INTRODUCTION: FACING FRAILTY

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All of the papers presented in this issue confront overtly or implicitly the problem of failing vitality and competence as the prelude to death. Various papers look at adaptations which accommodate frailty and personal strategies of denial of one's own potential frailty and ways of searching for meaning in declining capacities and death.

The concept of retirement and the provision of pensions in the developed world, which enables people to withdraw from active involvement in the sphere of work on reaching a specific age, has resulted in a common acceptance of an age-based definition of "the elderly" or "old age". This means that many active, well and able-bodied people come to be included in this "elderly" category. I remember an interviewer who once worked with me on a survey of people over 65, commenting with surprise that, "most of them are just like us but they've been alive longer". The growth of social gerontology has been led by researchers from the developed world and to a large extent has succeeded in superimposing the age-based (usually 60 or 65) definition of old age on the discipline (e.g. UN 1985) with the occasional qualification that in many developing nations retirement is not an option and that old age is equated with the need for help with the routine chores necessary for survival (see Peil's discussion of Nigeria in a recent issue Vol. 4, No. 2).

While the distinction between the well old and the frail old has been recognized as a cultural universal (Amoss and Harell 1981), in the developed world society tends to impose the label of old age, euphemistically referred to as, for instance, elderly, retired, pensioner, senior citizen etc. and increasingly to mark this transition -- which is not overtly marked by biological change -- by the rite of passage of the retirement party. In most instances, there is a precise point at which the change in status occurs -- one day the person is working and the next not. The transition from well elderly to frail elderly person is less clear-cut, more gradual and ill-defined. It is recognized to have happened rather than witnessed as it happens. It is a transition which occurs in all cultures and in most (but not all) cultures is resisted by the old.

The six papers of this issue are concerned with aspects of the transition into old age focussing primarily on the ways in which elderly people and others recognize, define and face up to or acknowledge the realities of frailty and the finite span of human life. Although emphasizing different aspects of old age, several themes recur.

The first two papers by Milada Kalab (Khmer) and Dianna Shomaker (Navajo) deal with the ways in which two very different cultures accommodate
old age. Kalab’s paper discusses the important role of Theravada Buddhism as a focus for the involvement of elderly people showing how this has undergone change in the context of exile while still providing a way in which the elderly can play significant roles in Cambodian society.

Shomaker also deals with the theme of social change in her discussion of how earlier cultural norms of providing grandparents with grandchildren, who took over those tasks which growing impairment made difficult, have adjusted in response to changes in the social environment. In both these papers the perspective taken is one of cultural adaptation in the face of social change, of norms which accommodate the transition into old age.

The next two papers, the first by Cherry Russell and Harry Oxley (Australia) and the second by Dorothy Jerrome (England), are concerned with adaptation at the level of the individual. They emphasize the creation by elderly people of new roles and values in cultural settings where no generally accepted norms for old age exist. Both papers identify variation in response, an aspect which is frustratingly absent in much that is written about ageing. Also evident in both these papers is the evaluation of health as behaviour and as a basis for status differentiation.

The last two papers by Raili Gothóni (Finland) and Haim Hazan (Israel) both focus on meaning. The contrast between the two papers, however, is stark. Gothóni describes the process of the search for meaning by the individual in the face of death and the struggle for acceptance of and a meaningful completion to life. Hazan’s paper, on the contrary, shows how the frail elderly in Israel are defined as a “symbolic type” by a television fund-raising marathon, whereby the living distance themselves, through the expiation of largesse and collective guilt, from the old who become caricatured as the living dead.

The parallel themes of roles and boundaries are apparent in all these papers. The way in which transitions across boundaries from middle age to well old age to frail old age are perceived, marked, enacted and valued and the meanings implicit in associated behaviours are what this issue is about. The boundary between life and death becomes explicit only in Gothóni’s paper, but death as the ultimate outcome of frailty is implicit in all the papers.

It is the papers on the Khmer and the Navajo – the most traditional cultures represented – that recognize specific cultural roles for old people. It is, therefore, unlikely to be coincidental that in both these cultures kin-terms reflect age relative to the speaker. Amongst the Khmer the domain of religion is, in practice, the responsibility of the old, conferring both respect and defining roles and activities. At the same time the monastery provided a source of support for the aged. The importance of the monastery as a focus for ageing has been carried into exile where the elderly continue to play an important role in religious observations and as an ethnic focus for exiled Cambodians. It is perhaps significant that this is the only paper where identification with ageing is neither shunned nor denied by the people discussed. The influence of Buddhism and the expectation of reincarnation appear to be reflected in an acceptance of ageing and death (which does not mean they are welcome) which are not present