**ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS THROUGH AN ACTION RESEARCH: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

***D.M.Y. Abeywardhana1\*, K.K.H. Pavithra 2***

*Department of Sociology, University of Colombo*

# INTRODUCTION

Society based knowledge production is the main objective of Sociology. However, that knowledge-based intervention for the wellbeing of society is rarely found. Most of the time this knowledge dissemination has been limited to the academics and rarely open to the respective communities. Action Research (AR) is a research methodology as well as a research technique that has been used among various social sciences, particularly in the educational research field. The pragmatic intervention of the researcher is highlighted in these ARs and it has benefited the respective communities as well as researchers. Environmental Sociology is a subject which studies the interaction between humans and the environment. So this research is basically an AR that tries to discuss the importance of ecological awareness in the context of environmental sociology. According to Payne and Payne (2004), “AR is research which, identifying a social problem is primarily designed to provide an empirical test of a possible solution: it contains an innovation to produce the change in policy or procedure, monitored by social research methods”. Therefore, socially as well as environmentally important knowledge can be generated in terms of making society benefited through an intervention. Herbs and their social usage are well within this knowledge and nurturing this discourse with the traditional knowledge of society is important. Consequently, this paper tries to gather ground- level knowledge on herbs which have been gathered through a pragmatic intervention program. The problem statement of this paper is “How far can children evaluate the value of natural herbs through their knowledge?” So the main objective was “To identify the importance of improving ecological awareness on herbs among institutionalized children”. Furthermore, this study has several sub-objectives; 1) To identify the gaps of their current knowledge on herbs, 2) To enhance their environmental literacy through educating them on herbal plants, 3) To develop pro-environmental behavioral patterns among institutionalized children though enhancing a culture of learning.

# METHODOLOGY

Environmental problems have fluctuated in the Sri Lankan context within the last few decades. Less environmental awareness and less attention towards protection of the environment has thoroughly led to peoples’ unsustainable environmental behaviors. Hence the importance of promoting environmental education can be highlighted in this background. Green personality can be developed through eco – friendly behavior which inculcates environmental education in children during the secondary socialization stage of a child. Consequently, this study will contribute to achieving the said outcome to a certain extent.

The research field was a probation center which is accommodates children under age 15 following court orders and regulated by the Child Protection Authority of Sri Lanka. Due to ethical factors the particular research field is not mentioned here. 20 respondents from the register of the probation center were randomly selected while following the rules of said institution. Gender and age of respondents were considered when selecting sample and the sample consists of 10 females and 10 males. Selected participants were under the age category of 11 -13. Even though researchers were

keen on increasing the sample size to educate more children, it had to limit the population due to stipulated institutional regulations. This can be shown as a limitation of this study.

A knowledge-seeking session, participatory awareness program, and herbs plantation program were administered under the components of program/ research. Under the experimental research design model, qualitative research methods were used to collect data. Simple observation, unstructured interviews, informal discussions, individual activities, and group activities are used as data collection techniques. All participants are anonymous in the data presentation and analysis, in accordance with ethical values of social research.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It remains relatively uncommon within contemporary sociological circles to cast considerable focus on the natural world and the social relations that shape and are shaped by the natural world (Dunlap, 1997). Hence environment and society have been interconnected and sociological focus on these particular areas is apparent for the last few decades with rising environmental pollution and the emerging importance of natural resources to the postmodern world. Environmental Sociology and Sociology of Natural Resources are keen on understanding and evaluating societal relationships with the environment and the importance of natural resources. “While practitioners of both the sociology of natural resources and environmental sociology have made a good many claims that their fields have long and distinguished histories dating back even to the 19th and early 20th century classical sociologists it is most accurate to say that the sociology of natural resources is the more longstanding of the two sub disciplines, at least as a recognized sub discipline and as an organizational entity in the United States” (Buttel, 2002: 206). According to Buttel (2002: 206), the sociology of natural resources is the most long-standing sub-discipline. While environmental sociology defines environment as a cumulative disruption, sociology of natural resources defines the environment based on the local ecosystem (Buttel, 2002). Therefore, discussing local values of the environment is highlighted in both disciplines, particularly in the sociology of natural resources.

Knowledge on local level herbs or medications is valued by traditional medical discourse. According to medical anthropologists, people’s health is highly determined by the surrounded environment (Pinikahana, 2013). Thus the nature of the surrounding environment and factors of that environment can help people to develop both their physical and mental health . Therefore it can be said that the knowledge on herbs can help people to maintain good health without depending on artificial medications. Thus plant therapy has become a popular treatment among medical professionals for a number of mental disorders.

Since action research is a pragmatic intervention that tries to make a social change, it can be successfully applied in the process of changing peoples’ attitudes towards the environment and also on dominative medical practices. Therefore, it was possible to initiate a brainstorming session that helps children to develop themselves with the knowledge of their own surrounding environment.

The results of the study can be categorized as follows:

* Most of the participants have identified herbs as the plants which they are growing, seeing them in their *Osu Uyana* (herbs garden).
* The medical use of each and every plant is not well understood by them.
* Traditional knowledge on herbs is not accessible to every child at the institution, because of their limited exposure to outsider communities.
* The study was able to identify regional weeds that can be used as herbs for some wounds.

As mentioned above, most of the participants have a rough idea of herbs which they are growing in their herbs garden, yet they are not very aware of the medical use of the said herbs. According to Rokicka and Stomczynska (2012), a higher level of environmental awareness inculcates and promotes environmentally friendly behavior among people. It tends to make people behave with a better environmental consciousness. Most of them have drawn similar herbs in their individual activity which was given by researchers because they could see them in their garden. The following figure shows a few drawings of participants.

# Fig. 01: Some drawings of children.



# Source: (Action Research, 2019).

But none of them clearly mention the medical use of said herbs, as they are not aware of them. So this intervention also was able to develop children’s motivation to grow and take care of herbs which they can use for their daily health needs. For instance, one child highlights that they have been growing Aloe Vera for years yet they hadn't used it for any health issue except burnings. After the intervention, they have identified the multiple uses of each herb in which they can be found from surrounding areas. Therefore, it was able to enhance their environmental consciousness by changing their attitudes towards the environment.

Apart from that, institutionalization creates social exclusion itself that could shut away these children from knowledge which is produced at a societal level. Society has various knowledge components and traditional knowledge is the main branch of this knowledge. The knowledge which is passed down from generation to generation is particularly important for the construction of a discourse of traditional medical treatments. These children are living under institutionalized circumstances and their generation relationships are so far, fragmented. So their knowledge of herbs cannot be produced through personal background or outsider community. Therefore, this intervention was clearly not just research, but a personality development attempt to a certain extent. The intervention was able to improve their motivation to seek knowledge on herbs and traditional use of plants to some extent. According to Brennan (1991: 178), since humans and the environment are intertwined with each other, Environmental Literacy is important to analyze ethno botany at the societal level.

Before the program, they were not exposed to these kinds of activities or knowledge as their developmental area is focused mostly on rehabilitation and not on the brainstorming on various topics. Therefore, this intervention attracted this community and they were very keen on the knowledge we were giving as outsiders. So Environmental Literacy improvement has become a psychosocial development method here. We live in a society where western medical discourse dominates over traditional/ local medical discourse. Even though some medications in western medical practices cause side effects, they cannot be questioned because of the dominancy of said discourse. Traditional medications are all about absolute treatments that do not cause any side effects like western medications.

So the traditional medications which are based on natural herbs must be promoted in spite of depending on tablets and pills for every medical need. Action research is not just a social intervention to make a change in society, but also a way of learning from society. Postmodern environmentalism highlights that the regional knowledge which is devaluated by modernization must be considered and updated for the sake of societal well-being (Gandy, 1997: 196). This intervention was also able to identify a few regional weeds that can be used as herbs to stop bleeding, cleansing wounds, etc. So the knowledge embedded in the study community has been identified and valued. This knowledge might be important to develop the regional knowledge databases as well as the whole medical discourse.

The researchers were able to make children aware of herbs and it was further developed by planting new herbs which were not found in their institution or area, but rich with medical value. Rokicka and Stomczynska (2012) show that collective eco – friendly activities impact on the development of pro-environmental behaviors among children. Therefore, this practical collective activity attracts children more than other activities as it was an opportunity to move with others, study with others, and develop themselves. So this activity became a motivational one which tends to keep them working on these particular activities.

# CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a distinction between knowledge of herbs and society, with the endowment of the whole responsibility given to the medical professionals. This has further strengthened the medical professionals’ dominance over every social power. Furthermore, this impacts the diminishing of traditional knowledge of herbs which has been passed on to us by our ancestors. Environmental health is an important topic that has been discussed over the past few decades in the discourse of sustainable development. Therefore an intervention on ecological awareness on herbs can be defined as a prominent perceived action. This action research was able to develop proper environmental consciousness through environmental awareness and this kind of intervention may be important for the development of Green Personality of our future generations. This is crucial among institutionalized children as their primary as well as secondary socialization is fulfilled by the institution where they are located. Institutionalized children need to be educated and included in social inclusion programs despite their psychological state, yet they need proper inclusion mechanism which can make them feel like they belong in society. Therefore, they should not be considered as a deviant community, but as children who seek knowledge like ‘normal’ children. Therefore, through a program that invites every one of them to contribute despite their institutionalized reason is important for their psychosocial development. Making it in a ‘green’ way can be defined as a pragmatic inclusive method. So it is obvious that the knowledge which is produced through this kind of intervention can change society in a better way.

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