first ever census of 1871 had increased up to 16.5% by the

census of 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2014). This evidence supports the argument Sri Lankan culture has been slow to absorb the modernization of its culture, with the resultant cultural lag experienced by segments of its people of all ages.

While some Asian economies geared themselves towards early industrialization, Sri Lanka has been slow in its industrial growth. The post-independence politico-cultural context of the country closely revolved around the dichotomy of modernization and the regaining of its past glory with respect to agrarian self-sufficiency. On the one hand, Sri Lanka as a developing nation opened itself to modernization through the implementation of many government liberalization policies; however, there was also a spirit of resistance to modernization led by nationalist political ideologies. Re-establishment of lost glory through the establishment of a vibrant, self-sufficient agrarian society was included in the political agenda of successive postcolonial governments (Tennakoon, 1988). However, the said transformation has not been felt equally by all social segments in different geographical regions of the country. Brow and Weeramunda (1992:09), with reference to agrarian change in Sri Lanka, point out that in, ‘the reorientation of peasant production from subsistence to the market, the transformation processes themselves have been heterogeneous and contradictory, as well as regionally variable’. Although the material conditions of peasant life deteriorated, the social relationships maintained by village agricultural systems prevailed and major migration from rural locations to urban locations was not observed. Going by this rationale, it is not at all reasonable to expect a drastic change in the experience of urbanization for Sinhalese village elders. The data given below (Table 01) is representative of the above reality.

Engagement in voluntary work is obviously a characteristic of successful aging. With the process of aging, senior labor force participation rates are increasing steadily globally (ILO, 2018). Despite proportionately low labor force participation compared to other age groups, the population of senior citizens can no longer be considered to be economically inactive. It is misleading to classify an elder as an ‘economically inactive’ person for the simple reason that his/her labor is not represented in formal surveys. The female labor force participation rate in Sri Lanka is 36%, but a higher proportion of working female elders fall into the category labelled as ‘economically inactive’ (Perera, 2017). Many activities of the elderly, whether they are attributed to be economic, social or political, take place in informal spheres and are inadequately captured.

Table 1. Labor force participation rates of Sri Lankan elders

Age category	2014	2015	2016	2017
55-64	51.8	53.6	54.3	55.5
65+	20.8	22.5	23.5	24.4

a. Labor Force Survey. (Department of Census and Statistics 2014-2017).

Distribution of employed population (60 years and over) by status of employment reveals very low engagement or complete absence of elders in governmental and non-governmental sectors (Department of Census and Statistics, 2014) This implies that on the one hand, the formal opportunity structure has had an alienating impact on elders. On the other hand, their high occupancy as self-account workers and private sector workers shows efforts at

resilience displayed by elders surviving in the labor market. A large bulk of self-account workers and private sector workers listed here are agricultural workers and those who are self-employed.

Sociologically speaking, work is any activity that a person undertakes with a goal of being productive in a way that meets human needs. In a situation where one is marginalized in formal labor markets, senior citizens appear to have found alternative spheres of work, probably those that are ‘invisible’. The nature and shape of old age for a vast majority of Sinhalese senior citizens are largely determined by their immediate family environment. Data suggest that a majority of old people actively participate in domestic chores (Tables 2 and 3). More than three quarters of senior citizens in the sample engaged in washing clothes (82.5%), cleaning (85.5%) and cooking (73.5%). Yet, in another family setting, senior citizens’ contribution towards domestic work is expected as an obligatory service. Child care seems to be an indispensable ingredient of elderly life, especially in the Asian experience. In other words, child care is often considered to be an activity in which senior citizen have specialized (Cain, 1991).

Table 2. Domestic work attendance by senior citizens.

	Urban	Semi-urban	Traditional village	Estates	New settlements	All sectors
Cooking	65.0	78.7	80.0	75.0	68.7	73.5
Child care	56.2	61.2	67.5	57.5	48.7	58.2
Laundering	82.5	85.0	87.5	80.0	77.5	82.5
Cleaning	81.2	91.2	85.0	83.8	81.2	84.5
Weeding	57.2	78.7	83.7	76.2	68.7	73.0

(Field Research, 2018)

Table 3. Percentages of senior citizens engaged in agricultural activity by sector of living

	Urban	Semi-	Traditional	Estates	New
Making fields	10.0	27.5	40.0	17.5	26.5
Watering	17.5	42.5	42.5	3.7	37.5
Harvesting	1.2	7.5	37.5	47.5	42.5
Fertilizing	8.7	30.0	38.5	33.7	36.2
Stocking	6.2	2.5	33.7	33.7	26.2

(Field Research, 2018)

Engagement in domestic activity by senior citizens does not significantly vary across the different cultural-ecological zones they live in. Nearly three quarters of the elderly population of Sri Lanka is engaged in domestic chores like cooking, laundering and cleaning, while more than half looked after grandchildren. A significant proportion of elders in urban and semi-urban sectors are engaged in agricultural activities, whereas these percentages were relatively higher for traditional villages, estates and new-settlement schemes. The above data (Tables 2 and 3) suggest that significantly high proportions of elders engage in domestic and agricultural work. Qualitative interviews suggested that through this work, many of these elders experienced a sense of fulfillment. Likewise, many elders have adapted to living without the

support of a formal income. Thus, even without a salary, domestic work and attachment to the family setting is a rewarding experience for ‘family oriented positive’ elders (Welgama, 2016). Qualitative evidence from the interviews supports the above argument.

I make muddy terraces...make them even...One day I worked till six in the evening. A gentleman was watching me. He said it's rare to see an old person work in loin cloth these days. He even took a photograph of me. (Male, 87 years).

We have a washing machine. But I wash all my clothes myself. I think it is good exercise. I wash some seven, eight pieces of cloth and then, bathe outside. When we old people always complain of sicknesses, others may not like it. I do all this work not with any feeling of anger or frustration...but with happiness. (Female, 81 years).

Look. Now I am seventy-one. I still carry a bag of cement or manure on my shoulders. If you lift a calf twice a day, you will lift the animal even if it is big. Those days I lifted 2.5 bushels of paddy. Now I lift 2 bushels. If somebody helps to lift the load on to my shoulder I can carry 3 bushels even today. I make ekel brooms and spoons during my leisure time. (Male, 71 years).

I still work two hours in the garden. The government had kept good faith in us by selecting this garden as the best home garden in the district. I continue this practice to support my home. (Male, 66 years).

Whether they worked for remuneration or not probably does not matter to these respondents a great deal so long as they feel fulfilled and connected to other social networks, while ensuring some form of economic sustenance. Their *invisible* work may bring economic sustenance to the family, which reason is the mainstay for a vast majority of elders. On these grounds, positive work experience is noted as a factor that contributes towards successful aging. If not for advanced disease or naturally induced senility, many senior citizens prefer to engage in some form of work. Interviews suggested that disease resulting in pain and lack of physical energy made work a negative experience for many elders, especially when that work is involuntary.

Small holder cash cropping seems to be an attraction for senior citizens irrespective of their class status. Tea, vegetables, rubber, coffee, pepper, cardamom, betel and betel nuts are cash crops that are widespread in the rural sector of Sri Lanka. Though it does not fall into the category of formal work, significant proportions of senior citizens, mainly those in new settlement schemes, and in the rural and estate sector spend a considerable amount of time in their fields and gardens (See Table 3). As their earnings boosted their family income, their agricultural work appeared to strengthen intra-familial relations. Despite the strains associated with cash cropping, capable elders preferred continuing to work as long as they could work at their discretion, using flexible timing of work to suit their schedules. Though engagement in child care, and other forms of domestic work fall into the informal sector economy, this work

boosts senior citizens' life satisfaction as it keeps them physically and psychologically engaged.

Co-residence and successful aging

Modernization as a process has systematically depreciated the dignity of elders. The resultant demographic changes are identified as 'subtle and complicated sociological processes' that have degraded many elders' experiences (Cowgill, 1974). According to the global experience, modernization has weakened the extended family and broken communal ties, causing a negative impact on elders. Structural changes in the family and the impact of highly dispersed family membership on elders has become a reality linked to modernization.

The family remains the main support base for a vast majority of Sri Lankan elders. The World Bank (2008:26) study on Sri Lankan elderly citizens points out that about 77% of elders live with their children, whereas only 6% live alone. About 40% of elders live with their spouse and children and 37% live with their children. It was found in this study that Sinhalese family ties are fairly strong and lasting. The constitution of Sri Lanka indisputably recognizes the family as the most basic social unit, not only as the main residential arrangement for all including senior citizens (Family Policy for Sri Lanka, 2010), but also as the main unit of primary care for older persons (Vodopivec & Arunatilake, 2008). The bond between elders and the extended family has been the norm established by tradition in Sri Lanka. Senior citizens, in this context, should be in a position to earn respect, wield powers of leadership and have the capacity for decision making (Sivarajah, 1986). In agricultural societies in the past, senior citizens enjoyed authority over the important resource of lands. Obeyesekere (1967) noted that the inheritance related obligatory kin relationships embedded in local culture ensure the responsibility of younger generations to care for senior citizens, though this is more obvious in the rural sector. The revered status of elders and caring for them has always been important to the economic sustenance of the Sri Lankan community. Both Buddhism and Hinduism, doctrinally, appreciate the sustenance of obligatory care towards the old (Perera, 1999). Uhlenberg (1996) points out how the physical, economic and emotional distresses of elders are effectively addressed through the caring of the family. Relatively stable Sri Lankan marriage relationships (Caldwell, 1999) lay a firm setting for a successful aging experience within the family.

Looking after elderly parents has been a reciprocal 'filial obligation' in many western and non-western societies. However, there has been a decline of such support for elders in both West and East. This has been particularly noted in Asian developing countries within recent decades, and such declines have made elders vulnerable to poverty and deprivation (Aboderin, 2005). This social shift, which is mostly an outcome of modernization, is not felt to a great extent by Sinhalese elders. Arguments taken from the above paragraph and data from the Figures show that an overwhelming majority of Sinhalese elders live with their children in an extended family setting. Table No.4 depicts the living arrangements of Sinhalese senior citizens.

Only 6.7% of elders lived alone. About 11.5% lived with their spouses and another 41.5% lived in their ancestral homes with their sons. This might be linked to the South Asian tendency towards patriarchal living arrangements. In comparison, only 14% of elders lived in the ancestral home with their daughters. This evidence points to a degree of preference of elders

to live with their male children. Taken altogether, only a mere 9.7% of elders lived alone or in other arrangements away from family members.

Table 4. Availability of children and living arrangements of older persons (60+) by living sector

Living Arrangements	Living Sector					Total
	Urban	Semi urban	Traditional Village	Estates	Colonized Schemes	
Alone	4(5%)	7(8.7%)	7(8.7%)	4(5%)	5(6.2%)	27(6.7%)
with spouse	9(11.2%)	14(17.5%)	12(15%)	5(6.2%)	5(6.2%)	45(11.2%)
with son at original home	30(37.5%)	31(38.7%)	26(32.5%)	39(48.7%)	40(50.0%)	166(41.5%)
with daughters at original home	16(20.0%)	16(20.0%)	5(6.2%)	8(10.0%)	11(13.7%)	56(14.0%)
in sons' home	4(5.0%)	2(2.5%)	7(8.7%)	2(2.5%)	2(2.5%)	17(4.2%)
in daughters' home	9(11.2%)	3(3.7%)	10(12.5%)	5(6.2%)	3(3.7%)	30(7.5%)
with both son and daughters original home	7(8.7%)	5(6.2%)	11(13.7%)	12(15.0%)	12(15.0%)	47(11.7%)
Other	1(1.2%)	2(2.5%)	2(2.5%)	5(6.2%)	2(2.5%)	12(3.0%)
Total	80(100%)	80(100%)	80(100%)	80(100%)	80(100%)	400(100%)

(Field Research, 2018)

This data reiterates the importance of a family-centered policy in elder welfare in the context of Sri Lanka. The highest proportion of senior citizens living with their sons in their ancestral home is reported from colonization schemes and estates where land transference is strongly biased towards male children as is customary. 81.5% of elders live at least with one child. Maintenance of intergenerational affiliations within the family is an indispensable element of the Sinhalese family, and this has contributed towards their successful aging experiences. Such an experience appears to become negative, that is, aging starts to become less successful, when elders are forced to stay away from their ancestral/original homes.

Table 5. Support from children for senior citizens 60 years and above by living sector

Source of support	Urban	Semi	Traditional	Estates	Colonized	All
Co- reside with at least one child						
Food and Clothing	93.7%	66.2%	78.7%	82.2%	75.0%	79.2%
Money	53.7%	46.2%	77.5%	73.7%	78.7%	66.0%
Emotional Support	87.5%	81.2%	81.2%	62.5%	53.7%	73.5%

From non-co resident children:						
Daily contact	19.6%	46.8%	43.4%	37.6%	32.4%	36.3%
Weekly	54.2%	37.5%	40.7%	46.3%	51.3%	45.9%
Once a month or less	26.2%	15.6%	15.7%	15.9%	16.2%	17.7%

(Field Research, 2018)

Unlike for their Western counterparts, living in an elders' home carries a certain social stigma in the Sinhalese community. The above data (Table 4 & 5) clearly show the level of dependence on their children displayed by senior citizens. Support given to adult children may increase the self-esteem of older persons and that can propagate feelings of independence, which, in turn, improves life satisfaction (Katz, 2009). This mutually beneficial interdependence does not vary significantly across the sectors of living. Even in urban and semi-urban settings, more or less the same reality is noted. The vast majority of elders sustain reciprocal obligations between themselves and their adult children, confirming the non-significance of government welfare on family. The interview data given below is reflective of these seniors' opinion, that the word 'family planning' should be re-launched with a broader meaning.

I am happy in the eve of my life. I see some old people in homes for elders. I spend time with my grandchildren. Five grandsons and four granddaughters. They love me. Now they are big. (Female, 83 years).

The meaning of family planning should be changed. Planning is not downsizing everything. Looking after senior citizens in the family should also be a part of family planning. (Male, 68 years).

These quotes portray the great desire of senior citizens to age within their families. Such qualitative information suggests that they even want to lobby policy makers to ensure that care for senior citizens is provided within the family. As the data suggest, aging among children and grandchildren, as well as positive intra-familial relations appear to strengthen the successful aging experiences of Sri Lankan Sinhalese seniors. A study in Cyprus has revealed that the elderly living in their own homes are significantly happier than the elderly living in nursing homes. On the basis of these findings, researchers advocated an increased role of social workers to promote aging within family environments (Neocleous & Apostolou, 2016), since seniors living in nursing homes felt their self-determination at risk (Riedl, Mantovan & Them, 2013). Therefore, although modernization and the resultant structural changes have weakened the co-residence of elders with their children, a vast majority of Sinhalese senior citizens appeared to have successfully negotiated their presence within an extended family.

Sinhalese aging vs. 'New ageing'

A very long time has passed since the West surpassed the phase of modernization. 'New ageing' as a meaningful model necessarily emerged in a post-modern metropolitan West.

Gilleard (2013) explains how senior citizens contested the manner in which the corporeality of aging emerged in the post war west, being influenced by emancipatory social movements. The Sri Lankan urban population has neither shown a very high growth rate within the last century, nor does it appear to have organized in terms of strong identity politics launched by marginalized groups such as senior citizens. Instead, the politics of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups have dominated the Sri Lankan political arena in a way that trivializes any emerging new identities. This ethno-religiosity has resulted in mitigating the ferment of senior citizens as a politically organized group. ‘New aging’ as a phenomenon which extends successful aging options in the west, is a slow-moving reality for Sinhalese senior citizens. In place of ‘new aging,’ the Sinhalese cultural ethos appears to assure a culturally-tailored and, for the most part, successful aging experience for senior citizens who demonstrate a positive outlook.

Cohen (1995) in a classical anthropological study in Banaras of India, focused on how aging becomes an embodied reality, yet in a quite different sense to the distant ‘new aging’ of the West. Differences in the ‘old’ person is embodied in all states of volition, affect, character and cognition. This difference is usually perceived as a change of behavior and speech in an older person, formed in a declining body. A ‘weak brain’ is spoken of as a physical consequence of aging which is not adequately supported by caretakers. A person’s understanding of the aging body is usually articulated as a fear of progressive bodily weakness. Fears of old age spin around the possibilities of being a burden to children and potentially inadequate support in a context that stresses the lifelong parent- child reciprocity. Despite the high levels of elderly care inside families, observations of the Sinhalese elder reveal that he/she is somewhat similar to his/her Indian counterpart, because the fears of both with respect to old age revolve around the basic questions of whether their children would care for them voluntarily with love, or would they be a burden to their children? To the extent that these questions are absent in a senior citizen’s psyche, that senior citizen does not perceive himself/herself to be old (*Nāki* = not capable). It is important to point out here that both canonical and common versions of Buddhism stress the core value of respecting and caring for one’s parents.

Isn’t it right to gather merit at the time of decline and death? (*Nahina dehina kāle pinak karagaththoth narakada?*). This Sinhalese proverb shows how old age is embodied and the old age experience is perceived in relation to the context of declining bodily and social responses. *Theravāda* Buddhist canons as well as popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka promote one’s consciousness of the deteriorating or changing body as a form of right consciousness. Most Buddhist sermons being broadcast over a multitude of Sinhalese radio and TV channels re-awaken consciousness of the declining body, while bodily desires are conflated with materialistic values condemned. The religiosity of most Sinhalese elders generally keep them bound to the aforesaid perceptions of aging and the aging body. Infiltration of the ‘new aging’ paradigm which promotes the sustained glory of the ‘ageless’ body in a consumerist culture bolstered by hedonistic values, may be slow to permeate through and can even be perceived as offensive to the above mentioned Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

By the year 2020, more than 40% of the Japanese population was over 60 years of age. Higher elderly cohorts in similar developed nations have become a unique group of consumers. This has a certain effect on market redesigning, with goods and services particularly targeting

the elderly population (Stroud & Walker, 2013). Senior citizens become powerful customers of government enterprises too, as they proportionately constitute a bulk of voters. As discussed earlier, the ‘new ageing’ enterprise appears to have bloomed in this context. The competitive markets in this environment have become increasingly innovative, providing goods and services that cater to new consumer groups. Branded marketing and packaging in health care, leisure (sports equipment, automobiles, secondary homes, and cultural goods), transportation, electronics, architecture and clothing are just some of the businesses that have targeted senior citizens in particular. In the West, leisure among senior citizens is perceived in terms of ‘explanatory models of service utilization’ (West, 1996). This paper suggests further research on the consumer behavior of Sri Lankan senior citizens. However, qualitative data strongly suggest that Sinhalese senior citizens in the three districts of Colombo, Kaluthara and Rathnapura are less distinct as an age group and do not show strong, age-specific consumer behaviors. Modesty in consumption during old age is attributed to the successful aging experience of Sinhalese Buddhists.

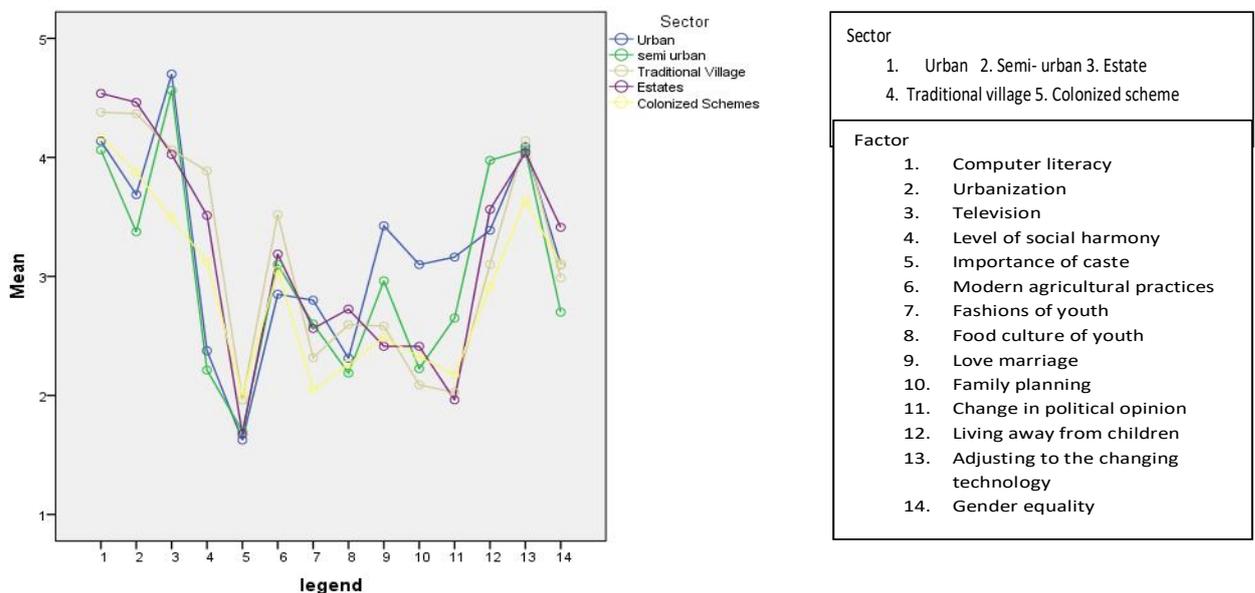
The highly commercialized elderly care market is a reality in the ‘new aging’ enterprise. The Sri Lankan elderly care market currently shows a compound annual growth rate of 3.8%, while the same value for North America remains as 7.1%. In 2020, the homecare segment dominates the elderly care market due to the significant rise in demand for home health nurses, occupational therapists and customized services (Data Bridge Market Research, 2020). The growth rate of the Sri Lankan elderly care market shows this figure at a period when the demand for elderly care is rising, and when the country experiences a fast-growing proportion of senior citizens. North America shows a growth rate of twice the number, even after the proportions of elderly increased much earlier. According to the same literature, the growth of the elderly care market in Sri Lanka faces certain challenges like the high cost of elderly care, low affordability, continuous enhancement of technologies and lack of knowledge and skilled professionals. On these grounds, it is rational to say that only the affluent minority of senior citizens can obtain access to paid geriatric care in Sri Lanka, when a large proportion of senior citizens depend entirely on the centrally managed welfare system of the country. According to the field study, only 52.8% of elders reported a high or very high attitude towards computer literacy. The majority of elders were of the opinion that they never use computers to obtain access to goods and services. This may be why exposure to elder-friendly technologies was almost non-existent in the minds of the elders who were interviewed, and this reveals that ‘new ageing’ is actually a slow in-coming reality for senior citizens in the sample.

A comparison between the leisure experiences of old age in the West and in rural Sinhala villages may serve as a good example for the aforesaid argument. Arendt (2005) justifies the fact that higher income levels permit a wider range of leisure choices. In that sense, leisure in the present social context seems to arise through class-bound implications. The meaning of leisure in the West appears to be closer to that of senior citizens in the urban affluent class in the sample and can be contrasted with the leisure experiences of rural elders. Sri Lanka has a dominant rural population and the meaning of leisure appear to vary in the case of each individual, though some common themes are apparent. Specifically, for rural elders, leisure means events such as sitting chewing betel on a porch with a neighbor, sweeping under the sacred tree, stretching on a reclining chair and a few similar activities, and these acts generate meaning. According to the field survey data, visiting the theatre to view films or drama (11%),

writing and/or reading (other than newspapers) as a cognitively stimulating exercise (26.6%), and music, dancing or physical exercise in a gym (54.3%), were experiences of a minority of Sinhalese senior citizens. The above argument helps in contrasting Sinhalese to Western senior citizens, and to reveal that ‘new ageing’ trends are not generally within the realm of experience of a majority of Sinhalese senior citizens.

When the other suggested characteristics of successful aging in the study are contemplated, the qualitative investigation further justifies the contrast between Sinhala senior citizens’ aging process with Western-style ‘new ageing’. Volunteerism as a characteristic of ‘new ageing,’ which has provided many novel opportunities that strengthen the social capital of senior citizens, is significantly limited among Sinhalese elders. Middle class or lower middle-class senior volunteers teaching in Sunday schools, where some held offices in community-based social circles was 17.2%. Some 24.2% of elders had experiences of being engaged in social services (Field research, 2018). Expansion of volunteerism can benefit society as senior citizens are generally rich in traditional knowledge or work experience. Instead of engaging in formal social networks, Sinhalese senior citizens appear to strengthen their social capital through informal work and religious service. Most Sinhalese Buddhist rituals are collective rituals. Social cohesion in ‘new ageing’ generated through the market appears to be established through tradition and rituals. Volunteer work, if any, appears to strengthen religiously induced value harmony. The diagram presented below illustrates the contrast between ‘new ageing’ oriented metropolitan senior citizenry and rural elders. The relationship is justified further by an investigation of elders’ attitudes towards social change.

Figure 2. Senior citizens’ attitude to social change by living sector



(Field Research, 2018)

The following analysis of Figure 2, explains the results of the linear model run in a profile analysis. The mean values explain the strength of 14 attitudes of senior citizens in the sample. Clusters represented five different socio-cultural settings in which Sinhalese senior citizens live. The estimated average mean values measured on the 1-5 Likert scale indicate

highly negative to highly positive attitudes. These attitudes reflect the mind-set of Sinhalese elders that are not inclined towards market-induced 'new aging'.

Changing technology is a key aspect of modernization and social change. Lifelong learning has become vital in the face of fast-changing technologies. Early research points out that many more senior citizens are finding it difficult to make rapid adjustments to fast changing technologies than young people do (Sala-I-Martin, 1996). On these grounds, 'digital-exclusion' (Paoletti and de Carvalho, 2012), that is, exclusion of people who do not have knowledge of information technology, has become a reality experienced by older people, particularly in less developed peripheral countries like Sri Lanka. Computer literacy rate for all provinces in Sri Lanka was 32% and this ratio remains as low as 6.3% for senior citizens between 60-69 years (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). The same source points out that computer literacy rates remain markedly low in the rural and estate sectors of Sri Lanka. Although the levels of computer literacy remain low among older people, a sizable portion of senior citizens (52.8%) bear a highly positive attitude towards computer literacy. Taken overall, senior citizens' attitude towards computer usage has the mean value of 4.26, indicating seniors' positive attitudes regarding computer usage, despite the reality of low computer literacy and usage prevalent in society. Interview data suggest that more senior citizens in urban and semi-urban sectors show a relatively negative attitude towards computer usage since many of them are victims of 'digital exclusion'. These findings further justify the fact that Sri Lankan rural senior citizens, in particular, remain distant from the 'new ageing' experiences of senior citizens in developed countries who are beneficiaries of digitalized online markets.

Data in Figure 2 supported by the interview output provide further evidence that bolsters the difference between the 'new aging' experience and the experiences of Sinhalese senior citizens. The 'new aging' concept is promoted in the context of urbanism. Rural elders (elders living in traditional villages, colonization schemes and the estate sector) show a positive attitude towards urbanization. However, elders in urban and semi-urban locales display a negative attitude towards the disorganized expansion of urbanism. Some urban senior citizens in the sample find urban environments less safe to walk in freely as they find pavements less spacious, poorly maintained or totally unavailable to pedestrians. This seriously curbs the freedom of walking and gathering with a concomitant negative impact on health. Careful urban planning can minimize property-related legal problems and issues that senior citizens encounter. On the other hand, senior citizens in estates and traditional villages see urbanization in a more positive manner (showing mean values of 4.46 and 4.36, respectively) since they have experienced minimal urbanization. In comparison, senior citizens in semi-urban and urban sectors have a relatively less positive attitude towards urbanization. A minority of rural elders hold the opinion that urbanization is an event of insignificance to their lives, but by and large, they have a positive attitude, since they are restricted to their living pockets and appear to have minimal links with outside society.

Closely knit social life, which has been largely replaced by individualism in the urban experience, is a less evident reality in the lives of rural elders. This is another point of contrast between 'new ageing' and 'Sinhalese aging'. As indicated in Figure 2, urban and semi-urban senior citizens show a relatively more negative attitude regarding the existing levels of social harmony, as indicated by the average mean values of 2.38 and 2.21, respectively, when their rural counterparts show higher values above 3. The highest value of a positive attitude is

reported by senior citizens in traditional villages. Despite the stereotypically-held low social harmony, senior citizens representing colonization schemes in the sample maintained satisfactory levels of positive attitudes towards existing levels of social harmony. However, some remnants of the traditional social order still cast a shadow on some of their lives. Caste had been an important experience in the lives of the current over-sixty population of Sri Lanka, since they, as a generation, had lived at a time when caste as a social institution pervaded society and cast its pall over all of life. The scholarly work of Bryce Ryan (1993) and Michael Roberts (1982) clarify the changing phenomenon of caste that has been a silent current underlying Sri Lankan society. Since they had been born to this reality, most Sinhalese senior citizens did not show neutrality with regard to caste. Therefore, the mindsets of a majority of Sri Lankan seniors are not fully liberal and are not properly attuned to the liberalized ground conditions of 'new ageing' constructed by free markets.

The increased secularization of western society and the quest for scientific knowledge gathered momentum during modernity appears to have liberalized the customary obligations of people. Presented below are a few good examples that demonstrate that such a secular mindset has been less explicit, at least as far as rural Sinhalese elders are concerned, which keeps them from reaping the potential of the concept of 'new ageing'. According to field research data, a majority of senior citizens (55.1%) have negative attitudes toward family planning, while 23% positive attitudes. Urban senior citizens show a relatively higher level of positive attitudes regarding family planning, whereas seniors in estate and colonization schemes have a largely negative attitude. Attitudes towards love marriages, food culture and fashions among youth, and changing one's political opinion have middle values, though, overall, seniors are positive towards adjusting to changing technologies and to gender equality. The above mentioned analysis of attitudes (Figure 2) justifies the fact that Sinhalese senior citizens, studied in this paper, have minimally assimilated to a 'life style' promoted by capitalist mores. Despite the above justified distance from the concept of 'new ageing', Sri Lankan senior citizens have a certain plasticity of attitude towards the future.

Conclusion

Modernization born in the West was a pervasive global reality and resulted in many structural changes in society. Despite the proposition of modernization theory deemed to be disadvantageous for elders, cultures worldwide have adapted themselves to fit this theory differently. The cultural ethos of the Sinhalese, in many ways, have held a protective shield against the negative impacts of modernization, enabling culturally bolstered alternative means of adaptation. Qualitative interviews enabled the researcher to capture what Sinhalese senior citizens in the sample perceived as successful aging. High levels of activity, effective coping skills, high religiosity, independence and positive self-image, value consistency, social capital, a continuum of positive life memories, good health and sound intra-familial relationships were noted as perceived successful aging strategies. Quantification of work engagement and patterns of co-residence were helpful in justifying some of the successful aging experiences found among Sinhalese elders. The high prevalence of intra-familial obligations and co-residence across different sectors of living have contributed positively to the successful aging experiences of elders in Sri Lanka as the dominant pattern of elderly welfare. Considering a broad range of observations, this study enables the comparison of the Sinhalese experience of aging with the

aging experience of the contemporary West. Successful aging among the Sinhalese differs in many ways from the manner in which it happens in the West, that is, the ‘new ageing’ enterprise. Therefore, although successful aging parameters remain more or less the same in the two socio-cultural settings considered in this paper, the manner in which it is accomplished reveals a sharp contrast. Stronger family ethics and moral obligation towards elderly care, higher engagement in informal work, contrasting and alternative means of leisure-related attitudes, a less vibrant elderly care market, regionally unparalleled government welfare initiatives, high religious orientation leading to renunciation of materialistic values and partially liberal senior citizens’ attitudes were noted as the key aspects of Sinhalese aging when compared to ‘new ageing’. The study justifies policy implications to promote aging inside families. Therefore, culturally sensitive successful aging has to be promoted through policy alternatives. An ‘age irrelevant society’, and the rhetoric of ‘new aging’ remains, and will remain, a distant reality for most Sinhalese senior citizens since the incomplete course of modernization in the local context has resulted in a very Sri Lankan, culturally articulated means of aging.

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