Reflexivity and women's agency

Reflexivity and Women's Agency: A Critical Realist Morphogenetic Exploration of the Life Experience of Sri Lankan Women

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Abstract

While the vital contribution of feminist scholarship is acknowledged, it has been criticised for overly relying on the influence of society upon women's lives. In this paper, I demonstrate the usefulness of also considering the influence of agency upon women's lives, specifically agential reflexivity. Using the work and life histories of a group of Sri Lankan women, I use Margaret Archer's morphogenesis to show how investigating reflexivity can provide greater insights into the subtleties associated with women's agency in relation to how they consciously (but fallibly) organise their life journeys and react to oppression, demonstrate resistance and effect emancipation. My research reveals latent aspects of women's agency within a postcolonial Third World social context, where an enduring patriarchal social system intersects with modernity and subjects women to complex social and occupational circumstances. This paper contributes to the field of women's studies by showing how the morphogenetic approach can address the problem of conflationary theorising within feminist scholarship.

Key Words: Women's agency, emergent powers, morphogenetic approach, reflexivity, women, Sri Lanka

Introduction

While feminism has been credited for uncovering 'some of the darkest and deepest recesses of sociology', it appears that 'many feminists now 'forget' to address 'woman' as an object of their research, using instead debates from feminist theory about gender, life itself or relations …' (Skeggs 2008, 670). Even though feminist work has had a dramatic impact in drawing the attention of scholars, policy makers and managers to the social and institutional levels of gender inequality (e.g. Acker 2006, Lewis 1997, Liff and Cameron 1997), the differing responses of women, both individually and collectively, are under-represented in feminist discourse (Assiter 2016, Dy, Lee, and Marlow 2014, Price 2014). 'Feminism [thus] has arrived at a philosophical impasse which only a return to (critical) realism can resolve' (New 1998, 2). In responding to such assertions, this paper explores women's experience empirically and argues that Archer's morphogenetic approach (MA) (1995, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013, 2015) provides a novel methodological possibility to incorporate women's agency in the analysis. The existing attempts to explore women's experience (e.g. Bihagen and Ohls 2006, Kamenou 2008, Kamenou, Netto, and Fearfull 2013) appear to underplay 'reflexivity' - the central tenet in Archer's social theory, which considers reflexivity as the dominant way individuals effect agency. Integrating reflexivity in the study of women's experience is therefore vital, as most of the existing accounts of

(women's) agency are based on 'an elisionist rather than an emergentist ontology', thus committing the error of conflation (Clegg 2016, 499). Conflationary theorising tends to take an epiphenomenal stance regarding social reality, granting primacy either to structure (upward conflation) or to agency (downward conflation); if not, the two are conceptualised as mutually-constitutive (central conflation) (Archer 2003). The focus of critical realism, particularly the work of Margaret Archer, is to present a viable alternative to conflationary theorising. Therefore, using Archer's work, which offers sociological currency to individuals' everyday reflexivity, to understand women's agency can provide new insights into women's responses to the social influences on their lives. The MA offers a novel way to understand oppression, resistance and emancipation 'as a process within an ontologically stratified account of reality that is mindful of the contingency' (Brock and Carrigan 2014, 378) of women's lives. Therefore, drawing profoundly on the work of Margaret Archer, this paper, focuses on the questions: (1) how can reflexivity help address the problem of limited agency granted to women within existing feminist scholarship? (2) How can reflexivity provide insights into the life strategies of contemporary Sri Lankan women within an enduring patriarchal social system that intersects with a modern social system?

This paper offers a theoretical contribution to women's studies by applying the MA to the analysis of the life and work histories of 25 women, gathered from Sri Lanka. These women face a dual social system in which a traditional patriarchal social system coexists with a modern social system. This study extends the application of the MA, which is under-represented as a research approach in the studies of post-colonial Third World countries and reveals latent aspects of women's agency. It demonstrates how examining the different modes of reflexivity can provide insights into the differential responses generated by women in confronting the causal powers of this dual social system. This paper shows the potential of reflexivity in understanding how women consciously craft their life courses, including their conscious choices of 'work', to accomplish different ends. It is emphasized that knowledge of an actor's reflexive orientation can provide an explanation for the observation that not all responses of women necessarily result in social change or transformation. Hence, this paper offers a reflexive lens to look at how women consciously organise their life journeys, instead of their experiences being viewed completely socially determined.

The first section of this paper uses Archer's work to explain how a morphogenetic view of women's agency can overcome the problem of conflationary theorising. Details of the current study are then outlined, including the research context, methods and approaches to data analysis. The findings are then presented, illustrating how women reflexively craft their life journeys according to their orientations to a particular reflexive mode. Finally, the findings are discussed, with emphasis on the importance of taking reflexivity into account in studying women's experience.

A Morphogenetic View of (Women's) Agency

In its most basic form, *agency* implies an individual's ability to act (Archer 2000). As Maxwell and Aggleton (2014, 801) suggest: '… agency is expressed, made visible and, crucially, only has an effect through the particular social practices that it drives'. Therefore, through *agency* individuals actively formulate 'life projects' that are their solutions to the social influence upon their lives (Archer 2007). These individual responses, in turn, reproduce, transform or reorient social structures (Archer 2003). *Agency,* individually or collectively, therefore, is held to have the capacity to generate resistance as well as compliance (Martin 2006). Most importantly, agency '… invokes an ability to overcome barriers, to question or confront situations of oppression and deprivation, and, as individuals

or together with others, to have influence and be heard in society' (Hanmer and Klugman 2016, 237).

Yet, '[w]ithin sociology, the concept of agency has been a continuing source of debate …' (Maxwell and Aggleton 2014, 800). Women's agency therefore remains a disputed issue and feminist theory has been criticised for granting limited agency to women (e.g. Clegg 2006, Mader 2016, Tomlinson et al. 2013). 'Women have been linked to lack of agency', for example in making decisions such as on social mobility (Ramos and Martin-Palomino 2015, 1). Scholars (e.g. Aboim 2010, Rao 2014) argue that, historically, the contribution of women has been devalued, particularly for women's reproductive responsibilities, compared to that of men, who are associated with productive activities. Thus, women have been subjected to biased recognition and treatment that limited opportunities for advancement (Rao 2014). As scholars such as Skeggs (2008) and Tomlinson et al. (2013) argue, much of the recent critical studies of women's experience has drawn upon postmodern/social constructivist thinking, based on techniques aimed to explore how discourses such as stereotyping shape their experience, which discounts agency. While such analyses 'provide *empirical* illustrations of discourses being resisted, the question of how such action is to be *theorized* is problematic' within the constructivist theory (O'Mahoney 2007, 479-80). In seeking to redress this problem of the 'dissolved self' within post-structural/postmodern feminist work, recent studies have attempted to draw upon realist philosophy (Kamenou, Netto and Fearfull 2013, Kamenou 2008, Charrad 2010). However, these studies do not fully explore 'women's agency', for example, by taking advantage of the rich methodological opportunity offered by the MA.

The starting point of the social theory put forward by Archer is the proposition that the social world consists of both structure and agency. In developing her social theory, Archer retains the key assumptions of critical realism, and places greater emphasis on the central premise of '… the primacy of practice rather than language' (Clegg 2016, 502). Social practice, for Archer, is a spatio-temporal process that takes place under pre-given natural, structural and cultural conditions (objective enablements and constraints), constituting the preconditions for social action (Mader 2016). '[O]ntologically, reality is understood to be stratified such that different levels (e.g. the psychic, the self, the social, and the cultural) are characterised by their own emergent properties and powers' (López 2009, 173). A stratified social ontology allows both 'parts' (structure and culture) and 'people' (agency) to have emergent powers that remain irreducible to each other (Archer 1995).

This irreducibility entails the concept of 'emergence'. Through the concept of 'emergence', Archer provides explanations on how an entity can be causally efficacious on its own right. Furthermore, the concept of analytical dualism is used to demonstrate 'parts' and 'people' as inseparable, yet operating independently, such that '[t]heir irreducibility to one another *entails examining the interplay between them'* (Archer 2003, 2: emphasis in original). Structure, culture and agency consist of unique and varied emergent powers of their own. These structural, cultural and personal emergent powers (SEPs, CEPs and PEPs respectively) are causally efficacious on each other (Archer 2000). SEPs and CEPs influence individuals in terms of constraints and enablements and individuals use their PEPs to mediate such influence upon their lives. The main aim of the MA, therefore, is to identify a way to distinguish the 'parts' and 'people' in providing a grounding to observe their interplay (Archer 2003). More importantly, the MA allows us to 'address the issue of separate but entangled processes in a way that does not lead to central conflation' (Clegg 2016, 501). Archer views SEPs, CEPs and PEPs as necessarily shaping social action. Therefore, she

asserts that any social analysis should incorporate these separate elements discretely and their association with each other should be understood and explained.

Most importantly, Archer's social theory holds that reflexivity is the way the individual and society are linked, and it is through reflexivity that their interplay can be observed. Archer (2000, 2003) considers both the 'self' and PEPs as emerging from this interaction of the individual with society, yet she grants autonomy to the 'self' from both society and one's biological constitution. The 'self' consists of a continuous sense stretched between the biological make-up and the social becoming of the individual (Archer 2007). Thus, the conceptualisation of agency as having reflexive powers allows understanding of how actors are able to distance themselves from society and reflect on the social influence upon their lives (Mader 2016). An emergent account of (women's) agency, therefore suggests that actors are not solely the product of or determined by the *social*.

'Internal conversations or reflexivity' is the dominant manner in which actors effect agency (Archer 2003). Individuals are capable of having internal dialogue with themselves about themselves – their situations, behaviour, values and aspirations (Elder-Vass 2010, 102). Thus, they are able to actively organise their life journeys towards a desired end – a modus vivendi (Archer 2012). Actors generate varied, novel, creative and spontaneous reflexive responses to mediate the divergent causal powers of social structures (Archer 2007). Through a continuous sense of self, individuals consciously work at attaining a personal and social identity that complements their ultimate life concerns (Archer 2000). Archer's theory emphasises that not only do actors consciously attempt to gain personal and social identities that are reflective of their ultimate life concerns, but they use 'work' as an enabling strategy in such endeavours. 'Work' is a way to reaffirm personal identity and ensure one's 'social becoming' by assuming specific social positions. The social positions sought by each individual differ based on their ultimate life concerns. Archer argues that actors, drawing on their social circumstances, consciously accomplish a life of their own, a life that is not (completely) socially determined or linguistically conceived. Reflexivity thus possesses 'causal efficacy – towards ourselves, our society and relations between them' (Archer 2003, 9). However, Archer also reminds us that, 'Nevertheless, … agents can only know themselves and their circumstances under their own descriptions, which are ever fallible, as is all our knowledge. If they get … these seriously wrong, then they will pay the objective price, which may give them occasion to correct their views. … [U]nless agents did subjectively conceive of courses of action in society, then nothing would activate the causal powers of structural and cultural properties to constrain or to enable them (Archer 2003, 15).

The agential responses to SEPs and CEPs further vary among individuals (women) based on the different reflexive modes they practice. Archer recognises four dominant reflexive modalities – communicative (CR), autonomous (AR) meta- (MR) and fractured (FR) reflexivity, each entailing distinct characteristics (see Table 1). Particularly, each reflexive mode generates a different pattern of social mobility and occupational choices. Archer has established that the practice of the three dominant reflexive modes – communicative, autonomous and meta-reflexive – generates social immobility, upward social mobility and volatile social mobility, respectively. Fractured reflexives are identified as having under-developed reflexivity; they therefore do not tend to demonstrate a clear pattern of social mobility. An emergent account of agency therefore enables the understanding of the 'situatedness of agency on the one hand, and the creative and formative potential of subjects on the other … conceived together' (Mader 2016, 441). Thus, a morphogenetic view of agency can provide useful insights into how actors effect agency in demonstrating resistance, overcoming oppression or effecting emancipation.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE (Table One. Summary of the features of reflexive modalities)

The Study

Research Context – Sri Lanka

The fieldwork of this study was conducted in Sri Lanka which has a population of nearly 20 million. Sri Lanka is mainly a Buddhist country, but also consists of minority ethnic and religious groups of Christians, Hindus and Muslims (Fernando and Cohen 2014). Contemporary Sri Lankan society is characterised by a dual social system and this unique social configuration provides an ideal setting to study the complex nature of women's agency. The precolonial, traditional social system is moulded by caste, religious and agricultural systems that exhibit clear patriarchal social elements (Matthews 2004). The colonial occupation that continued for over 450 years in early Sri Lanka, from the early 16th century, has generated a modern social system based on social class (Wickramasinghe 2006). The feudal patriarchal social system that denied individuals any form of social mobility through the enduring caste system was gradually eroded via a mercantile economy introduced through plantation capitalism (Matthews 2004). The emergence of a class system alongside the traditional social system offered many previously suppressed groups, including women, opportunities for social mobility, particularly through education and work (Jayawardena 2007).

Even though Sri Lanka is characterised by traditional gender ideologies – patriarchy, extended family relations and intergenerational caring obligations – nevertheless, in comparison to other South Asian countries, there is widespread acceptance of women's education and occupation (Fernando and Cohen 2013). However, the unequal influence of colonisation in different regions of the country has resulted in the continuation of traditions and practices, making social mobility still a constraint for some women (Wickramasinghe 2006). Scholars (e.g. Fernando and Cohen 2014, Gunawardana 2014, Lynch 2007) argue that, despite the increased opportunities available for women under post-independence, liberalised, political and economic conditions, they must still juggle between occupations and the social obligations of 'a good mother/good woman', demonstrating 'respectable femininity'. Although the 2009 labour force survey identified 90 per cent of women as literate in Sri Lanka (Fernando and Cohen 2014), the social expectation is still for them to fit in with the ideology of a 'respectable woman' or a 'good girl' who possesses good character, and the potential to be a 'good' housewife/mother. These patriarchal expectations that restrict women's progress and social mobility (oppression) seem to continue, at least covertly, notwithstanding the obvious dilution of traditional social barriers. This unique dual social position found in contemporary Sri Lanka arguably demands women to wield unique agential powers to consciously organise their life journeys.

Methods and Approach to Analysis

The data gathering method was 'biographical narrative interviews' which afforded the use of an in-depth qualitative interview approach to explore the subtleties of reflexivity. The interviews addressed both life and work histories, and participants were encouraged to share

their thoughts and experiences freely. The themes of the interviews incorporated the key elements of Archer's reflexive theory. The interviews lasted approximately between 25 and 100 minutes, and were digitally recorded. Interviews that were not in the English language were translated and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded in NVivo. As it accommodates both the themes generated by participants' own narratives in addition to emerging themes, the analysis was guided by the basic principles of the constant comparative method (CCM) (Boeije 2002). The CCM involves breaking down qualitative data into discrete segments that are then coded into themes, as well as identifying emerging themes within the biographical data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The analysis was primarily concerned with identifying the reflexive orientation of each participant. To achieve this purpose, the interviews partly focused on the key criteria presented in Archer's work, viz. the ultimate life concerns, the nature of the natal context, social mobility intentions, nature of internal conversations and contextual/occupational continuity or discontinuity. The biographical interviews further focused on capturing the temporality associated with participants personal and occupational life courses, in relation to past, present and future aspirations. The interviews also focused on the career history of individuals, covering areas such as the nature of their present work, their intentions on acquiring qualifications, skills and experience, *work* aspirations, occupational choices, and the position *work* assumes in their lives. The identification of each participant's dominant reflexive mode was a prerequisite to observe the way the SEPs/CEPs were mediated, and the nature of their life projects.

Participants

The 25 interviews analysed in this paper were obtained from the work and life histories gathered for a larger study that explored the meaning of work in Sri Lanka, which included 90 individuals. All the participants were recruited based on a loose and flexible approach, which combined both convenience and snow-ball sampling methods. Most these women were currently living in urban cities but grew up within rural settings where the traditional social system had a stronger influence. The four exceptions to this, who had grown up in the city, included a systems analyst, two senior bank managers and a TV presenter. Three of the women interviewed were unemployed. The socio-economic classification of the participants is based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), UK. The use of NS-SEC adds a form of structure in mapping the occupations from Sri Lanka within a formal hierarchy, as there is no official recognition of social stratification in Sri Lanka. NS-SEC also allows the inclusion of unemployed members. All the participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant prior to the interview and informed consent was ensured. The analysis identified the 25 women in terms of the four modalities of reflexivity as indicated in the table below. There was only one participant identified as a fractured reflexive (*Sunanda*, 25), who worked as a machine operator in an urban setting. *Sunanda*, did not provide detailed answers to the questions asked and for many open-ended questions, her answer was a smile or a monosyllable *yes* or *no*. Therefore, the analysis below focuses on the other three dominant reflexive modes.

INSERT THE TABLE 2 HERE

Findings

Communicative Reflexive Women and Social Immobility

Six participants were identified as communicative reflexives, including two of the three unemployed participants. While communicative reflexivity is strongly associated with social immobility (Archer 2007), the evidence suggests that the lives of communicative reflexive women (CRW) cannot be generalised as being guided by pre-reflexive habitual action. Instead, these biographies demonstrate greater levels of reflexive engagement in actively *staying put*. In a society characterised by the elements of patriarchy (Fernando and Cohen 2014), CRW appear to consciously *continue* and *reproduce* the established social and cultural forms. Nevertheless, CRW's endeavours to ensure contextual continuity involve greater reflexive engagement in (fallible) articulation of life strategies. The findings suggest that settling for modest occupations, voluntary step-downs and under-employment, involvement in familial trade, or voluntary unemployment are common strategies they employ to ensure contextual continuity. CRW seem to consciously maintain the ideologies of *ideal mother/ideal woman* which requires solid reflexive engagement. CRW are aware of the social price to pay in (fallibly) accomplishing a modus vivendi reflective of their ultimate life concern of *family* (Archer 2003). *Work,* for them, appears to be a way to staying close to family. CRW's biographies provide evidence resonating with Archer's findings that communicative reflexives create *micro worlds* around *family*. For example, this excerpt from *Kanthi's* biography demonstrates the range of reflexive responses a CRW generates in attempting to achieve her ultimate life concern:

> I always tried to build up the family… to a good level. I cared for children, didn't care for myself, even if my husband lost his job, I committed myself for him, for the family. I ensured all the obligations, I always wanted to spend a beautiful family-life. But I don't think I had it 100%; once husband lost his job, that became really difficult, but still I always cared for and did everything for children… Sometimes when I have problems, there are moments that I feel like committing suicide, but also, I always think, I lived my whole life without my mother, I shouldn't let my children go through the same worry [cries]… I think things have worked out more than I expected, I am very happy, even the family didn't think I will come up to this level, specially after husband's problems, everyone is surprised to see how I have managed all that. The other employees from the branch at the time called me '*diriya mawa*' [courageous mother] (Kanthi, 51, Public Sector Deputy Bank Manager).

As *Kanthi's* biography suggests, her modus vivendi is clearly a *happy family life*. A main feature of *Kanthi's* biography is the extra-ordinary reflexive engagement she demonstrated in attempting to reach her modus vivendi, overcoming a range of challenges cast upon her. *Work* is clearly the way she has managed to keep her family intact. *Kanthi's* determination to hold her family together, educate her two daughters and give them in marriage, has demanded life-long reflexive engagement.

The claim that women tend to reproduce and continue existing structures, cultures and traditions can be explained through Archer's identification of the *evasive* stance taken by communicative reflexives towards structural powers. The evidence suggests CRW prefer to avoid the activation of new SEPs/CEPs by staying put. Through this *evasive* strategy, CRW generally prefer to avoid being subjected to new social and occupational conditions. However, the findings also demonstrate that, if it leads to contextual continuity in the long-run, CRW tend to confront novel social and occupational situations in the short-term. For example, *Yasoma* (35, teacher) in this sub-group spent several years in a training college and in other rural areas, away from her home, in fulfilling the requirement of becoming a qualified teacher prior to managing a transfer to her home town. Their *evasive* strategy is also

evident in the tendency to settle for modest occupations, indicating a degree of voluntary under-employment. CRW tend to readily make 'objective self-sacrifices' (Archer, 2007) in accomplishing their ultimate life concerns. For example, *Romain*, with a privileged middle-class social background that offers a range of 'social bonuses and relational goods' (Archer 2012), is not keen on exploiting such opportunities for economic or occupational success. Instead, she appears content with modest occupational prospects that allow her adequate time to be with her family. She explains:

> I don't have a plan on what I want to do. I have... backups for so many things, in case if something fails. I found a job at [a name of a private company] as a marketing executive that was a UK body. I was handling the branch office as a marketing executive. Then I worked at [a name of a five-star hotel] in public relations. *Ammi* [mother] was scolding 'you don't have even a little qualification', so I started CIM [and] completed only the diploma level, didn't complete the rest... I do not want to really commit to a marketing job. I wouldn't pursue a career as a fulltime TV presenter either... If it is a talk show, a fun show, stuff like that, then I will go and do it... At every interview people keep asking what is your five-year plan, what do you have next thing in mind. I don't know. I am more like as the way things go... My mother owns a salon: I know how to do a part of that, but I don't have a passion for it as such... Another concern is whether my future partner will mingle with my friends, in case if they marry a director and if I marry a normal managerial person, and when we go to a party, will we be mixed? Or will we be ditched, that worry is there (Romain, 24, Assistant Manager/TV Presenter).

Romain's biography, similarly to those of other women in this subgroup, provides many examples of CRW's intentions of attaching themselves strongly to the interests of the family. Taking up family traditions and trades, getting into occupations that enable them to stay close to family, fulfilling family expectations, or in some cases being voluntarily unemployed to fully commit to the family, are some of the ways in which CRW reproduce traditions. These women appear to be the carriers of social ideals such as 'carer', 'mother', or 'good woman' situated within this continuing patriarchal social system. They seem to willingly and consciously adapt to such normative expectations. Their choices of 'work' are those that entail stability and stagnation (Archer, 2007). For example, *Shanthi's* biography provides many examples showing her conscious efforts to reproduce social ideals which reinforce her commitment to continuing and respecting family traditions:

> Then I was doing my A/Ls and I got selected to the University, but that's when my marriage took place. I actually married the man my sister was supposed to marry; she had been proposed to marry him. My husband was a close friend of my elder brother... However, sister was having an affair with another guy. So, when my husband's family came to see her, she refused to marry him and eloped with her lover. My brother found it very difficult to face his friend... I wouldn't have any affair with a boy, as I was very scared, my brother was so tough, I had seen him beating my sister for having that affair, she was scolded every day, so, I never had an affair. One day [he] himself came to me, and said 'can I ask something?' and proposed to marry me... I told him 'I wouldn't do anything against my family's wish... so if you want you can go and ask them'... He asked from my family... they gave consent as they had that guilt... That was my obedience to parents and family... that is why I took that decision, and why I couldn't go to University... Later, my husband managed to get this job for me, he tried a teaching job for me too, which didn't work out, I liked this one... (Shanthi – Health Management Assistant – public sector, 45).

Shanthi has sacrificed her opportunity for higher education, occupational success and even her freedom to choose a life-partner, to protect the family honour. This sacrifice by *Shanthi* shows that she does not fully operate through internalised behaviours. She is having to generate spontaneous, creative and reflexive responses to ensure her life concerns are

accomplished. The biographies of employed CRW show that 'work' is the anchor that holds their 'contexts' and 'concerns' together as they are in occupations consciously sought within their natal context. Therefore, communicative reflexivity, as these biographies demonstrate, should not be considered as a case of absent or passive agency.

Autonomous Reflexive Women and Upward Social Mobility

Thirteen women were identified as practicing autonomous reflexivity, and they were all in full-time employment. In comparison to CRW, autonomous reflexive women's (ARW) life journeys are patterned differently. Conforming to the dominant features of autonomous reflexives already established by Archer, these ARW's ultimate life concern is clearly *work*. The biographies of the ARW demonstrate a clear career vision and a sense of strategic sensitivity towards opportunities available in their social and occupational contexts. ARW take a *strategic* stance towards structural and cultural powers, which is mainly implemented through *work* related life projects and is also reflective of their non-hesitant attitude towards violating the traditions and norms to reach a desired modus vivendi. A modus vivendi for autonomous reflexives, as identified by Archer, is predominantly characterised by occupational success and material gain. The biographies of the ARW in this study reveal that their lives are devoted to *work*, through which they gain a degree of autonomy in life. *Charu's* biography is an ideal example of autonomous reflexivity, in which she considers her prime concern in life is *work*. She conceived her *work*-related life project as a child and today she is clearly a contented woman, experiencing the satisfaction of being a banking professional. Through *work*, *Charu* has managed to confront the inherent constraints women must encounter in this traditional society:

> [A]ll I knew was, I was in love with [the bank] since I was going to school. I just wanted to join that bank. That was my pure objective in life… I used to walk past [the bank] every day… So, all I wanted was to get in there. I knew the kind of life I wanted from the day one… I joined [the bank] … [I]f things don't work out here, if there is no progress here… I will go… Personally, I feel, when it comes to work, you must put everything out there and do what you have to do. I believe my job is to make my boss look good, that's how I operate… I don't really care about the applause and the appreciation as long as my boss looks good… I would just give it 110% if that meant, [s]he never has to ask me twice… as a principle… (Charu, 30, Senior Manager – Private Sector Bank).

Through her confident lone reflexive powers, *Charu* has made use of the social bonuses available to her within her middle-class background to get into and thrive in a middle-class professional occupation. The degree of freedom she has gained has also offered her a greater opportunity to choose her life-partner and make her life choices by herself.

Another dominant feature of ARW is their commitment to acquire *qualifications* and *experience* to strategically enable their occupational progress. The following representative example, from the occupational history of *Sayuri*, demonstrates ARW's *strategic sensitivity* and commitment in acquiring qualifications and experience, the precursor to effecting career progress and upward social mobility:

> I started doing CIMA [Chartered Institute of Management Accounting], I was applying for jobs as well… I applied for banks… [S]tarted doing banking exams ... also an IT diploma… [and] in the meantime bank sent us to [a computer institute] … By then I completed the BCS (British Computer Society) degree… It's B.Sc. equivalent… [next] I did the pre-MBA, as I wasn't selected for the MBA, but in the second year I got selected to do the MBA… by then the management changed again, the new GM [general manager] is tough, very quickly I learnt he needed real hard work. So I thought it would be tough to manage the MBA considering my workload… I had to be available all twenty-four hours… therefore, I applied for an HR

postgraduate, an M.Sc. at [a name of a University] by then… I thought HRM would be good for me and easy to do… even with my workload… I did the HRM postgraduate in 2007… and passed with a merit. After that, in 2009, I did the M.Sc. When the M.Sc. classes ended, I only had a PG [Diploma]… [the institute] … decided to offer the [PG Diploma] second year… so that is the MBA… I enrolled in that too… I will be able to complete both the M.Sc. and MBA… The MBA will help me, even after my retirement (Sayuri, 50, Senior Manager – IT, Public Sector Bank).

The number of qualifications that *Sayuri* has obtained, her ongoing educational commitments – even at the age of 50 – and her post-retirement work plans are all evidence of the ARWs life-long focus on *work*. *Sayuri*, though married, has not had any children and she did not explain the reasons for this. Despite the challenges of Sri Lankan women situated in a patriarchal social context, ARW consciously effect a considerable degree of independence. They seem to challenge what Lynch (2007) considers the patriarchal ideals that necessitate an early marriage, and the sacrifice of educational and occupational pursuits. Instead, ARW's life strategies include: delaying marriage or having children; finding a husband of their choice; and avoiding proposed marriages. For example, unlike *Charu* or *Sayuri,* with their middle-class backgrounds, *Sakunthala* – born in a rural, poverty-stricken village – is from a deprived working-class social background. While most women in her village would settle for early marriages and a life dependent on their husbands, *Sakunthala* has used her reflexive powers to confront and mediate a great number of constraints that were activated by her actions. *Sakunthala* therefore demonstrates resistance to social expectations. She has achieved this resistance through strategic action based on her intuition that education and occupation are the only way to get away from the oppressive conditions. She explains:

The village I was born … is very rural, we didn't have even a pair of shoes… I grew up at my grandmother's, as my parents couldn't afford to educate us, we were all very poor… Many others in the village had [love] affairs when they were seventeen or eighteen. They didn't have money to continue studies, so they would elope with a guy… at an early age or marry someone proposed to them... There is nothing more than that in their lives… We did not have money to do science subjects. When you do arts, you can do it at least by cramming. Therefore, I chose arts… Yet, I didn't have enough marks to enter the university. I was short of ten marks... I didn't try a second time… I obtained the degree by doing it externally. I spent a long time without a teaching job. I… even worked as a cashier at [a supermarket] ... Then I worked as an area manager at a cleaning service. After four years since graduation only I got the job: I sat for a teaching exam… That's how I got the job… To become a teacher was the ambition from the childhood… I knew I must have a job to get out of my situation... My husband… is much educated… more educated than myself… He does just the same kind of a job as mine… That's the main reason I chose him… I was searching for the right person, so my marriage was a bit delayed… I thought I would be able to find someone of my social status… but if I got married to someone who wouldn't understand what I do, who wouldn't value what I do, it would have been a struggle. The villagers gossiped, ridiculed me for my delayed marriage so much; that hurt my parents a lot (Sakunthala, Teacher, 30).

Sakunthala's biography illustrates how a woman uses her reflexive powers to create a life of her own amidst a gamut of social and cultural constraints. She resists the powers of the patriarchal social system through hard work and commitment to a career. As a child, she realised that to have a better life she would have to do things differently from her fellow village girls. She has actively developed a reflexive life project – to become a teacher – which is a realistic target considering her disadvantaged social circumstances. She has worked extremely hard, mediating many constraints, and violating societal and cultural norms with her life-long commitment to education. *Sakunthala* is now content with her achievements and is planning to further succeed in her career. She believes in hard work and

the importance of work in life (to ensure upward social mobility). *Sakunthala's* life history, like all the women in this subgroup, supports the contention that *work* even becomes an emancipatory strategy in overcoming oppression. These findings suggest that, within this research context, the outcome of the practice of autonomous reflexivity involves 'transformation' of social structures and cultural forms. This finding therefore implies that, unlike the case for CRW, the agency of the ARW challenges the established customs, practices, norms and ideals within contemporary Sri Lankan society.

Meta-reflexive Women and Lateral Social Mobility

Five participants, including one of the three unemployed women, were identified as meta-reflexives. Conforming to Archer's findings, the meta-reflexive women (MRW), in common with ARW, appeared extremely comfortable with their own reflexivity. Claiming another unique patterning of life courses, MRW often engage in 'social critique' (Archer 2007). They are committed to moral and ethical considerations and their ultimate life concerns are placed upon value commitments. These self-inflicted ideologies appear to supersede even *work*. As illustrated by *Waruni*'s statement below, the biographies of all the MRW in this study demonstrated that their occupational contexts are consciously (but fallibly) accomplished platforms that enable them to live out their value commitments:

> I am happy about the work I am doing currently. I do not decide whether to stay on a job based on its salary. I expect recognition and self-respect more than a salary, which I feel I receive in working for a prestigious bank. Whether I can be satisfied with what I do, is all I care about the most. I wouldn't mind where I work. Sometimes the return will not be that great, but it will satisfy myself… I am not a person who will go behind other people asking for favours. I wouldn't care… whether that is the GM [general manger] or the DGM [deputy general manager], if there is anything to be told, I tell it off to the face. If I can't do something I would tell that too. I do not care… (Waruni, 34, Public Sector Bank Manager–E-remittance).

Waruni, an educated woman from a privileged social background, also shows signs of having practised a degree of autonomous reflexivity in the past, in gaining qualifications and a job she liked. Due to her inherited social capital, together with her experience in the banking sector, *Waruni* has potentially rewarding employment prospects. Yet, she appears content where she is presently employed, in a public-sector firm with a comparatively lower salary to private sector jobs. As in this excerpt from her interview, *Waruni's* whole biography demonstrates that what has mattered to her most in life, from childhood, is her self-respect and dignity. This ideology relating to 'self-respect' is her ultimate life concern and through work *Waruni* has attempted to find/create an ideal setting which is conducive to realising this concern.

Work, therefore, appears to be a dominant life strategy for MRW too, in seeking a modus vivendi that will satisfy their value-related life concerns. MRW seem to even go a step further than ARW in confronting SEPs/CEPs. Through *work* MRW attempt to transform structures and cultures to create social/occupational outlets conducive to their ideals, often paying a high social price. They also demonstrate a *rigid* and *subversive* stance towards SEPs/CEPs. For example, *Padma* represents one of the most oppressed lives among the women in this study, but her approach to life as a meta-reflexive is unique. She has paid a high social cost during her determined life-journey, seeking a modus vivendi that offers her freedom from the oppressive conditions within a rural patriarchal social setting. The man she was in love with, had abandoned her for choosing to go to the Middle-East for employment in her attempt to overcome poverty. The social recognition of a woman who leaves her home unaccompanied, particularly to go to the Middle-East to serve as a housemaid, is very low (Lynch, 2007),

however poor the family or woman might be. *Padma* has risked her good name, self-respect and the social identity of a *respectable woman* by leaving her natal context for an occupation. Yet, rather than continuing to live away, meta-reflexive *Padma* has chosen to come back and live in the same village, which subjects her to a great deal of harassment and ridicule, questioning her character for being single, which is an unorthodoxy in this rural setting. Yet, as her words that follow show, *Padma* continues to maintain her *rigid* attitude in safeguarding her ultimate life concerns of freedom and independence:

> If I needed money, I wouldn't have come back [from the Middle-East]. I do not want money… I actually do not like money. I have enough freedom to do as I like, but I don't misuse my freedom… I am not scared. I live on, if the path I tread on is right why should I be scared? No one can ask me why… I do not get married, or advise me on how I should live, for I am very independent and I do not become a burden to the others… There is no happiness in this life. I like to lead the life with very little money and problems (Padma, 40, Money Lender).

Furthermore, although MRW appear to be socially and occupationally unsettled, they still demonstrate rigidity about their value commitments and are not ready to negotiate them (Archer 2003). Below, an excerpt from *Padma's* biography further demonstrates MRW's active efforts to overcome the SEPs/CEPs rather than surrendering to them, despite the high social price they have to pay:

> It is very difficult for a single woman to live in this society… [W]hen people come to harass me, I tend to become tough. People are jealous about me… as I earn money just staying at home. It is all my money but people sometimes are curious about how I live this way without obviously working hard. Men expect undue advantage from me, and when they are unable to succeed in that they start spreading rumours about me… I don't know why they do this. I help them. I try and give them money when they need it… There are many rumours spread by the villagers… about me going out of the village and earn money by misbehaving. I actually do not have a need like that… There are situations where I almost felt like committing suicide, they have subjected me to that much of harassments. But, I am not scared. I live on. If the path I tread on is correct, why should I be scared? No one can ask me why I am single, why I do not get married, or advise me on how to live my life. I am very independent and I do not become a burden to the others… (Padma, 40, Money Lender).

In her own way, she expresses her attitude: 'when they come to harass me, I become tough', which is clearly the way *Padma* demonstrates her resistance to the powers emanating from the patriarchal social system. *Padma* is aware that the harassment will never end, but her confrontational approach to it is clearly different from women who practice other reflexive modes. The MRW's biographies thus demonstrate a unique and different approach to confronting the SEPs/CEPs, in comparison to CRW and ARW. Thus, the MRW's actions that tend to dispute and challenge the established social and cultural ideals appear to be the strongest of the conscious efforts by women in effecting emancipation.

Discussion

Generally, women's progress is measured in terms of their levels of literacy, educational attainment, and employment status. In Sri Lanka, these indicators are recognised as better than in the other South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan or Nepal (Fernando and Cohen, 2014). In fact, such a homogenous view of all women as a single group can only paint a faint picture of the reality. Instead, the knowledge concerning women's reflexivity provides more subtle insights into the diversity in their life experiences, not only within both caste and class structures, but also within an enduring patriarchal social system. While a large proportion of Sri Lankan women are full-time housewives, another significant portion of

women are in employment. The feminist argument is that the system of patriarchy situates women into a subordinate position relative to men, in both social and occupational spheres (Acker 2006). However, this fails to acknowledge women's active and reflexive agency. The general acceptance of the idea that women lead an inferior or an oppressed life, dominated by men – and that this state of affairs is natural or normal to all women, and characteristic of the Third World (Lynch, 2007) – undermines women's individual attempts towards resistance and emancipation. In this context, this paper presents a novel sociology of women's emancipation through a morphogenetic lens, as an alternative to the elitionist views of social reality.

While Archer's reflexive modes are useful in understanding the various emancipatory efforts of individual women, nevertheless, they should not be considered to be deterministic. Particularly, this study has found a tendency for the women to create micro-worlds, in which they practice temporary or provisional reflexive modes alongside their dominant enduring reflexive modality. For instance, a CRW may practice autonomous reflexivity to get a specific job through education, which will enable her intention of being in the natal context, or an MRW may look for a compatible occupational outlet to live out her value commitments. Through these differing reflexive modes, women consciously effect divergent patterns of social mobility. Therefore, this study urges future studies on women to be more sensitive towards the variety and diversity involved in women's responses to SEPs/CEPs, owing to their differing voluntary and involuntary occupational, social and cultural circumstances, as well as variations in reflexivity.

The awareness of the dominant reflexive modality practiced by a woman is therefore only a guide to explain the doings of individuals within society. Nevertheless, such an understanding can set us in a non-conflationary direction to better understand individual action. The way CRW craft their life journeys mediating the SEPs/CEPs is largely shaped by their commitment to 'family'. The feminist argument that 'women use their agency within the limits of existing rules and resources [and] … take into consideration social values, meanings and norms when they act and initiate change' (Charrad 2010, 519) appears to be consistent with CRW. Women with this orientation prefer to operate within the boundaries of 'respectable femininity' that demands adherence to existing moral rules and gendered expectations (Fernando and Cohen 2014, Radhakrishnan 2009). However, the social circumstances that the present CRW occupy demand creative responses to ensure that they achieve their goals of contextual continuity and social immobility. Evidently, their pre-reflexive habitual behaviour appears to be inadequate in their attempts to hold traditional practices together. The biographies examined demonstrate the centrality of active agency, effected through reflexivity, as a key agential property through which contemporary CRW manoeuvre their life journeys. However, based on the biographies of unemployed women who were full-time housewives, this research suggests the question whether they conditioned themselves to practice communicative reflexivity, as their underprivileged involuntary life circumstances did not offer any other social bonuses. This is a possible question for future research.

Nevertheless, the case of ARW and MRW appears to be more consistent with the argument that women, as active subjects, desire autonomy and emancipation (e.g. Atasoy 2006). 'Work' is the ultimate life concern for ARW, through which they aim to effect upward social mobility. In this quest for occupational success, these women do not hesitate to break the normative barriers of *respectable femininity* or established norms within this patriarchal system. Material and financial success, mainly attempted through constant dedication in acquiring qualifications, experience, and occupational progress, is a recurring feature in their

biographies. Women with this orientation demonstrate a high degree of reflexive engagement in consciously crafting their life courses. In their undisputed focus on 'work', that offers a sense of autonomy, ARW create an outlet to demonstrate resistance towards the oppressive mechanisms that operate in their world. Through educational/occupational/economic success, they gain a source of power to confront traditional norms. Thus, *work* appears to hold emancipatory potential for ARW.

MRW claim another unique patterning of life journeys, devoted to self-inflicted value ideals. Their reflexive life projects entail *work* choices which are attempts to find/create occupational settings that provide congruency to sustain these value commitments. These ideologies set MRW apart from other women and the way that they respond to oppression is different to others. Women with this orientation are insubordinate towards SEPs/CEPs and not ready to negotiate or compromise their value ideals. Because of this *subversive* stance, MRWs find constant incongruence between their contexts and concerns. This incongruence leads them to find or create conducive social and occupational settings, generating a volatile or lateral pattern of social mobility. These women may also practice other reflexive modes such as autonomous reflexivity temporarily, in creating opportunities that they think would offer better opportunities to realise their value-committed life expectations. MRW do not hesitate to challenge or contradict the established practices, beliefs, traditions and norms of the patriarchal social system in trying to guard their value commitments. The choices of *work* for MRW could also be an emancipatory strategy to overcome oppression, demonstrating their *subversive* stance towards society.

Conclusion

This paper makes a theoretical contribution to the field of women's studies by demonstrating how a more nuanced understanding of women's experience can be achieved by the application of Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity and her typology of reflexive modes. The paper also provides novel understandings of the social reality of women in a postcolonial Third World society, with a dual social system, in which a traditional patriarchal social system and a modern social system co-exist. Feminist scholarship, which has brought group level discrimination against women to the fore, has so far failed to unveil the latent nature of emancipatory attempts of women in their day-to-day life. This study, demonstrates that individuals (women) have their own powers and properties that are not reducible to social contexts. Such a non-conflationary view of social reality provides a more viable methodological possibility to develop a sociology of women's emancipation. This paper has demonstrated how the SEPs/CEPs constrain or enable the social action of women, and how women, in turn, generate differential reflexive responses to mediate such social powers. These responses tend to reproduce, transform or reorient existing social structures and cultural forms. By incorporating temporality in her analysis, Archer's social theory supports the contention that 'agency [is] not … a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but … a capacity for action … that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (Mahmood 2001:203, quoted in Charrad 2010, 518).

This paper also recognises the unique role that *work* plays in women's lives in enabling the conscious manoeuvring of their life journeys. 'Work' assumes a vital position in all kinds of reflexives, but for different reasons in relation to their ultimate life concerns. While it is noted that a few CRW were *voluntarily* unemployed, *work* generally serves as the anchor through which they effect contextual continuity. Through *work* ARW effect upward social mobility, gaining occupational and economic success that grants them a degree of power to strategically confront the powers of patriarchal system. For the MRW, *work* is an avenue to live out their ultimate life concern of value commitments and to demonstrate their *subversive*

stance towards oppressive conditions. Even though the ultimate life concerns differ among practitioners of different reflexive modes, it appears that *work* is the bridge between life concerns and modi vivendi. Thus, *work* holds even the potential of being an emancipatory life strategy in mediating SEPs/CEPs.

Thus, this paper provides an answer to the question whether all responses of women necessarily result in either the reproduction or transformation of existing structures and cultures or whether they operate by pre-reflexive habitual action. Even though scholars (e.g. Gutafsson-Larsson et al. 2007, Ramos and Martin-Palomino 2015) have argued that women's demonstrations of resistance are embedded within male dominant conventional gendered practices, no adequate explanations have been offered relating to such assertions. This work, therefore, stresses that a morphogenetic view of women's agency can provide realistic explanations regarding the subtleties associated with their responses to social powers and observes that not all action by women results in reproducing existing social structures. Only communicative reflexivity is linked with the practices that engender the continuation of subordination. Nevertheless, the reproduction of existing structures by CRW must be understood as a conscious reflexive activity, and the practice of interim reflexive modes by CRW may still contribute in transforming and reorienting existing structures and cultures. The practice of both autonomous and meta-reflexivity by women offers rich insights into their attempts toward resistance against oppression resulting in social transformation and reorientation. The present work demonstrates how a morphogenetic view of agency can explain why we should not consider structure as the single determinant of women's life experience, where group level indicators such as level of education or employment cannot provide an adequate account of the life trajectories of women. Thus, this paper emphasises that '… the biographical trajectory of a given subject is never set in stone, but is rather a result of the reflexive choices they make …' (Carrigan 2011, 465).

Finally, a critical realist morphogenetic account of social action entails acknowledging *fallibility*. Based on the critical realist meta-theoretical assumption that the natural and social worlds exist independently of the fallible knowledge of individuals, the MA accommodates the notion that all human attempts at knowledge could be fallible (López 2009). Therefore, while enabling individuals to reflexively mediate social powers, all such reflexive attempts are assumed to be characterised by *probable fallibility* (Archer 2007). Individuals, thus (fallibly) attempt to satisfy their ultimate life concerns by reflexively formulating *life projects* that they will endeavour to implement in the practical order. Therefore, agents can only anticipate their future and likely occurrences, which are bound to be fallible. In this light, even though the knowledge of a woman's reflexive orientation can provide us with realistic explanations about her approach to the world around her, it is likely she might realise one-day that she has not been able to eradicate her oppressive conditions fully.

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Reflexive mode / Main Features	Communicative	Autonomous	Meta-	Fractured
Ultimate life concern	Family and friends	Work	Self-inflicted value ideologies	Not clear
Social mobility intentions	Immobility & contextual continuity	Upward mobility & contextual discontinuity	Lateral/volatile, often finds contextual incongruence	Unclear, more concerned about present moment
Internal Conversations	Need completion by an interlocutor	Self-contained	Self-contained & critical about own reflexivity	Under-developed
Stance towards structural powers	Evasive, tends to be under community pressure, guided by tradition	Strategic & not hesitant to contradict tradition	Subversive & own ideologies that supersede collective ideologies, engages in constant social critique	unclear
Career orientation	Voluntary step-downs, degree of under-employment, keen on work near home, modest occupations or voluntary unemployment	Clear career vision, many false starts, keen on career progress, committed to acquire qualifications & experience	Focused on jobs located in the social sphere, aims to realise value ideologies through work, work is an avenue of expression	unclear
Reflexive life projects	Aimed at enabling contextual continuity	Anticipatory & opportunistic, aimed at upward social mobility	Solutions to overcome contextual incongruity	Unclear

Modus Vivendi	To be with family and friends	Occupational success and material gains, autonomy	Social and occupational contexts that support value ideals	Unclear
Outcome	Reproduction and continuation of existing structural and cultural forms	Transformation of structural and cultural forms	Reorientation of structural and cultural forms	Lacks purposeful action

Table One. Summary of the features of reflexive modalities

Reflexive Mode	Occupations	Total
Communicative Reflexivity	Housewife (2), Management Assistant (public sector bank), TV Presenter, Deputy Manager (public sector bank), Teacher	6
Autonomous Reflexivity	Senior Manager (public sector bank), Teacher (2), Systems Analyst (2), Packer, Machine Operator (5), Senior Lecturer/Lecturer (2)	13
Meta-Reflexivity	Manager (Public Sector Bank), Senior Lecturer, Money Lender, HR Executive, Housewife (former housemaid).	5
Fractured Reflexivity	Machine operator	1
Total		25

Table Two. Participants in Terms of Their Dominant Reflexive Modality