

An aim of anthropology:

**to make the familiar strange
and the strange familiar**

thereby illuminating both.

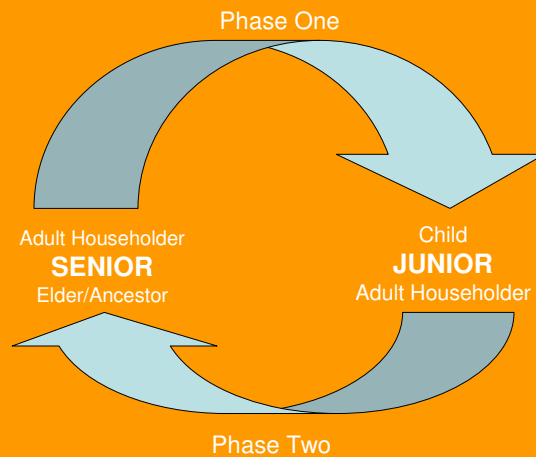
My aims as a cultural anthropologist of aging:

- to make interventions into the ways we think about things (our taken-for-granted assumptions)
 - new, deeper understandings of ourselves and others
 - potentially new, better social arrangements, policies, philosophies

Two prevalent U.S. assumptions that I aim to “make strange” through juxtaposing to India:

- 1) Decline in old age is bad.
- 2) Living independently in late life--alone or with a spouse--is ideal.

Life-long Indian intergenerational reciprocity



First parents, then children, provide to the other: material support, residence, food (cooking and serving), intimate bodily care (bathing, toileting), a body (in birth and reconstructed after death as an ancestor), and love.

A common U.S. model of aging and intergenerational relations

State & Private Institutions

(if necessary)



Parent



Child

An adult child would provide love, visits, phone calls, errands, assistance arranging care—but not ordinarily full material support, co-residence or intimate bodily care (toileting, bathing).

- **In the United States, 80% of the over-65 population lives alone or with a spouse.**
- **Such “independent” living has long been considered a normal and even ideal form of aging.**
- **What is considered less than ideal is to be institutionalized, or to move in with and depend fully on one’s children.**

In India, for those 65 and over--

- **Living alone (4%) or with only a spouse (7%, also often called “alone”) is on the rise (now at 11 percent of the aged population),**
- **but widely thought to be “unnatural” and quite “unthinkable”:**
- **“Human beings have always lived together; it is not part of human nature to live alone.”**
- **“We couldn’t have even *dreamed* earlier that people would be living like this! . . . We had no *concept* at all even that a person could live alone!”**

And living alone is widely regarded as even more culturally bizarre & uncomfortable than living in a group old age home

- **Over the past few decades, old age homes have been rapidly springing up throughout India’s urban and suburban neighborhoods, primarily for the middle- and upper-middle classes--regarded widely as a distinctly “modern” and “Western” mode of managing aging.**

INDIA'S MAINTENANCE AND WELFARE OF PARENTS AND SENIOR CITIZENS BILL 2007

- Legal obligation for kids to care for parents
- Some sons and daughters-in-law going to jail and fined for parental neglect

(Like U.S. child support laws.)

parent → child unidirectional flow

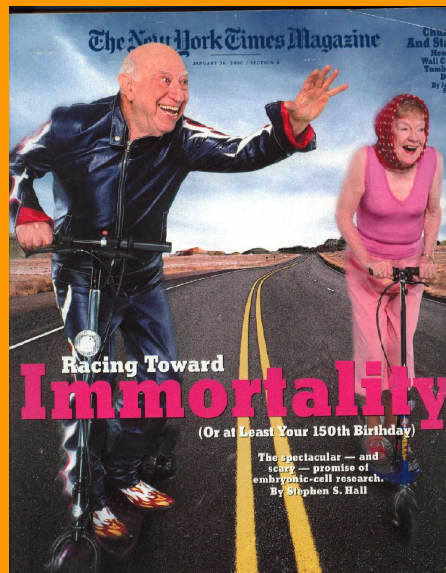
Contrasting welfare policies

In the U.S., elders with adult children making millions can qualify for SSI aged welfare benefits.

In India, aged welfare is only available to elders who can prove they have no sons able at all to support them.

attitudes towards decline and change in late life?

U.S. tendency to prevent or deny the changes and declines of age



A Hindu perspective:

- Life fundamentally *entails* decline and transience—not only in old age, but as an essential feature of the human, material condition.
- Coming to realize this transience can be a positive and enlightening move, potentially making both aging and dying meaningful.

In closing

Examining aging across cultures helps us answer the questions:

- How best to deal with the inevitable transience of the human condition?
- Where *is* the best site of elder care and elder living: the individual, the family, the market, or the state?
- It is likely difficult for most of us here to relinquish a notion that independent, nuclear-family-style living is more desirable, more “advanced,” than life-long mutual interdependence and multi-generational co-residence.
 - But, *is* it?