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In recent decades, the social sciences, especially anthropology, have made a growing contribution to studies on health conditions. In Latin America, interest in the anthropological approach to the study of health and disease has made its presence felt, as reflected in a growing production of articles and even special issues of journals devoted to the theme. Such was the case for volume 7 (1985) of *Nueva Antropología* (Mexico City) and volume 5 (1991) of *Cuadernos de Antropología Social* (Buenos Aires). The Argentine journal *Cuadernos Médico Sociales* (Rosario) is also a major contribution to the development and strengthening of medical anthropology in Latin America. Venezuela has also been outstanding as a center for disseminating this field of study, especially through the *Laboratorio de Ciencias Sociales*, which is headquarters to the social sciences component of the World Health Organization's Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases in Latin America.

It is true that themes such as "disease", "cure", and "death" have long been the object of anthropological investigation, ever since the early days of this field, with works by Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, and Boas, to name a few. However, it has only been in recent years that anthropologists have become more directly involved in research directed towards an understanding of the systems of beliefs and medical practices, representations of disease and contagion, behavior and disease, ethnomedicine, therapeutic itineraries, and utilization of health services, amongst other themes. The potential contribution of such studies to medical sciences and public health has been acknowledged at various levels, as reflected in the growing interest of health professionals in anthropological methods, particularly those of a qualitative nature.

In Brazil, the expansion of this field of investigation has been somewhat timid and recent. Still, 1993 has been an outstanding year, since it witnessed the 1st Brazilian Meeting of Medical Anthropology in Salvador, Bahia, in the month of November. This meeting helped identify researchers and emerging research centers where anthropological studies on health and disease have been given priority, often as an essential contribution to discussions on the implementation of health care models in a society such as ours, which is essentially

pluralistic from the cultural point of view.

This thematic issue of *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* crystallizes an effort to gather together a portion of recent production in this field of research, with particular emphasis on studies carried out in Brazil. Planned initially as an issue devoted exclusively to anthropological articles *strictu sensu*, we opted for including articles by other professionals working with qualitative methods who were not necessarily anthropologists.

The article by M. C. Minayo & O. Sanches, deals with a highly current theme, the opposition or complementariness between qualitative and quantitative methods in health research, in addition to reinaugurating an important section of *Cadernos de Saúde Pública* entitled **Debates**. Under the journal's new format, articles selected for this section are followed first by critical commentaries signed by professionals from the field and then by the authors' rebuttals.

The theme of "representation" is present in practically all of the articles in this issue. M. J. Spink and G. Sevalho approach the topic from the perspective of social and cognitive psychology and history. F. Telles and collaborators, L. Hoffman and H. Oliveira, also analyse in their articles different categories of representations.

P. Alves' article contributes to a better understanding of the individual and collective process of illness as experience. The articles by S. Atkinson and M. Queiroz deal with anthropology's contribution to the assessment and consumption of health care services. In particular, Queiroz focuses on working-class families, a theme that is also central to the work by M. L. Rangel on identity and health risks. M. Rabelo's article approaches the interface between religion and cure, particularly with reference to the role of "cults" in providing services. Finally, the article by R. P. Castro and M. P. Bronfman is an important contribution to medical sociology and the discussion of the categories of "sex" and "gender", analyzed in light of feminist theory.

We see this initiative as opening a pathway which we are sure will have positive consequences for the development of medical anthropology in Brazil.

*Maria Cecília de S. Minayo  
Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr.*

Escola Nacional de Saúde Pública/Fiocruz