

# Notes on the Application of Anthropology<sup>\*</sup>

*Richard N. Adams*

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From January, 1950 until August, 1951, the writer had the opportunity to work as an applied anthropologist on several public welfare programs in Central America. In the course of the work a number of problems arose which do not seem to have received adequate attention in the literature. While anthropologists are usually called in to deal with subject societies, the main problems to be discussed here deal with issues arising from the fact of an anthropologist working with a specific sponsoring organization. This paper will consist of a description of certain of these problems and conclude with a discussion of generalities which arise from the material.

The program from which the following cases are taken was one carried on in a nutrition experiment project by the *Institution of Nutrition of Central America and Panama* (INCAP).<sup>1</sup> The writer, as anthropologist, joined the project early in 1951 and undertook to work in the Guatemalan Indian village of Magdalena Milpas Altas which had been offering particularly difficult problems for INCAP. The organizational personnel of the project felt that the Indians of this town showed great resistance to the work of the project, and that they were generally uncooperative with the project personnel.

After some discussions with townspeople, and research into

the social organization and medical beliefs and practices, certain foci of trouble became apparent. There was, in the first place, a bad communication system between the field personnel of the project who were working in the town. Second, the nature of the national political situation was such that it entered the local scene in a way which was disturbing to the project. Third, a rather extensive social work program carried on in conjunction with the nutrition project was evidently causing more trouble than aid. And finally, as was to be expected, differences in local medical customs and the subculture of the medical specialists caused uncertainty and distrust. Each of these issues was interrelated with the others, and they are discussed separately in the following only for the sake of convenience.

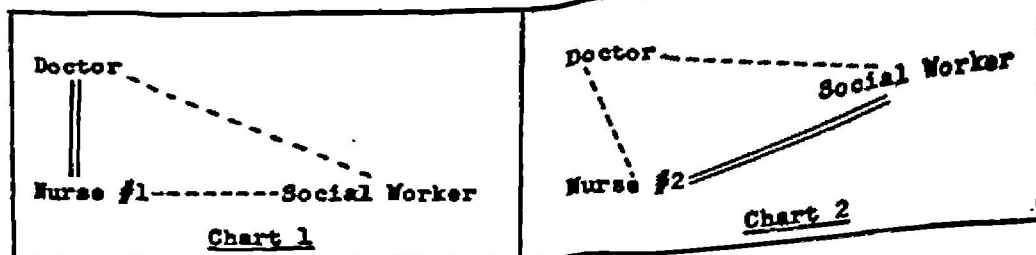
The first indication of bad communication between the members of the field team appeared as complaints from field team members to the effect that the Indians were not showing up for appointments at the clinic. Investigation showed that as often as not, the reason for the failure of the Indians to appear was due to the failure of members of the field team to communicate with each other as to when such and such an Indian was supposed to appear. The field team was headed by a medical doctor who visited the town two or three times a week and was responsible for seeing patients referred to him by his subordinates. Directly under his authority was a nurse who spent every day in the town. In addition, there was a social worker who was not clearly responsible to him; she too spent each day in the town. Due to the fact that there were two nurses who alternated in working in the town, two different communication patterns emerged (see Charts 1 and 2). In one case, the doctor and nurse were good friends, but neither got along well with the social worker; in the other, the nurse and social worker were friends, but neither got along well with the doctor. Both these situations led to failure to communicate between the members of the team, and consequently resulted in appointments being made by one member and ignored by another.

\*The present paper is a revised version of a paper read at the 1952 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia.

\*\*At the time of the work described in the present paper, the writer acted as Ethnologist for the Institute of Social Anthropology of the Smithsonian Institution, and later as Specialist Grantee of the United States Department of State. At present he is acting as anthropologist for the Pan American Sanitary Bureau in Central America.

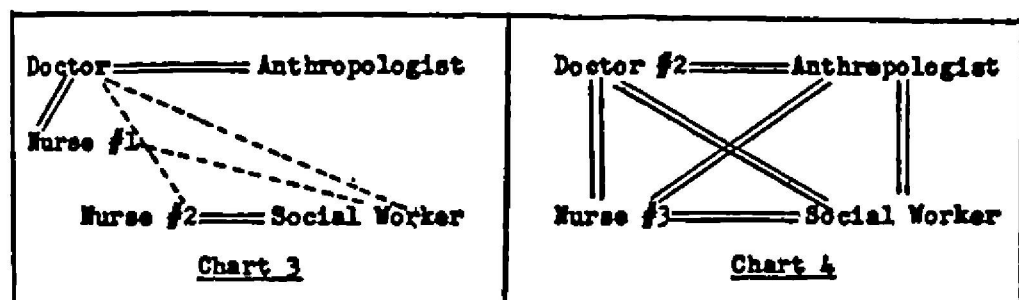
1. A brief note on this project may be found in Volume 1, Number 1, of the *Clearinghouse Bulletin of Research in Human Organization*. Further notes will be found in "La Antropología aplicada en los programas de salud pública de la América Latina," *Boletín de la Oficina Sanitaria Panamericana*, Octubre de 1952, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 298-305, and in a forthcoming casebook on anthropology in public health edited by Benjamin Paul.

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Good communication: ———  
 Bad communication: - - - - -

The first solution to this problem was a temporary and clumsy one. When the writer started his work in the field, the social worker's activities were placed in his charge. Since he got along well with all members of the team, he served as a channel of communication between the various members. This, in fact, helped very little since he was not in the field all the time, and it frequently took two or three days for ideas to make their way around the circuit (see Chart 3). The final solution came about by changing the doctor and nurse in the town (see Chart 4). With new personnel, communication between the various members of the team was once again established and difficulties arising from its lack disappeared.



The important issue in this case is that, prior to investigation, the field team and other members of the organization tended to place the blame for failures on the Indians; actually, the trouble lay within the organization of the field team itself, and the Indians were little more than uncomfortable bystanders in the affair. One suspects that there may be other cases where organizational personnel place the blame on local peoples when, in fact, the fault lies directly with themselves and within their own social structure.

The second case has to do with the effect of the national political situation on the program. At this time, there was high feeling in Guatemala between two factions, the anti-communists and the pro-government. While these two points of view were and are not mutually exclusive, it was around these issues that the factions formed. Many Indian towns, including the one in which we were working, were implicated in this because both factions were trying to gain their support. The Indians were generally anti-communist, but many were also pro-government. All Indians tended, however, to be suspicious of communists since the anti-communist propaganda had pointed out that communism threatened family, land and religion.

In August, 1951, the members of the field team suddenly found themselves being called communists. INCAP was an international organization, but so far as the Indians could tell, it was sponsored by the government and, therefore, was probably communistic. Since there were two North Americans working with the organization, the logic was extended to include all North Americans as communists. It might have been possible to channel this scapegoating had it been perceived in time, but that *all* North Americans should be

called communists was something that not even Senator McCarthy had suggested. The problem was clearly one of role definitions and expectations. To the Indians, welfare working had little meaning, and international organizations less. It was clear, however, that INCAP worked with the government and that the latter was communistically-inclined.

The solution to this problem was crude but evidently effective. It involved tracing down the sources of the rumor that INCAP was communistic to its specific sources, and then having fairly strong conversations with the individuals concerned. There was nothing particularly gentle in our dealing with these individuals; we told them frankly that they had been lying, that they were spreading insidious misinformation about a reputable group of people, and that they were actually aiding the communists by doing this. At the same time, the field personnel visited the homes of everyone we had considered to be friends until that time, and the nature of the gossip was discussed openly.

The third source of problems came as something of a surprise, but perhaps lay closer to the fundamental difficulties involved than any other. Early in the INCAP program, before the writer started as anthropologist on the project, the chief of the program had felt that some sort of social work in the town would aid in the Indians' acceptance of the project. In addition to the social work, as was mentioned before, a clinic with medical service for the townspeople was established in order to produce more local interest in the program. Neither the clinic nor the social work program had any direct relation to the experimental nutrition work, but were introduced as auxiliary means by which the experimental work would be better received by the town.

After field investigations had been underway for some time, it became increasingly apparent that these ventures in social work (which included bringing a breeding pig into the town to improve the local stock, setting up a municipal chicken coop to better the chicken stock, and holding social evenings at periodic intervals, as well as helping in small ways in the school) were causing a good deal of trouble and distress among the townspeople, and there was little evidence that they were producing any greater cooperation for the nutrition project. The breeding pig became a source of contention since the school teachers felt it belonged to them, while the men who had been bringing food thought it would bring a good price on the open market. The chicken coop, established through a local committee, caused dissention between the members of the committee and other townspeople since the committee members felt they had first right to the eggs, and sold them for private profit instead of giving them out to the townspeople to improve the stock. The social nights usually included movies borrowed from the local American Embassy; as often as not, something would go wrong with the generator, and the movie would be delayed or not shown at all. This caused considerable ill-feeling as the townspeople thought that if they were expected to show up for movies, movies should be shown.

Besides the social work projects, the clinic itself brought on a multitude of problems. One phase of these was described at the beginning of the paper. In addition, the inconvenient time of the doctor's visits, dissatisfaction with western clinical,



practice, and the inability of INCAP to act as a wholesale drug house made the Indians quite unhappy over the clinic service. The clinic, as well as the social work projects, it seemed, was causing more trouble than it was worth.

Gradually, the social work projects were removed from the town. The social nights were stopped, except when specific requests for movies were made on the occasion of local fiestas. The breeding pig was returned to the national agricultural institute which had given it to the town in the first place. The chicken coop survived, but without fulfilling the function for which it was designed. Due to a change in policy with respect to the medical service, as well as to financial problems, the clinic service was gradually reduced. Cutting down on these projects greatly reduced the sources of friction between program personnel and townspeople.

The clinic service presented what was perhaps the most obvious case of maladjustment of the program, due to differing habits and customs on the part of the program personnel and the Indians of the town. The emphasis will be placed here on what may be called the specialist's sub-culture. With respect to the clinic, the writer became more and more aware that he was dealing not only with curious reactions on the part of the Indians, but the medical personnel themselves provided an important subject of study. By medical sub-culture is meant those aspects of thinking and acting which are derived from training in public health and medicine and through interaction between public health and medical personnel. A distinction must be drawn here between medicine as a science and medical practice—it is to the latter that we refer in speaking of the medical sub-culture.

The permissible and expected behaviors of the physician in our society have little meaning in the Guatemalan Indian culture. Premises of thinking, beliefs concerning curing, action patterns involved in curing and in gaining rapport, the patient-doctor relationship, and the general content of the physician's behavior are ambiguous in the Indian context. In order to make adjustments for this situation we need not only study the culture of the Indian; we must also have more systematic knowledge about the medical sub-culture from which the doctors, nurses, and other personnel come. It is not merely that Indians are different, but that doctors and Indians are different. Coordination and integration of medical practice requires more than impressionistic knowledge of both sides of the meeting ground.

The problem of the sub-culture of the specialist has significance not only with respect to public health personnel, it is equally a problem among anthropologists themselves. This has become alarmingly obvious to the writer in such cases as the following: Dr. X, a public health worker, says, "You're an anthropologist? Wonderful! You can certainly help us. I talked with Professor Y, the famous anthropologist at Z University, and he clarified how the work of an anthropologist was imperative to our work, etc., etc." The net effect is that Professor Y has sold Dr. X on the wonders of modern ethnological magic. It seems to make little difference that Professor Y has seldom—if ever—done any work in the field of applied anthropology; the fact that he is well known (or perhaps merely that he is available) makes him competent to

advise on the work of a project he has never studied, in an area he has never visited, and to set up general principles about a type of work in which he has never participated. It sometimes helps if Professor Y did spend two or three days in the country in question, but this also threatens to make him an "expert" on that area.

The field worker in applied anthropology certainly does not mind having his discipline promoted. But if he is of the same mind as the writer, he would suggest that his professional colleagues who are inexperienced in applied work should be a little more careful of what they say. The field of applied anthropology is struggling to make a name for itself; it should do so on the basis of facts of accomplishment, not on the basis of "should's", "might's", and "could's". The effect on the field worker is that an employing organization frequently assigns to him one role while he perceives for himself quite a different role. This discrepancy leads occasionally to quite unpleasant situations which could have been avoided if the employer's ideas were a little more in accordance with the facts of applied field work. In the writer's experience, quite a few such divergencies in role perception stemmed from inspiring talks the employers had received from competent professional anthropologists who were inexperienced in applied work.

Anyone who has worked for any length of time in the applied field cannot help but be aware of the intricate problems involved. Generalizations, even within a fairly homogeneous culture area, can frequently be disastrously misleading. It is one thing to make theoretical generalizations in a monograph or article for discussion by one's colleagues; it is a very different thing to make such generalizations when they are to be a basis for action in a specific region and have a real affect on the way of life of the people living in that area.

Turning now to generalities, there are a number of issues which derive from these examples. First, an anthropologist has an obligation to his employer to define clearly the role he intends to play. Second, he must be thoroughly conversant with the structure of the organization with which he is working. Third, the concept of the grand, multi-phased project to accomplish many culture changes simultaneously should be examined much more carefully in the light of the questionable success of projects of this type. An integral part of this problem is that of the adequate coordination of the various aspects of a multi-phased program. And, finally, there is the very serious question as to whether many anthropologists are properly trained to work in the applied field.

With respect to the anthropologist's obligation, most anthropologists must function as auxiliaries in otherwise established programs. The writer's own experience has been in the general field of public welfare and includes projects sponsored by both profit and non-profit agencies. In such situations, the anthropologist has certain responsibilities and it is his obligation to define these clearly to his employers. If there is a discrepancy between his role as he and the organization perceive it, then the role must be clarified. In the INCAP program the writer's role grew gradually and remained unambiguous. In another program, however, his role was not clear and subsequent misunderstanding was in great part due



to this. Furthermore, the anthropologist should determine whether his goals are in accordance with those of the organization. They do not have to be the same, but they cannot conflict. If there is considerable likelihood of conflict, it is the anthropologist's responsibility to clarify this to his employers and advise that they look elsewhere for help. Once the anthropologist has undertaken the work he must recognize the real obligation to see it through. A story was related to the writer about an anthropologist who was involved on a fairly extensive project. As time went on it became apparent that the project was not running smoothly and that many mistakes were being made. The anthropologist is quoted as saying that he could not afford to have his name connected with a failure and therefore he was going to get out from under. Needless to say, this did not help the employers, it did not help other anthropologists to understand the reasons for the failure, and certainly it has not helped the reputation of anthropology in applied work. It is of interest in this connection that in its *Code of Ethics* the Society for Applied Anthropology fails to take any note of the anthropologist's obligation to the sponsoring organization. The understandable concern of anthropologists with subject societies is one reason why the other side of the issue is being stressed here.

Many anthropologists, especially those working in ethnic group administration and in industrial settings, have discovered the importance of a thorough acquaintance with organization structure. As the example of the fouled-up communication system cited earlier illustrated, this is equally true of public welfare projects. Many times in the course of working on these projects, the writer has felt that 90 percent of his problems started before the field personnel ever left the office. Indeed, so often did the Indians have little or nothing to do with the difficulties, that he found himself spending less and less time in the field.

The surprising success resulting from removing elements of the social work program and reducing the work of the clinic in Magdalena suggests that the idea of the many-sided project may be poorly founded. Officers of many international, specialized agencies have tended in recent years to favor the initiation of large-scale ventures, frequently combining the activities of specialists in education, public health, agriculture, and other extension services. It is not possible here to go into an evaluation of these projects but there is considerable evidence that many have fallen short of success due to failure to achieve adequate coordination between the various personnel involved. Henry Dobyns, in another connection, has pointed out that "... unless the agency directing cultural change is the only institution of dominant culture in contact with the subordinate culture, it will never be able to control the changes in the subordinate culture."<sup>2</sup> While the writer is not sympathetic with the "dominant-subordinate" terminology, Dobyns struck on a very important point in the ultimate success or failure of welfare and extension projects. The phenomenon to which he refers moreover, holds for different branches of the same agency and for different individuals working out of the same agency. Lack of coordination be-

tween these individuals, a purely intra-agency problem, inevitably results in lack of control of the program in the field.

Besides the organizational aspect of limiting objectives, there is another reason why multi-phased projects start with the cards stacked against them. There are basically two different kinds of culture change: one is the slow, gradual, evolutionary type in which the members of the society may be only partially aware that any change is underway at all; the other is the rapid, revolutionary change, brought about by attempts on the part of certain of the society's members to produce immediate and far-reaching alterations. Applied anthropology can and must concern itself primarily with the first of these types of change. The multi-phased project, on the other hand, works on an implicit assumption that rapid revolutionary change is superior. Without totalitarian authority, revolutionary change is extremely difficult, and even where it is possible to precipitate it, the ultimate results are impossible to control.

Aside from the theoretical considerations of the preferability of evolutionary change to revolutionary attempts, there is the very practical consideration that most people are limited in the amount of innovations which they can understand and digest in a given length of time. It is, for example, easier for a public welfare project to convince a rural community of the value of DDT spraying than it is to convince them of this and introduce latrines, dietary innovations, new house-construction methods, and new agricultural practices simultaneously. In short, the average human being is not very fast on the pick-up.

Of equal importance with intra-organizational problems are those which stem from the nature of the anthropologist's work and the characteristics of an anthropologist. Many of these may be summed up by saying that a good anthropologist does not necessarily make a good *applied* anthropologist. Aside from personality problems, perhaps the most obvious inadequacy which faces the applied anthropologist is lack of training in areas which may be essential or highly important for efficient work. This lack of training appears in two different fields. First, few anthropologists are conversant with the disciplines which are being applied. A Ph.D. in anthropology does not equip a man to deal with the problem of public health, city planning, forestry, agriculture, education, or any one of the multitude of disciplines which may be involved in welfare programs. Second, there is tremendous variation between one anthropologist and another with respect to his cognizance of adjacent fields. Social psychology, rural and urban sociology, sociometry, demography, human relations training, group dynamics, statistics, sampling, and many other areas of study and method are fields with which he may simply not be sufficiently familiar to handle effectively.

With respect to the first of these, it has already been mentioned that the anthropologist stands as an auxiliary in a program which is applying the findings of another discipline. In the various fields of public welfare, such as those mentioned, a lack of knowledge of the materials, findings, premises, and goals of the field of application can cause considerable lost time and conflict of effort between the various members of the program. Once, when the writer suggested using ap-

2. Dobyns, Henry, "Blunders with Bolsas," *Human Organization*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1951.

plied anthropology to an agriculture specialist, the latter bluntly asked what the devil an anthropologist knew about agriculture. The fact is, and one suspects that many other anthropologists find themselves in a similar position, that the writer's only real experience in agriculture occurred while doing studies in Peruvian and Central American rural communities. This knowledge can be a great help, but it is not what the agricultural expert is trying to get across to a Peruvian or Central American rural dweller. Of course the anthropologist is not trying to usurp the status of agricultural specialist; on the other hand, how can he suggest ways for applying some of this knowledge when he is grossly ignorant of the materials, premises, and activities involved? It is, of course, true that the anthropologist often can point out aspects of local practice which are important; this is an obvious part of his work. But it does not make his cooperation with specialists any easier with respect to their knowledge.

How much an anthropologist knows about disciplines adjacent to his own depends upon his own inclinations, experience, and training. It may safely be said, however, that there is little consistency to be found between one anthropologist and another in this respect. Social science departments are tending to insist that their students have some familiarity with relevant disciplines, but it is practically impossible for the student to gain more than a brief reading knowledge, if that, in many of these areas. In applied work, depending upon the nature of the program, the anthropologist must be cognizant of some of these fields. They may be essential parts of his work. Indeed, if you want to change habits, there is very little that anthropology can tell you about a specific situation beyond the descriptive level.

While it is practically impossible, and hardly necessary, for most applied anthropologists to become conversant with all related disciplines, part of the problem would be solved if the individual could have access to those particular fields which he has needed or knows he may need in the immediate future. One way of solving this problem would be to provide a center where anthropologists could meet with specialists in other fields, both fields of application and social science. A prototype for such a scheme is the Linguistic Institute which meets every summer. In such an institute specialists in the various fields could provide basic courses in their subjects and applied workers could go to them for formal instruction and consultation in special problems. A few months of intensive work would better equip the individual to handle the problems which arise in the course of his activities. Such an institute would also serve well as a meeting place for applied workers to discuss their common problems. Not only is publication slow and

scattered, but there are many problems which can be discussed but which cannot well appear in print.

In concluding, the writer would like to add his voice to the constant din of those who claim that the anthropological disciplines are, are not, can be, or cannot be scientific. Whatever straight ethnology may be in this respect, applied anthropology is another problem. I have received the impression, perhaps falsely, that many anthropologists consider applied work to be a science, or that much of what it does is carried on scientifically. It is my opinion that the degree to which applied anthropology may be called scientific at this time is very slight. In the first place, anyone who has been involved in it must be acutely aware of how much his findings and actions depend upon his own peculiar past experience, upon quick, almost intuitive, judgments made on the spot, indeed, upon many elements which cannot be called scientific. Our handling of the accusation of communism in the public health program was not scientific; it was necessary to act quickly, and there was no time to sit down and do things scientifically. Had we done so, we would not be working in the town now.

Secondly, even when one has more time to study and consider one's conclusions, the application of these conclusions remains something of an art. Some people can do applied work effectively, and others will botch any effort whether scientifically-conceived or not. This, of course, stems in part from the fact that applied work deals directly with the specific; unlike science, it does not formulate generalities. Obviously it uses scientific findings wherever possible, but the application is always concerned with a specific problem.

Finally, most if not all applied anthropological work is involved in normative effort. Something is done because somebody believes that a better situation will result. Introducing sanitary habits, helping in the reconstruction of earthquake regions, introducing plough agriculture, improving corn, even preventative psychiatry, presupposes the concept that these techniques will provide a better life for those involved. The application here is governed by normative concerns, and science enters only as a way to accomplish the goals most effectively.

While applied anthropology itself cannot be called scientific, the subject matter with which it deals offers unparalleled opportunities for scientific study of social and cultural change. A program of applied work provides the much-sought-after human laboratory in a natural setting. If the applied anthropologist can keep his wits about him in the midst of the practical concerns which plague him daily, he can provide real contributions to the theory of cultural and social change.