

A study on the social impact of changing family structure on the ageing people

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Abstract

This research study is concerned with the social impact of changing family structure on ageing parents in Sri Lanka. The traditional extended family in Sri Lanka has been undergoing a dramatic social change with the increasing number of nuclear families, the trend of their migration to urban areas and out migration for work and education in other countries. It is accompanied by a drastic change in the proper performance of traditional social functions of family as a social institution. In particular, the function of providing care for ageing parents in their original family environment has been seriously challenged by this structural change in the traditional extended family. Being helpless in their own family and home environments, ageing parents have been compelled to leave their hometowns and migrate to urban areas to enjoy the care provided by their children. The current research was carried out to explore and explain the social impact of this phenomenon with reference to a sample of 120 parents living with their children in urban areas. Personal interviews with them and observations of their behavior revealed a particular problem that seemed to affect seriously their life in the new residential settings. It is a problem stemming from their alienation from the original social life and social and ecological system that they had been attached for the whole life.

Key words: Family, Social change, Social impacts, Aging parents, Migration and Alienation

I . Introduction

This research study is concerned with the social impact of changing family structure on ageing parents in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is an island of 65610Km² with an average annual rainfall of 2000mm. It has been famous in the world for its natural beauty as well as the historical heritage of over 2500 years. According to the latest statistics issued by the department of census and statistics, the population of Sri Lanka had increased up to 20359000 in 2012. Female population accounts for 51.6% whereas the rate of male is 47.4%. Sri Lanka is a home land for four ethnic groups such as Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors and Burghers. The majority Sinhalese represent 75% of the population. Tamils and moors account for 15.2% and 9.2% of population respectively. As the distribution of the population is concerned in terms of age ranges, the population of the age range between 0 and 14 years accounts for 25.2%. Over 62.2 % of the population is in

between 15 and 69 years whereas people over 60 years of age accounts for 12.4% of the total population (Department of Census and Statistics. 2012) It is interesting to record that Sri Lanka is turning towards an aging nation as is well apparent from the increasing rates of the population over the age of 60 years (Silva and Samarasinghe. 1999. Pereira. 1993:28) In 1963 the percentage of people over 60 years was 6% of the total population and that rate increased to 6.3 and 6.6 in 1971 and 1981 respectively (De Silva. 1994:21). But by 2001 it had increased up to 10.2% and by 2012 the rate had further risen to 12.4% (Department of Census and Statistics. 2012)

In response to various processes of social change including colonization, modernization, urbanization and industrialization, expansion of the market economy, migration and globalization Sri Lankan society has been undergoing a considerable social change. The rural social institutions including the traditional extended family have not been exceptions to this social change (National Council for Elders.2014, Amarasinghe 2002:56, Nanase

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1995:97). Even though the population statistics show 77.4% of people as rural and only 18.2% as urban people, almost all the rural areas have been highly exposed to all the processes of social change (Department of Census and Statistics. 2012). The era of traditional kinship system and extended families is heading to an end with the elderly generation of people and a new era of modern nuclear family is consolidating its sustenance causing a historical change in the traditional structure and geographical locations of the family. This change has brought about a considerable transformation in the traditional social functions and social values and norms of the family and marriage (UNFPA.2004. Amarasinhe 2002:90, Raju, 2002:109). The statistics of civil status of people clearly indicate this change. The rate of never married people had increased from 35% in 1980 to 44.4% in 2012. The rate of married people remained at 50.7% whereas nearly 4% and 0.7% are widows and separated people respectively. Among the elderly population above 60 years of age, 72.8% were married and as this rate is compared with the rate of married (50.7%) people in the total population, it is well evident that there has been a decreasing trend in getting married among people in the age range of 15-59 years. There was a higher rate (21%) of widows among the elderly population over 60 years. Whereas 44.4% were never married in the total population, only 5.4% were in that category among the elderly people. These characteristics indicate the higher respect for the social value of getting married in the traditional rural societies in Sri Lanka.

The rise of the nuclear family and its migration to urban areas have been extensively discussed in the sociological literature with reference to different social settings (Roso. 1967, Wijerathna. 1999. Nydergger.1983. Fischer.1985. Leigh. 1985. Willianson and Boren. 1977). Migration to urban areas has been motivated by number of factors including employment, education, better life and the need of getting rid of caste and family discrimination. These social phenomena take place compelling the helpless elderly parents to migrate from place to place with the nuclear families of their children seeking care and security (Silva.2004: 51). As the aging parents are not fully accommodated into the families of children their living with children is not going to form an extended family. The parents seemed to live as strangers in the nuclear families

of their children. The inevitable migration to an urban area to live with children has caused myriad of problems from which the elderly parents have been suffering at their present residence. This research was designed to explore causes of them. Even though the research has revealed number of factors this paper presents only the most important factors with special reference to the concept of alienation. A social theory of alienation was developed by Karl Marx to explain the fate of working class under capitalism (Haralambos and Heald.1980: 229). It has also been applied in the explanation of the plight of aging people (Baruside. 1970:174) Baruside had discussed about some types of alienations such as alienation from roles, norms and people in association (1970:174).

II . Objective

The main objective of this research was to explore and explain the major social impacts of the structural change of the family on the life of aging parents.

III . Methodology

1) Sample

A sample of elderly parents over 60 years of age was randomly selected from a list of such persons maintained by social service officials for official purposes. The research was designed at the begging to obtain data from 200 elderly parents living under the care of a child after migrating to an urban area in the Colombo District and a list of such parents were prepared. But only 130 parents were available for the study. To have an equal distribution of males and females the number was randomly reduced to 120.

2) Way of collecting data

They were interviewed for an average time period of three hours allowing them to speak without interruption. Most interviews were informal, beginning from a point of their expressions but ending after getting the required information. The information gathered from interviews were cross checked with the help of social service officials who were familiar with them. Furthermore, documentary sources also referred to gather data. The

research was carried out in 2014 in the District of Colombo In Sri Lanka. Trained social workers (6 in number) assisted in conducting the interviews and analyzing the data.

The interviews with parents were conducted in terms of an interview schedule (See Appendix). The schedule was prepared addressing fifteen areas of social integration through which the rural people were generally related to their social life in the Sri Lankan rural social context.

3) Inquiry items asked by interviewer

They were (1) family and domestic affairs, (2) Kinship system, (3) caste system (4) neighborhood (5) ethnicity (6) Religious institute (7) community organizations (8) work (9) Rural environment of the village (10) properties (11) political institution (12) cultural events (13) self-dignity of being independent (14) social welfare and (15) educational institutes. All were interviewed under those fifteen means of social integration in order to understand whether their migration to urban areas had been conducive to social disintegration as a result of being unable to continue their original relations through them. And also to learn whether they were satisfied with experience of being disintegrated or still suffering from the dissatisfactions stemming from such a discontinuation of former social relations. They were also questioned to understand whether they had been able to offset the kind of social integration they had had in their rural areas with new means of integration in the new social context of urban areas. Furthermore, they were asked about any sense of alienation they had experienced with reference to each factors and if so how they explain it recollecting their former life in the original rural areas. Only ten factors out of the above fifteen were evident as producing a strong sense of alienation from them as expressed in the interviews. They were not so concerned about caste, political relations, educational relations, ethnicity and social work. As a qualitative research study the information gathered from the parents were further cross checked with the information revealed by the care takers and social service officials familiar with them in addition to some documents available with reference to them.

IV. Findings and Discussion

As is apparent from the study, the problem of dissatisfaction of the life that the ageing parents have experienced after coming to a new residence, seemed to have stemmed from an alienation from their original social and environmental settings. The phenomena of alienation had affected them in terms of ten forms such as alienation from (1) kinship system, (2) neighborhood (3) community (4) rural environment (5) work (6) domestic tasks (7) possessions (8) temple and religious commitments (9) cultural practices and (10) self-dependence.

(1) Alienation from kinship system

Alienation from the kinship system was evident as a serious impact that 92% of the parents, irrespective of their gender, had experienced after migrating to urban areas. In their original places, they had had a strong attachments to the extended family members and other kin and kith residing in the same village and around it. One important social characteristic of Sri Lankan village is the social integration mainly formed by kinship relationships. All the parents of the sample claimed that most of their villagers were relatives integrated by consanguinity and marriage. The average number of brothers and sisters of the sample members was nine and they had settled in the same and adjacent village areas and married to relatives and others. This practice had reinforced the kinship system in their village communities. Their kinship system had performed some important social functions facilitating the social life of them while assuring the well-being of all the kin and kith. It had been a means through which they had been integrated to the larger society with a sense of belongingness and kinship based social obligations and responsibilities.

Apart from day to day transactions, important events including weddings and funerals appeared to have reinforced their solidarity and cohesiveness as they actively involved in them in terms of kinship roles driven by kinship values and norms. The physical separation from the original places of residence has resulted in social alienation as they find it difficult to

actively maintain kinship relations and reinforce them through face-to-face social interactions and participations. Consequently, they had been disintegrated from their kinship system and started having a feeling of alienation. This particular alienation has deprived them of an important social source of life satisfaction and they have not been able to find an alternative for it.

(2) Alienation from neighborhood

Alienation from neighborhood had been felt seriously by 85% of the parents as they had had very deep attachments with neighbors of their original residential places. Neighbors consisted of relatives and non-relatives. It is the breakdown of interaction with those non-relatives of neighborhood which has resulted in this particular alienation. According to the parents the neighbors had been functionally significant for meeting various needs of their day-to-day life. Face to face interactions had facilitated not only the exchange of information but also spending the spare time of the day.

Exchange of cooked meals and raw food had been practiced by 80% of the parents and it is a common cultural trait of rural neighbors. Meal sharing with close neighbors had been enjoyed by those parents on the assumption that “meals of ten families have ten types of tastes” (“Dahage Malu Daha Rahai” in Sinhalese language). This cultural assumption reinforced the co-operative social life of neighbors as it motivated the exchange of even same type of food with the desire of enjoying the different taste of various types of meals and cooking of them. Meal sharing had solved the problems of taste and insufficiency of one’s food and consequently it had strengthened the peace of the family. Being accustomed to such a life style with the neighbors, the parents had found it difficult to eat alone at their new residential place where they completely depend on the family of a child. As reiterated by the parents, when they were eating alone, trying to eat meals that they didn’t like and spending the whole day with nothing to do, they had felt a strong sense of alienation from neighbors as their neighbors were not there to interact with them.

(3) Alienation from Community

Communities of those parents had been larger than their neighborhoods. The communities consisted of relatives, neighbors and non-relatives and various community organizations. Parents had been integrated to the society through those social organizations established for achieving common goals of the community. There had been 12 types of organizations in their original communities and they had provided them with opportunities for participating in development and welfare activities. All the parents had been members of “Societies for Supporting Funeral Functions”. These Societies collect membership fee and donations for assisting families to incur at least a considerable portion of cost of funeral functions. Irrespective of old age, aging people had actively assisted those Societies as they played a vital role in their communities.

Community Development Societies, Social Welfare Societies, Societies providing micro credit facilities, Societies for Civil Security, Environmental Protection Societies, Women’s societies were among other types of community organizations. Active involvement in activities organized by those organizations, and the enjoyment of benefits of them had facilitated their social life in those communities. In particular, they had met some of their needs with the support and assistance of community organizations. Those organization had provided opportunities for enjoying power, prestige and social status in rural social context where such opportunities were limited. The parents had to give up those community relations, roles and statuses they had occupied for years with the migration to urban areas.

(4) Alienation from rural environment

Over 85% of the parents were of the opinion that they loved their rural environment as their life events had been written in it where they were born and reared. Their homes, home gardens, paddy fields, vegetable cultivations, roads, lands, rocks, streams, mountains and other structures and monuments were so closed to them they recollected their biography of rural life and they enjoyed the reminiscence. Their reminiscence of

rural life compels them to compare it with the congested urban life. This comparison always ends up with a sense of alienation from an environment which is interwoven with their life events and families.

According to their explanations, the meaning of their life is inseparable from the rural environment as it is deeply associated with their life events. Now, they have been deprived of an environment where they felt at home. Most felt in the urban environment of their residence is the extreme confinement of physical movement to an area of ten to fifteen perches of land. The village and the home gardens of those parents had provided them with sufficient space for physical movement without any sense of confinement. As the villagers were well known to the parents, their movement in the village was live as they enjoyed not only their own home environments but also the environments of their relatives and friends. But such a free movement is not facilitated by the neighborhoods of their present environment as most of the residents are not interested in having close relationships. Even public parks and similar areas had not been proper alternatives for them as they cannot develop a sense of belongingness with them. The dissatisfaction stemming from the solitary life in the new residences compels them to return to their village areas but it has become impossible due to the issues of care and protection.

(5) Alienation from work

Alienation from work was found as a source of dissatisfaction for parents who had engaged in a work even after their retirement from formal work. Over 42 percent of the parents had been working and earning some income at the time of leaving the hometowns. Five retired teachers had conducted private tuition classes. Ten parents had involved in retail businesses and others in small scale agricultural activities. They all had given up working after coming to live with their children and it was after some weeks that they had realized the difficulty of spending the day without regular work and the problems of living without any income for themselves.

Over thirty percent of parents had shared their

income with children and even poor relatives as an economic support for them. Loss of income after migration to urban areas had affected not only those parents but also others who were supported by them. As the present care taker child provides all the requirements the parents hesitate to ask for additional money for personal use. According to 9% of parents, there had been a practice of donating money for various welfare activities and it had been a source of satisfaction for them. But the loss of income from their own work had precluded their philanthropic activities. Accordingly, alienation from work not only prevent the parents from work but also from generous contributions to society. As they find no formal work or are not supposed to work in the new residential places they are deprived of the physical, social and psychological benefits of working.

(6) Alienation from domestic tasks

Alienation from domestic tasks refers to the deprivation of domestic activities that the parents had been carrying out for the whole life span in their villages. In particular, female members of the sample were having a strong sense of being alienated from their domestic activities such as shopping, cooking, sharing of meals and keeping house arrangement etc. Cooking of meals and keeping the kitchen as they desired had been an important domestic tasks they had carried out enthusiastically in their original residences. Preparation of meals and performance of daily domestic activities had been functioning as opportunities of involvement for ageing females. This regular involvement had developed an attachment to their home environments.

Regular involvement in domestic work is associated with a sense of authority in handling one's own domestic activities. Furthermore, the domestic authority had been enjoyed by the females for taking decisions of cooking meals and keeping the home in a desired manner for them. For rural parents kitchen had played an important function of developing a cohesive family life through cooking and enjoying meals together. The parents had spent a considerable time of their day in the kitchen as a routine. It is a particular

adaptation to home environment. Once they were separated from that domestic activities and compelled to be strangers to the new residences they had developed a sense of alienation from their own domestic works.

They had really felt the loss of domestic authority at the new residence of their children. Being powerless had been an intolerable experience for most of parents in the sample. In some cases it had been conducive to power struggle between the aging parents and their children and in-laws with reference to domestic activities. Transition from the perception of “my home and kitchen to their home and kitchen” seemed to have been a serious issue for most of the female parents as such a change makes them aliens to the new residences. This impact had been well experienced when the aging parents wanted to cook meals as they desired but were unable to realize it at a kitchen which was under the domination of others of the family.

(7) Alienation from possessions

Possession of properties has not been confined to the economic importance of them. Possession of various types of properties functions as primary source of power, prestige and social status in the rural and urban communities. The parents had been proud of their possession of properties such as jewelries, domestic consumer durables, furniture, buildings, lands, vehicles, etc. They had earned such properties through hard working, long term savings, family inheritance, credits and careful management of their daily consumption patterns. It is with such possessions and accompanied power and prestige they had developed their social identities. They had enjoyed social interactions based on those identities that facilitated their social integration.

Migration to urban areas has resulted in an alienation from the possession of lands and housing structures as they had to leave them alone, transfer them to children or sell them out at the request of children to gain money. Over 20% of parents had sold out at least one plot of land and shared the money with children. As they had been enjoying the possession of lands and

cultivations on them their life in the original places of residences had a sense of prestige and proud. But the inevitable alienation from those sources of identity, prestige and even arrogance seemed to have made their life in the new residences unsatisfactory. The sense of propertylessness accompanies an issue of identity crisis as they have nothing to be identified with in the urban areas.

(8) Alienation from temple and religious commitments

The aging parents were dissatisfied due to alienation from the village temples and their religious commitments. All the respondents are Buddhist and they have maintained a good relationship with the Buddhist monks of the village temple. In Sri Lanka Buddhism is taught in public schools and Buddhist temple and families actively engaged in Buddhist religious practices regularly. Consequently Buddhist temples and their religious practices play a vital social function in integrating the peoples to the larger society. The parents, interviewed for the study also showed a deep religiosity and they were not prepared to give up religious activities after migrating to urban areas. They had developed a sense of alienation due to inevitable break down of active relations they had with the temple and the temple based activities. Village temples have a close interaction with people and they actively intervene in solving problems of people. The parents also used to visit the monks of the temple for consultation with reference to family or community matters. Religious consultation provided by the temple is an important social service in all the communities. Even though temples are available in the vicinity of their new residences they need time to develop the type of relationships similar to that they had with the village temple. The loss of a trustworthy means of religious consultation has aggravated the dissatisfaction of aging parents.

Full moon day is an important Buddhist religious day in Sri Lanka and it has been declared a public holiday with the intention of facilitating the religious performance on that day. All the temples conduct regular religious programs with special reference to the religious importance of the each full moon day. One

important practice is the observance of Buddhist Eight Precepts on the whole day from early morning to evening or for the whole night. This day is spent at the temple committing oneself only to the religious practices and rituals. Almost all the aging people in the village tend to engage in those religious activities with other community members and this collective involvement monthly reinforces the religious solidarity of devotees. With the migration to remote urban areas the parents had lost those opportunities of being with other members of the village. Furthermore, the parents had had to discontinue the practices of alms giving, offering donation to the temple for religious activities that they had been following on a regular basis. There were number of annual religious events they participated and generously supported.

Accumulation of more and more religious merits ("Pin" in Sinhalese language) is the spiritual ambition of such religious practices and offerings while the social impact is the reproduction of social integration which facilitate the well-being of the community. The alienation from those religious involvements in their original villages was so influential that most of the parents had a feeling of breakdown in the sustainability of their religiosity. Beliefs in the blessings of religious totems in village temples for the successful achievement of life goals, recovery from diseases and protection of secular life cannot be sustained through regular performance of rituals due to their migration. Those religious beliefs and accompanied rituals had been functioning as means of consoling their minds suffering over various problems. Loss of such religious means of stress and tension management also appeared as a negative impact of the change in family life.

(9) Alienation from cultural practices

Cultural practices are of great importance for the social life of people in all the human societies. One important characteristic of cultural events such as New Year festivals, new harvest festivals, religious festivals, and community welfare activities is the leading role played by the old generation of society in Sri Lanka. Old generation enjoys a reputation for being well versed with the traditional cultural events and are

supposed to transmit the cultural practices from generation to generation. As same cultural events of Sri Lankans are practiced with local or regional identities the elders have a special interest in maintaining their own identity. As was evident from the research 90% of the parents had enthusiastically involved in at least two cultural events such as new year festival and religious festivals. They had been very happy about the community's recognition of their active performance of role of transmitting the cultural events. Being alienated from such a social environment, those parents have lost an important source of social recognition at the old age of their life.

(10) Alienation from self-dependence

Self-dependence was appreciated by 65% of the parents referring to the happiness they enjoyed in their original residences. Self-dependence was cited by most of the parents pointing to the traditional social value of being unindebted to anybody or organization for meeting the basic needs of life. In particular, it is a highly emphasized Buddhist social value which is referred to as "the happiness of being unindebted" ("Anana suhka" in the Pali language). Based on this social value the parents had had a strong attitude of not being indebted to even their children for sustenance. It was clearly revealed in the interviews with them that they wanted to live on their own income and support without exerting any burden on their children. It was not a problem for them to ask for anything from their own children but they were not willing to be indebted to in-laws of their families. Even through the parents had shared such a self-reliance perception of their life various problems such as the bereavement of spouse, chronic diseases, medical and health care requirements, loss of income and unexpected expenditures, helplessness etc. had compelled them to seek the assistance of children. The consequent alienation from self-dependence had directly affected their prestige and independence. It had subordinated them to the children and in-laws.

V. Conclusion

The traditional extended family is diminishing with the

emergence of a modern type of nuclear family which shows a special interest in migration to urban areas for work, education, better life of modern style and overcoming social obstacles of progressive development. Being helpless in the face of this change the elderly parents had to leave their original rural residences and migrate to urban area to get the care and protection of their children. Even though they live with families of children they showed little satisfaction about the new life but deep dissatisfaction stemming from a sense of alienation they had experienced after losing their own family life and being a total dependent on children and in-laws. It was a problem of adaptation to a new urban and nuclear family style at the latter part of the life of ageing parents. The sense of alienation has not derived from the mere migration from their village areas but from the breakdown of a well institutionalized pattern of social life and environmental adaptation to their original rural areas. Their identity and meaning of life had embedded in the rural culture and social context which cannot be so easily replaced in a new setting. As was evident from the research study there had been ten forms of alienation such as alienation from kinship system, neighborhood, community, rural environment, work, domestic tasks, possessions, temple and religious commitments, cultural practices and self-dependence. Further studies are required to explain the varying degree of the impacts of those forms of alienation.

VI. Acknowledgement

This research was carried out with support of the Social service officials working with elders and they specially assisted in finding the sample of elders and conducting interviews with them. They also introduced some of the family members who took the care of those elders. Those social service Officials and the respondents' assistance is appreciated. The cooperation of the Department of Social services, National Institute of Social development, National Council for Elders and the research assistants is also acknowledged.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

Interview the elderly parents over 60 years of age who have migrated to urban areas to have the care of their children in terms of the following questions and instructions.

1. Collect the demographic information of elderly parent you interview under the following questions

- 1.1. Name
- 1.2. Age
- 1.3. Gender
- 1.4. Marital status
- 1.5. Original place of residence.
- 1.6. Period of residence in the original place
- 1.7. New place of residence
- 1.8. Period of residence in the new place of residence
- 1.9. Number of family members in the new residence
- 1.10. Number of family members in the original residence
- 1.11. Diseases / disabilities suffering from
- 1.12. Whether medical treatments are taken currently
- 1.13. How they spend the day and night
- 1.14. Is there any family member who specially attend on the care of parent
- 1.15. Social welfare facilities enjoyed by the parent
- 1.16. Social security of the parent

2. Ask about each of the following factors of social integration in terms of each of the given questions and take notes of their responses.

Factors

- (1) Family and domestic affairs
- (2) Kinship system
- (3) Caste
- (4) Neighborhood
- (5) Ethnicity
- (6) Religious institute

- (7) Community organizations
- (8) Work
- (9) Rural environment of the village
- (10) Properties
- (11) Political institution
- (12) Cultural events
- (13) Self-dignity of being independent
- (14) Social work
- (15) Educational institutes

2.1. Whether the migration of the parent to urban areas has been conducive to social disintegration as a result of being unable to continue their original relations through them. (Take down responses under each factors mentioned above.)

2.3. Whether the parent are satisfied with the experience of being disintegrated or still suffering from the dissatisfactions stemming from such a discontinuation of former social relations. (Take down responses under each factors mentioned above.)

2.4. Whether the parent has been able to replace the kind of social integration they had had in their rural areas with new means of integration in the new social context of urban areas. . (Take down responses under each factors mentioned above.)

2.4. Whether the parent has developed a sense of alienation from those factors and how they feel it in their new residential places.

2.5. How the parent expresses her/his sense of alienation and explain it in terms of the former life in the rural areas.

抄録 (Abstract in Japanese)

本調査研究は、スリランカ国における家族構造の変化が、老い行く両親に対する社会的インパクトに関係していることを明らかにしている。スリランカにおける伝統的な大家族は、核家族の増加、農村部から都市部への移住の傾向、仕事や教育のために外国への移住という劇的な社会変動に晒されてきた。そのことは、社会的制度として伝統的で適切な社会機能を有していた家族機能に劇的な変化をもたらしている。とくに、旧来から続いていた家族環境において、老い行く両親のためにケアを提供するという機能が、伝統的な大家族における構造的な変化によって重大な挑戦を受けてきている。両親が自らの力で培ってきた家族と家庭環境において、子どもからの援助がなく無力となった状況において、老い行く両親は、子ども世代から提供されるケアを享受するために、生まれ故郷を去らざるを得ず、都市部へと移住を強いられてきた。本調査研究は、都市部で彼らの子ども家族と暮らす120組の両親からなるサンプルを用いて、このような現象に与える社会的衝撃について探究し、かつ背景要因について考察するために実施された。個別の面接と彼らの行動観察による結果から、新しい居住環境において彼ら老親の生活に深刻な影響を与えているように見える特別な問題が指摘された。その問題とは、老親が全生活を愛着してきた元々の社会生活や社会的、生態学的システムからの疎外に由来するものである。