

**SOCIOCULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF WELL-BEING  
OF THE ELDERLY PEOPLE IN SANCHAUNG  
TOWNSHIP, YANGON CITY**

**PhD DISSERTATION**

**THU ZAR AUNG**

**DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF YANGON  
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THU ZAR AUNG

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EXAMINERS IN ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF  
YANGON, FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



**EXTERNAL EXAMINER**

Dr. Tin Maung Chit  
Deputy Regional Health  
Director (Retired)  
Ayeyarwaddy Regional Health Department  
Ministry of Health



**CHAIRPERSON & SUPERVISOR**

Dr. Mya Mya Khin  
Professor & Head  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Yangon



**REFEREE**

Dr. Saw Saw  
Research Scientist  
Health Systems Research Division  
Department of Medical Research  
(Lower Myanmar)



**CO- SUPERVISOR**

Dr. Aye Kyaw  
MBBS, Dip Med Sc GP (Family Medicine)  
DA Psychology, DAE, MPA  
Certificate of HIV Medicine (Bangkok IS)



**MEMBER**

Dr. Lwin Lwin Mon  
Lecturer  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Yangon



**MEMBER**

Dr. Khin Htay Htay  
Lecturer  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Yangon

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## ABSTRACT

Aging is an important issue for both developed and developing countries including Myanmar and, the role of sociocultural factors upon well-being of elderly is also the issue that need to be investigated. This study attempted to point out some factors influencing upon the well-being of the elderly population in Sanchaung Township, urban area of Yangon City. The objective of this study was to describe the situation of well-being of the elderly people in Sanchaung Township, urban area of Yangon city and their determinants. This study is a community-based cross-sectional descriptive study with analytical component. The method used in this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods as mixed method. In this study, data were collected from 296 elderly people and used with face-to-face interview questionnaire covering well-being of the elderly. In-depth Interview (IDI) was used as data collection technique for the qualitative findings. The majority of respondents (48%) were in medium well-being group. Significant differences were found three out of four demographic variables, gender, age group and marital status. Moreover younger age group and married couples were experiencing more well-being than older age groups and unmarried, widowed and divorced groups. Of all of the socio-economic variables , only three variables educational levels, employment status and own income were found significantly associated with the well-being of the elderly respondents. In this study, no one of support was associated with the well-being of the elderly respondents. Furthermore, there was significant association between cognitive function of the elderly respondents and their well-being. The quantitative findings were supported by the qualitative findings of the informants' reports with five main themes; income (their own or family), types of the social support (family or relatives), perception of the elderly concerning the attitudes of their younger generation towards them, religious practice and belief in fate. In the qualitative finding, it was learnt from the elderly population that their children become lesser respect to most elderly people. Thus, as for the community or society, it needs to find the ways to maintain the traditions of the respect to the elderly by the younger generation in Myanmar culture.

**Key words:** Sociocultural Determinants, Well- Being, Elderly, Socio-economic variables, Perception

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	= Activities of Daily Living
ASEAN	= Association of South East Asian Nations
CLHLS	= Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey
EHC	= Elderly Healthcare Clinic
MCWA	= Maternal and Child Welfare Association
MOH	= Ministry Of Health
MWAF	= Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation
QOL	= Quality Of Life
SEA	= South-East Asia
SPSS	= Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software
UN	= United Nations
WHO	= World Health Organization
YWCA	= Young Women's Christian Association

## CHAPTER (1)

### INTRODUCTION

Aging is a biological process with its own dynamism. There is no country in the world that does not have old aged people. Whether the population is large or small, a certain portion of that population would be the aged. The aging process advances from second to second. The pace is so slow that it is not noticeable. The nature of aging itself is gradual. Actually, today could be regarded as “the Age of the Older People”. As the world is entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, aging population is becoming one of the global challenges. Ageing population is the result of rapid declines in fertility as well as increased life expectancy. The rapid growth in the number of older people worldwide is creating an unprecedented global demographic change. As consequences, the proportion of the world’s population over 60 years is increasing more rapidly than in any previous era. In the year 2000, there is about 550 million and by 2025, the number of over 60 is expected to reach 1.2 billion (Myanmar Academy of Medical Science, 2000).

Aging has significant changes in daily life. It is best understood within a life-course perspective. Persons do not suddenly become old at age 65; rather, aging represents the accumulation of a lifetime of interacting social, behavioural, and biomedical processes. Aging is dependent on the social context in which people grow older (Ory and Bond, 1989). With advancing age, elderly people have declining functions, increasing disability and dependence with functional impairments such as loss of mobility, sight, and hearing (Hla Myint, 2002). Advances in medicine and technology now allow people to live longer, but there have been major further needs to promote well-being of these elderly people.

Well- being is open to the whole range of human experience, bio, psycho, social, and spiritual as well as material. According to the World Health Organization definition (WHO 1993, cited by Utian, 2007, p.101), “well-being is an individual perception of one’s life status in the context of the culture and value systems in which one lives and relates with individual goals, standards, and concerns”. Thus, when considering the well-being on elderly, it is important to recognize sociocultural factors in relation to their aging experiences. In addition, anthropology is the study of human life within their sociocultural context. Therefore, research on well-being of elderly has been exploring the differing experiences in different culture and societies.

This chapter introduces the research topic by describing the context of the problem under study. Firstly, theoretical background of the study is described. And then, a description about the problem that was interested to study is delineated. Based on the problem, research questions are generated and stated. Moreover, practical and theoretical significance of the study problem is presented to provide a rationale for studying that problem. Besides, the significance of the problem for anthropologists and for a field of knowledge is presented. A conceptual model is developed and then illustrated by reflecting upon the relationships among independent variables and outcome of the study. And then, the general and specific objectives of the study are described. Then, the operational terms for study variables are stated. Finally, the body of the thesis appears at the end of this chapter.

## **1.1 Background to the study**

### **1.1.1 Defining the elderly**

Aging is inevitable and irreversible. It can be defined differently from different perspectives on the social context in which they lived. Aging can be defined as progressive, generalized impairment of function resulting in a loss of adaptive response to a stress and in a growing risk of age-associated disease (Kirkwood, 1996). From the socioeconomic point of view, the elderly people are entered into the age of depending upon others. Also it can be specified by different age. Typically, the "aged" are defined as all persons 65 years old and over, with further distinctions made between the "young-old" ( 65-74 years old), the "old-old" (75-84 years old ) and the "oldest-old" ( 85 and above) (Czaja, 1990; Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum, 2005). Both developed and developing countries tend to define old age at a certain pre-established point, usually retirement from full time gainful employment, and that is used as the artificial cut-off point at which an individual is known as an elderly or an old person. The United Nations defines 60 years as the age transition of people to the elderly segment of the population (Department of Population, Myanmar and United Nations Population Fund, 2005).

### **1.1.2 Elderly in Myanmar**

In accordance with The United Nation's definition and based on the retirement age in Myanmar, the ageing population is defined as 60 years and above (Department of Population, Myanmar and United Nations Population Fund, 2005).. The elderly population (aged 60 and above) constituted around 10% of the total population (Ministry of Health, 2006<sub>a</sub>). At present, there are the supports of the government for the elderly, including the provision of homes for the aged, the elderly health care project that provides entitled elderly workers with free medical care.

### **1.1.3 Well-being of the elderly**

Well-being is important for a human being. Well-being can be described as the experience of good quality of life (Chamber, R., 2000). Each person can define well-being for herself or himself. Theoretically, well-being can be described by three aspects; physical, emotional and social (Myint Myint Khin, 2000). Physical well-being can be expressed by their health status, living standards, access to basic services, education, occupation and working conditions. Social security, love, peace of mind, happiness, satisfaction and gratification are component of emotional well-being. Person who can make good relationships with others and friendship possess good social well-being. According to these concepts, not only physical well-being but also emotional and social well-being will be vigilant in this research. Therefore to reveal the well-being of elderly, sociocultural factors will be considered fundamentally.

### **1.1.4 Sociocultural values of Myanmar on their elderly**

Religion and culture are closely related and play a vital role in shaping the value system, the norms of social organization in most societies. All major religions revere the family as the basic unit and natural frame-work in which children and adults receive the material, emotional and moral support, they need for their well-being and development. Several centuries of influence of Buddhist Culture, there have a great impact on Myanmar society. Myanmar culture is one of which flourished from Buddhism and literature. Myanmar traditional culture considers old age as one of the stages of human development, wherein a person attain maturity, wisdom and economic and social stability



which leads to social recognition and emotional fulfillment. In Myanmar society, elderly people have been accorded a place of respect, honor and importance in family (Saw Naing, 2000).

In Myanmar social life, the aged plays a vital role. No matter how much they old, they are looked after well by their sons and daughters at their homes. They in turn looked after their grandchildren. They have to take responsibility to hand down the Buddhism to their grandchildren. And the grandchildren are used to give their grandma and grandpa a relaxing massage before they go to bed. During massage giving time, the grandma and grandpa tell folktales, the dos and don'ts of the community. The folktales told by them have rooted deeply in their hearts till death. As such doing, the norms and values of the society have passed down to next generations (Chit San Win, 2003). Moreover in Myanmar family, the most important thing is family spirit. Myanmar people have strong family attachment. There are very close ties between family members: parents and children, between the siblings and thus caring the older persons are a tradition and a good culture in Myanmar.

Traditionally, Myanmar people are socialized to take care of the elderly people within the family since their young age. Myanmar people pay respect to all those who are older than them even by a second. Myanmar spirit has been born out of the Lord Buddha's teachings. Buddha taught the moral and social disciplines for both people and the monks. In those teachings, parents are one of the respectful persons and every son and daughter has obligations to look after their parents. Buddha's teachings highlight the merits of caring the parents and demerits of neglecting them. Moreover, there are thirty-eight rules for good life (Mingala sermons of Buddha) in Myanmar. One of the points in Mingala sermons was to care for one's mother and father: this is the highest blessing (SILANANDABHIVAMSA, 2001). Myanmar observes these rules for the present life and the next existence or life after death. Generally, Myanmar customs, culture and social norms are conducive to coping with the care of the elderly. In Myanmar society, since time immemorial, older people have been accorded a place of respect, honour and importance in the family and these are good indicators for well-being of the elderly.

### **1.1.5 Challenges of breaking up the cherished Myanmar culture**

Although the family members are considered to be the primary caregivers and protectors of the elderly, the traditional support base of the elderly in Myanmar is gradually diminishing. Despite the fact that all families in Myanmar society wish to have children, there has been a noticeable decline over the years in the number of children desired. Almost all parents consider as the difficulties for their child to develop well with adequate facilities. In addition, smaller family sizes will mean that there are fewer children available to take care of elderly parents. Moreover, increased life expectancy and increased dependency ratio may be one of the challenges. According to the National Health Plan (2006-2011), life expectancy for male was estimated as 62.1 years and for female as 66.2 years in 2003 ( Ministry of Health, 2006<sub>b</sub>). As the dependency ratio arises, the working age group will be unable to support the growing population of elderly people. However, we must remember that those at the other end of the life cycle, the infants and children, are also dependent on the working population.

Furthermore, industrialization may be another challenge. Effects of industrialization, the greater involvement of females in employment outside the home also limit the amount of time available for caring of the elderly.

Globalization is one of the most fundamental challenges breaking up the cherished Myanmar culture. Today world is a global village and cultural transmitting is spontaneously occurred. Most of Myanmar society changes their life styles and social values on older people and responsibilities of the young were gradually changed. All these factors have contributed to the gradual decline of the traditional family-based support system and cherished Myanmar culture.

Institutions for the care of elderly have been established and run by government as well as by voluntary organizations and religious organizations. However, the number of institutions was considered insufficient and the programmes for the elderly are needed to be expanded in view of the growing aged population. All of this may have certain effect on well-being of the elderly.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Advances in medical technology and improved standard of living have contributed to an increase in the elderly population. In 2025, there will be a total of about 2 billion persons aged 60 and over, with 80% of them living in developing countries (World Health Organization, 2002). It is estimated that the proportion of older people over 60 years in Southeast Asia will triple between 2000 and 2050, which effectively means that the caring needs of older people will dramatically increase. The rate of growth of this population segment will be greater in developing countries as compared to the developed countries.

The increase in the elderly population in the developing countries will particularly be marked in Asia especially in China and India. It is estimated that by the year 2020, there will be 274 million persons over aged 60 in China alone - more than the current population of the entire United States (WHO, 1998). In India, the aged population (60 years and older) is the second largest in the world. It is estimated that the proportion of elderly people will increase 11% (142 millions) in 2020 (Dey, 2000). The populations of countries in the ASEAN region are ageing at a rapid rate. In developing countries, definitive problems are emerging in relation to aged population that is the social, health and economic dependence of the aged on their families, community and government (WHO, 2002).

In Myanmar, according to 1973 censuses and 2001 survey, elderly dependency ratio increased from 11.47 to 13.81 over 28 years, with a faster increase in urban than in rural areas (Department of Population, Myanmar and United Nations Population Fund , 2005). Out of the estimated population at 55 millions in 2006, 60 years and above age is about 4.46 millions (Ministry of Health, 2006<sub>a</sub>). Moreover, not only is the aged population increasing, but the elderly population is itself getting older as more and more people survive longer. Today, about 80% of older adults have at least one chronic condition, and 50% have at least two (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2005). Chronic diseases disproportionately affect older adults and are associated with increased cost for health care and long term care, disability, diminished quality of life and overall well-being.

In addition, the effect of industrialization, urbanization and globalization the social, economic and cultural changes are taking place in the present world. Shifting the

roles and statuses of elderly takes place and well-being of present generations of elderly differs from the past aged population.

Furthermore, the sociocultural context of urban area has a very wider context and totally different from that of rural area. The urban lifestyles are less likely to be close family relationships, more social isolation, less inter-generational authority within the family, greater alienation, more normless (O'Donnell, 1994). The problems associated with urban lifestyles, thus, will have more effects on the well-being of urban elderly than that of rural. Moreover, although many studies from various areas have investigated including aging, the study on sociocultural determinants of well-being of elderly is limited. Therefore, the role of sociocultural factors upon well-being of elderly is the issues that need to be investigated.

### **1.3 Research questions**

A research question is a statement of the specific enquiry that the researcher wants to answer to address the research problem. The research questions guide the types of data to be collected in the study (Polit and Hungler, 1999). In order to clarify and elaborate the research purpose, the following main research questions arose from the above context are:

- (i) To what extent is the well-being of elderly in Sanchaung Township, Yangon City?
- (ii) What are the influencing factors on well-being of the elderly?

### **1.4 Rationale for the research**

Growing old is a part of every human's life cycle and it has significant implications on their well-being. The very first century of the new millennium will face several major issues in the health area, of which one of the most important is the "graying of the world population". Ageing becomes a common feature of population worldwide as fertility rates decline and life expectancy increases (Myanmar Academy of Medical Science, 2000).

In western countries, people are living longer and many of them are being cared for in the institutional environment. However, 80% of the care provided to elderly in

United States of America (USA) is provided by family members (Modnick and White, 2007). In accordance with the tradition and culture of the Myanmar people, major support for the elderly is provided by their families and family members play the responsible person and front line caregivers for their elderly.

However, as Myanmar is a developing country, effects of rapid urbanization, industrialization, almost all of the family members have to work outside home. And then, younger persons are moving out for greener pasture. Thus the opportunity for looking after to elderly family members is diminishing. Furthermore, cultural transmission is taking place by effect of globalization in today Myanmar. As a result, changes in socioeconomic status, attitudes of younger generation upon their elderly and traditional social values and culture are taking place. These changes are more occurring in urban than that of rural area.

All of these interesting issues of elderly drive the researcher to do a research on the sociocultural influences of the well-being of elderly people in urban area. There are many studies concerning about the elderly from different aspects in social sciences in other countries of the world. However, fewer attempt of scholarly research, except other disciplines such as medical science, psychology, economics etc., on the well-being of elderly in Myanmar, has been made. Totally lack of elderly research in anthropology in Myanmar also urged the researcher to conduct a kind of research through which is hoped to explore the existing conditions of the older people in the country. This study would enlighten the current opportunities and obstacles that the elderly faced in this urban area.

### **1.5 Significance to profession**

Population demographics have also affected on the sociocultural patterns of society. It is estimated that there are roughly 600 millions elderly populations worldwide, two-thirds of which are living in the developing countries including Myanmar (Ministry of Health, 2006<sub>b</sub>). In this situation, sociocultural values placed on the aged people are important in the well-being of the elderly. Thus sociocultural determinants of well-being of the elderly are essential issue in anthropological field.

Anthropology is the study of human and their ways of life. Traditionally, anthropology has concerned on examining past cultures and present simple societies. Today, however, it is also concentrates on complex societies and anthropologist want to

know for deeper knowledge about human nature and behaviors. It is thus anthropology is the science of mankind and culture, and anthropologists are busy gathering the worldwide inventory of human social and cultural invention (Hoebel and Frost, 1976).

In the field of Anthropology, cultural anthropology concentrates on social relations, such as family and kinship, age groups, and economic activities (Hoebel and Frost, 1976). It can be stated that anthropologists are concerned with the well-being of the elderly based on deeper understanding of their sociocultural system.

In applied anthropology, other scholars are also interested in applying anthropological approaches to analyzing and solving real-world problems such as alcohol and drug use, disaster research, geriatric services, industry and business, social impact assessment, urban development or wildlife management. As industrialization and urbanization spread globally, anthropologists increasingly study these processes and the social problems they create. Urban anthropology is the cross-cultural and ethnographic study of global urbanization and life in cities. Therefore, this study is essentially contributed to anthropology and can be useful to support to the well-being of the elderly and cherished Myanmar culture.

## **1.6 Conceptual framework for the well-being of the elderly**

The conceptual framework of research study is very important in order to make research findings meaningful. A framework is the conceptual underpinnings of a study (Polit and Hungler, 1999, p-110). Not every study is based on a theory or conceptual model, but every study has a framework. In a study based on a theory, the framework is referred to as the theoretical framework; in a study that has its roots in a specified conceptual model, the framework is often called conceptual framework (Polit and Hungler, 1999). In this study, the framework which is based on some conceptual models of well-being of elderly was applied.

Firstly, Park, (2005) stated that ‘well-being’ of an individual or group of individuals have two components: objective and subjective component. Objective component, which is generally known by the term ‘standard of living’ or ‘level of living’ and Subjective component is referred to as ‘quality of life’. After that, according to definition of Wolman, (1989), well-being has three aspects; physical, emotional and social well-being and these are interrelated with each others.

Secondly, San Shwe (2000) stated that well-being of elderly highly depends on their health status. After that, the meaning of health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being not merely absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1989 cited by American Nurses Association, 2003). Thus, well-being of elderly is strongly related with their health status.

Thirdly, Velkoff (2000) found that family structure, living arrangement and support system have an impact on the well-being of the older population, and family resources such as physical, emotional and economic care from family are also influenced upon well-being of elderly. Moreover, varieties of behavioral, economic, and sociocultural features of elderly lives are related to their health as well as higher level of overall well-being (Kaplan and Haan, 1989).

Fourthly, the amount and quality of family interaction or family support is a major correlate of well-being of elderly (George and Maddox, 1989). And then, physical and emotional support for Japanese elderly were received mainly from their family members living together followed by children living apart, neighbors and friends (Koyano, Hashimoto, Fukawa, Shibata and Gunji (2005).

By integrating above perspectives, the investigator conceptualized the basic framework for the study; it is that, well-being of elderly may be influenced by various sociocultural factors including health status, family structure and support system, economic status and younger's attitudes toward upon them. This conceptual framework is shown in figure (1).

The aim of the conceptual model that the researcher had developed is designed to promote the well-being of the elderly. The emphasis in this model is to increase the awareness of preserving cherished Myanmar culture which influence on well-being of Myanmar elderly.

### Conceptual Framework

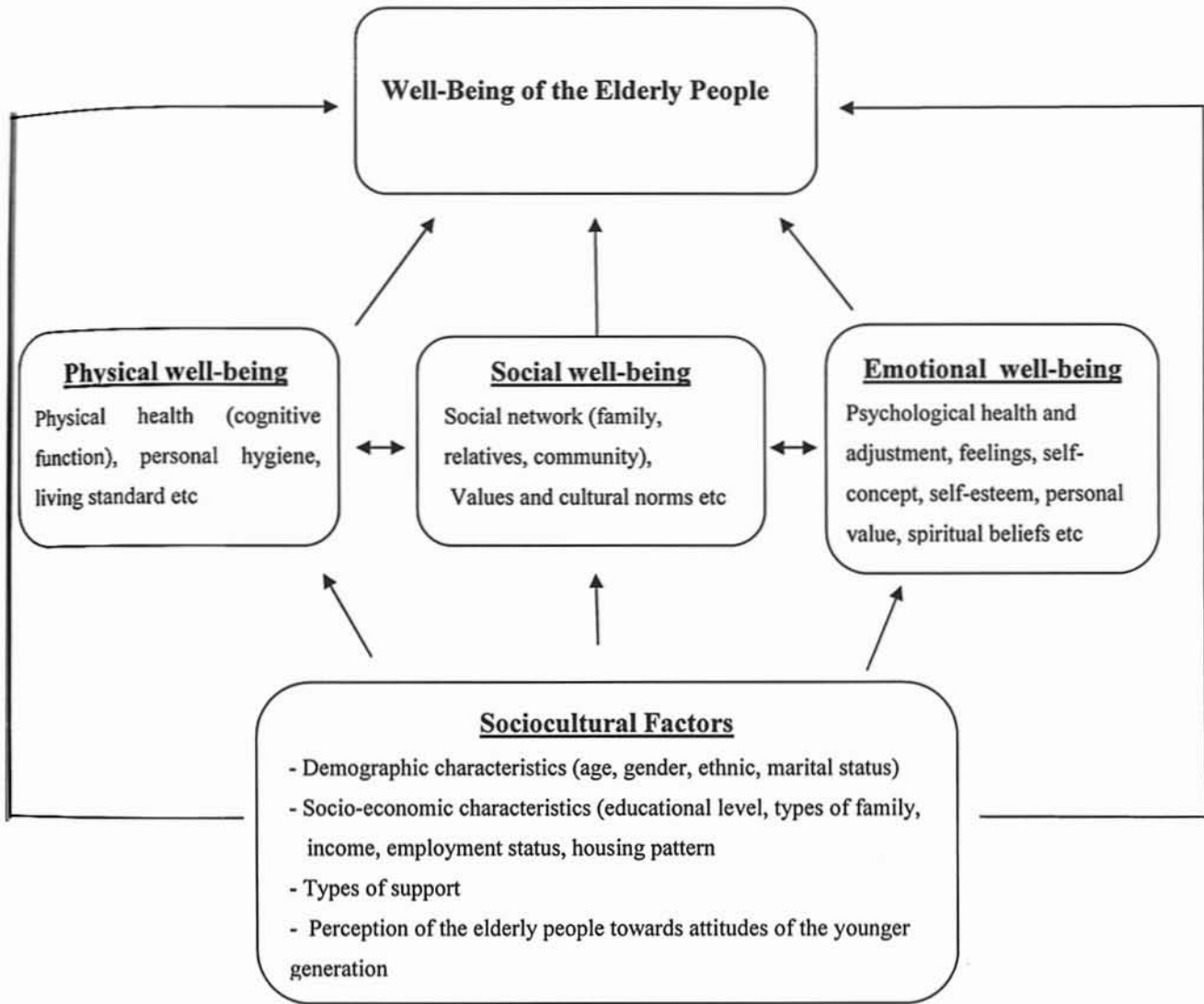


Figure (1) Sociocultural influences of the well-being of the elderly people



## **1.7 Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this thesis is to describe the well-being of the elderly in Sanchaung Township, Yangon City.

The specific objectives of this thesis are:

- (i) to find out the demographic characteristics of the elderly involved in the study area;
- (ii) to explore the socio-economic characteristics of the study population;
- (iii) to examine the support types of the elderly people;
- (iv) to investigate the perception of the elderly people towards attitudes of younger generation;
- (v) to identify the cognitive function of elderly respondents;
- (vi) to assess the elderly's experiences that impact on their well-being in relation to their aging process; and
- (vii) to analyze how the key variables indicated in specific objectives (i) to (vi) are associated with the well-being of the elderly.

## **1.8 Operational definitions of the terms**

### **Elderly person**

Elderly person is a person who is above 60 years old.

### **Sociocultural**

The term 'Sociocultural' is used as a short form of 'social and cultural', and the word 'social' means 'interaction'. In this terms society and culture form a complex system of interacting parts. Sociocultural systems are made up of different variables, such as environmental, demographic, technological, economic, social-organizational, political, and religious variables.

## Well-being

Well-being is a term that refers to experiences of good quality of life and includes three aspects; emotional, social, and physical well-being.

Emotional well-being include:      Psychological health and adjustment  
Feelings  
Self-esteem, self-concept and self-control  
Personal values  
Spiritual beliefs

Social well-being include:      Social network / Intimate others  
Family  
Friends  
Co-workers  
Neighbourhood and community

Physical well-being include:      Physical health  
Personal hygiene  
Nutrition  
Exercise  
Grooming and clothing  
General physical appearance  
Living standard

These definitional terms were adopted from Dictionary of behavioral science written by Benjamin B. Wolman, (1989), Harris (1995), Hiebert (1983) and Scupin (2000).



































































































































































































































