Applying Ethnography in Educational Change

JEAN J. SCHENSUL
Hispanic Health Council and
University of Connecticut

MARIA GONZALEZ BORRERO
Hispanic Health Council

ROBERTO GARCIA
Hispanic Health Council

Although educational anthropologists have been involved in researching and writing about most of the major educational debates of our times, it is difficult to find examples of ways in which anthropology has been applied directly to the solution of education-related problems. This article explores reasons for this dilemma by analyzing the bases from which educational anthropologists carry out their research. It then outlines three case examples in which ethnographic research in the Hispanic community of Hartford, Connecticut, has been utilized to bring about changes in education-related services to Hispanics. The article concludes with suggestions for using ethnographic research to bring about improved relations between education systems and the communities they serve. APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY; CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION; ETHNIC MINORITY.

Historically, educational anthropology has been viewed as an applied field (see the lead article by Elizabeth Eddy in this issue). This is as true today as it was in the 1920s and 1930s when this specialization first began to emerge. Like their predecessors, contemporary educational anthropologists are concerned with major issues and debates about the social and cognitive development of children, and about the delivery of educational services. In our era, educational anthropologists have been involved intellectually in such issues as bilingual and multicultural education (Arvizu 1978; Gibson 1976; Havighurst 1976; Serrano 1974; Torres-Trueba 1976; Warren 1982), desegregation (Crain 1977; Hanna 1982; Leacock 1976; Lein 1975; Spindler 1974; Walker 1978),

Jean J. Schensul is Director of Research, the Hispanic Health Council, Hartford, CT 06106, and Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, Storrs. Maria Gonzalez Borrero is Executive Director of the Hispanic Health Council, former director of the Health Careers Center, Hartford Public Schools, and is completing a law degree at the University of Connecticut. Roberto Garcia is Director of Student Training and the Library Resource Center, Hispanic Health Council.

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cognitive and social development (Cohen 1973; Erickson 1982; Glick 1974), school community relations (Boggs 1972; Heath 1982), industrialization and educational change (La Belle 1984; Leacock 1976; Schensul 1976), the evaluation of educational programs (Cook and Reichardt 1979; Herriott 1977), and disjunctures in classroom processes (Cazden, John, and Hymes 1972; Philips 1972).1

A major criterion of application is the utilization of research-based knowledge for the solution, or amelioration, of educational problems. How can educational anthropologists effectively use their ethnographic findings for change within educational systems? This question has been addressed by educational researchers for some time (see, for example, Havelock 1969; Paisley and Butler 1983; Seiber, Lewis, and Metzger 1972). However, educational anthropologists are only beginning to concern themselves with the uses of ethnographic research as they examine their past and present inability to relate research findings to educational practice in classroom and community settings (Eddy 1978; Schensul 1981).

Educational anthropologists have had difficulty relating their research to practice for several reasons. The dominant research models used by educators have emphasized methods different from ethnography: experimental design, quantitative data, and the detachment of researchers from the daily flow of activities within educational systems (Comitas and Dolgin 1978; Spindler 1982). The time requirements and formats of ethnographic research are strange to educators who view this approach to research as unrelated to the demands of decision-makers in educational practice and policy. In addition, it has been difficult for anthropologists to introduce new ideas about culture, intercultural communication, and ethnicity into school curricula and community programs. Ways of considering solutions to these problems constitute the primary focus of this paper.

We begin with a brief examination of the customary roles that educational anthropologists have occupied during recent decades. We suggest that there is a need to develop new organizational settings and strategies if ethnographic research is to be used more widely by educational practitioners. We then describe three projects in which attempts are being made to utilize ethnographic research more fully in the resolution of education-related problems. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of these projects for applied educational anthropology.

**Professional Bases of Educational Anthropologists and School-Community Problem-Solving**

Most educational anthropologists are employed in professional schools that train educators. Their duties usually revolve around teaching. Less frequently they become involved in developing programs that unite schools of education and local public or private schools around a common purpose.
Anthropologists in schools of education have devoted major attention to curriculum change by introducing educators to the problems entailed in cross-cultural research, communication, and educational delivery systems. These new directions in the educational program have created greater potential for the dissemination of anthropological knowledge to students of education. However, new curriculum does not necessarily result in identifiable changes in the relationship between local communities and the university in which the anthropologist is based.

The literature reports only a few instances in which university faculty reach out to local communities on behalf of the department or university to strengthen community or community-school involvement in school change (see, for example, Erickson and Gantz 1974; S. Schensul 1981). A recent example is presented by Barnhardt, who describes a broad effort to relate professional schools to service institutions and Native American and Eskimo community organizations in Alaska (1982). If educational anthropologists are to change the relationships between universities, local communities, and educational institutions, they must regularly and systematically seek out change strategies that reach beyond the boundaries of professional schools.

Large scale public service institutions, such as public school systems, hospitals, and departments of social service, constitute the second most important base for educational anthropologists. These institutions are vehicles of cross-cultural transmission as well as settings for intercultural conflict. They embody dominant group values and behavior that often differ from, and conflict with, those shared by local ethnic groups. Anthropologists in these institutions may act as links to local universities and colleges because faculty members, especially those in professional schools, are interested in providing research and other training experiences for students.

Nevertheless, anthropologists in public service institutions rarely become involved in the development of informed community participation in the initiation and implementation of student training and service programs. This is primarily because public service institutions do not give high priority to the involvement of local communities in the formulation of their policies and programs. Yet, an active and stable community educational institution that can articulate local interests and advocate clearly on behalf of constituents is crucial to ensuring the importance of a community perspective. Only with such a force are educational anthropologists likely to become engaged in research that includes community involvement and an ongoing community perspective.

Community-based organizations often represent the education or other interests of specific constituencies. There are few examples such as the work of Margaret Gibson and Cathie Jordan (reported in this issue) in which anthropologists have been involved in the establishment of community education programs or in the efforts of special interest groups to change local schools or other helping resource systems. Applied research in these settings has not been of interest to an-
Anthropologists, perhaps because funding for work of this nature is unstable and difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, these organizations and other more informal community collectives have great potential to provide the base for quality ethnographic research. They also are well equipped to use research results to make sure that the concerns of local communities in education and other services are met.

The professional positions and activities of educational anthropologists may appear diverse and unrelated. Yet all share a common concern with ethnic populations, improvements in education in multiethnic communities, the identification and resolution of educational problems, and the use of ethnographic research as a tool in educational change. How then can educational anthropologists interested in using research for change bring together local communities and educational institutions to collaborate in the recognition, understanding, and amelioration of educational problems?

We turn to this question by considering three exemplary projects in an urban area of the northeastern United States. Each project involved a local or state educational institution, the University of Connecticut, and several organizations based in an urban Puerto Rican/Hispanic community. Each begins in the local community and then reaches out to collaborators in related institutions. In each case we review the purpose and organization of the project, the uses of ethnographic research, and the roles of anthropologists in conjunction with other major participants in the attempt to solve education related problems.

The Evolution of Settings

The Puerto Rican/Hispanic community in Hartford is relatively new (Backstrand and Schensul 1982). Between 1960 and 1975, the population of Puerto Rican/Hispanics in the city quadrupled, from 7,000 to 30,000. Hispanics now constitute about 35 percent of the population of Hartford, or 35,000 to 40,000 residents. Ninety percent are Puerto Rican, a third have arrived in the past five years, and over 60 percent are of small town or rural background.

The city's institutions have been slow to respond to the needs of this bilingual/bicultural community. The expanding business, insurance, and banking sectors offer limited opportunities to migrants of rural island background or with career experiences and credentials not recognized in the United States (Borrero 1982). Puerto Ricans have had difficulties entering the world of formal city and state politics (Backstrand and Schensul 1982). Health and mental health services have hired few Hispanics in direct service positions, despite the fact that in some facilities Puerto Ricans constitute over 90 percent of the clients (Schensul and Schensul 1982).

This situation set the scene for the creation of several community-based organizations interested in research leading to community development in education and health. The first of these organizations, La
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Casa de Puerto Rico, created in 1969, has concentrated on education, employment, and housing. The second organization, incorporated in 1979 as the Hispanic Health Council, has focused on health and education. Over the past 15 years, these organizations have worked with local universities, colleges, and other institutions to bring about changes in services and policies affecting Puerto Ricans in the area and in the state. Both organizations provide the base for the applied research programs described below.

Training Community Action Researchers: The Puerto Rican Research and Training Project

Puerto Rican students have constituted the fastest growing sector of the public school system in the city of Hartford. Nevertheless, until the middle 1970s there were no bilingual education programs or other ways of serving this recently arrived and predominantly rural Spanish-speaking group of students. A study carried out by La Casa de Puerto Rico demonstrated clearly the inability of public education institutions to offer educational curricula and models responding to the needs of students (La Casa de Puerto Rico 1978). This study led to a suit against the local board of education in 1979 for failure to provide bilingual education to Puerto Rican/Hispanic and other bilingual/bicultural students. The Hartford Board of Education signed a consent decree and established a bilingual program, which was monitored by a lawyer hired by a community education task force. Recognizing that the consent decree was only a preliminary step in addressing the issue of educational accessibility, the task force sought to obtain information concerning other areas of educational programming.

In that same year, educational anthropologists in the University of Connecticut School of Education suggested that the task force apply for funding from the National Institute of Education to train Puerto Ricans to carry out educational research. These anthropologists were interested in expanding the role of the School of Education in the local Puerto Rican community. They saw the granting program as a way of linking faculty with the community while bringing in new students for course credit. Members of the task force decided to apply for funding.

Anthropologists on the task force assisted in designing a project to bring together community professionals, educators, and others interested in applied educational ethnography in the Puerto Rican community. The long-term goal of the program was to develop a network of Puerto Rican/Hispanic applied ethnographic researchers who would carry out educational research in topic areas of concern to the community with the cooperation of the university.

The Hispanic Health Council, then part of La Casa de Puerto Rico, received three years of funding for this program. An administrative team consisting of a community research coordinator and an educa-
tional anthropologist organized and administered the program. This team taught applied research courses and planned workshops and applied research projects with the trainees, following guidelines set by the overall research, training, and utilization program of the Hispanic Health Council (Borrero, Schensul, and Garcia 1982; J. Schensul 1981).

The project conducted a two-semester course sequence for three years. The first semester concentrated on ethnographic research methods, the second on the development of an applied research project. The methods course began by rooting ethnographic research in the experience of the participants and by examining the roles of applied research in community and school settings. The second section of the course covered methods of ethnographic data collection ranging from participant observation to formal surveys. This was followed by a review of approaches to community research, including the results of research conducted locally. The fourth section of the course explored ways of linking schools and other educational institutions to the local community, using research as a tool. The course concluded with planning for a small-scale applied research project to be carried out by trainees, singly or in small groups.

Project guidelines followed the principles of applied research. The problem to be addressed was to arise in an "action setting" and was to be deemed significant by others in the setting as well as by the researcher. The project was to be negotiated so that it was researchable; that is, it needed to be translated into a research framework and associated with one or more identifiable theoretical approaches, drawn from the literature, the knowledge base of the trainee, or from both. Research methods were to be articulated carefully and agreed upon by all parties. Participants were told to specify ways of utilizing information once gathered. By following these guidelines the trainee became an action researcher, responsible for carrying out research while creating the action setting for its use.

The program brought together an unusual cross section of educators, researchers, community activists, and social science students. Course work was accredited for two years by the University of Connecticut School of Education, and for the third year by the New Hampshire College of Human Services, as part of a degree program. The program also was able to offer a series of special workshops in research methods, the politics of educational research, and current trends in methods and classroom practice. In addition, a number of faculty members from the School of Education came into the community to work with trainees on research of mutual interest.

The immediate consequence of the program was a collection of data and multimedia materials addressing a wide variety of community interests ranging from bilingual education to the educational functions of community celebrations. Since the completion of the program many trainees have been hired by the Hispanic Health Council. Others have joined local organizations that have turned to action research as a com-
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Community or program development strategy. Two trainee projects led to broader efforts to examine the effects of housing dislocation and chronic health problems on student performance and the incidence of educationally disabling conditions in the Hispanic community.

This program model has formed the basis for research training for medical and education students, school health advisory personnel, and Hispanic Health Council new staff (Schensul and Caro 1982). The Hispanic Health Council staff's first awareness of the possible effects of otitis media on Puerto Rican/Hispanic children emerged through this program.3

The Problem of Otitis Media and Its Consequences Among Puerto Rican/Hispanic Children

Otitis media (inflammation of the middle ear) is the most common disease of infancy and early childhood. In the first two years of life, 75 percent or more of all children incur at least one bout of otitis media. These episodes generally resolve with the use of antibiotics. In some instances, however, otitis media is followed by serous otitis, characterized by fluid remaining behind the eardrum or by recurrent acute infections.

These forms of otitis media are common among Puerto Rican children in the northeast (Allen and Frampton 1981; Schensul, Allen, Serrano, and Borrero 1982). They have serious implications for Puerto Rican/Hispanic children of preschool and elementary school age for the following reasons:

- Hearing is impaired at the time of maximum language learning and social development. This is particularly significant for children raised in a complex bilingual/multicultural environment, and accounts in part for the large numbers of Hispanic children in special education classes in Hartford and New York City.
- Hearing loss impairs interaction between the child and others, resulting in hyperactivity or passive withdrawn behavior, both of which may interfere with classroom social life and learning.
- Acute phases are highly disruptive because they cause severe pain and demand immediate attention. They result in missed school days and disrupted household schedules that can create significant stress in families with marginal economic and social support resources.

Delays in cognitive and social development may not be identified until the child enters school, at which point hearing appears normal. As a result, the child may be labeled "learning disabled," "emotionally or mentally retarded," or "language delayed," but the cause—fluctuating reduction in auditory stimuli—is not identified properly. Greater familiarity with the problem and its consequences would provide needed assistance in the prevention of otitis media and its consequences, as well as in the development of more focused educational interventions.
A team of community researchers and educational anthropologists began to collect pilot data on the distribution of otitis media in the Puerto Rican community. These data supported the argument for a project geared simultaneously to developing a theoretical framework for understanding otitis media in its social and cultural context and to offering health education and early medical intervention. The project represents a collaboration between the Hispanic Health Council and the pediatric clinic of a local community hospital interested in child and adolescent development. It is now staffed by a community coordinator, two community researcher/health educators, and an anthropologist.

During its first year, the project staff interviewed and provided education to over 100 families in the community and among patients in the participating clinic. An explanation for the widespread distribution and seriousness of the problem was generated from interviews, observations in homes and clinic waiting rooms, and epidemiological data. These data allowed the team to prepare educational materials for communitywide dissemination.

Community interest in the problem of otitis media was immediate and widespread. We found that interest extended to school personnel at the city and state levels. Our interviews showed that parents, teachers, school nurses, and primary care physicians were describing treatment of the problem as episodic and dismissing individual cases as "just a little ear infection." Mothers also were reporting language delays and unusual behavior in children with chronic otitis media. However, non-Spanish speaking educators and health care providers did not observe these behaviors in bilingual or Spanish-speaking children, and could not obtain developmental norms for Puerto Rican/Hispanic children. Finally, teachers, speech clinicians, and school nurses were identifying Hispanic children with language delays and hearing problems in the early grades but were not collecting comprehensive medical histories.

At the request of the State Department of Education, the Hispanic Health Council organized a series of institutes on otitis media for special education personnel working with Hispanic children. The planning team for the institutes included the Hispanic Health Council otitis media program staff, pediatricians, and language and child development experts. The objectives were to increase awareness of the consequences of otitis media for Hispanic children, to offer culturally appropriate cognitive intervention strategies, and to encourage school personnel to collect information on otitis media among the Hispanic special education student population in their school districts. Institutes were held in October 1983 and April 1984. The result has been the development of a statewide network for information exchange about otitis media and language and developmental disabilities.

The program recently expanded in collaboration with a developed national center for pediatric research and rehabilitation based in the Department of Pediatrics of the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. The center has supported a survey to identify the prevalence
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of impaired or chronically ill Puerto Rican children between birth and five years of age and the cultural aspects of disability management. This study represents the work of a team of community researchers and two medical anthropologists based at the Hispanic Health Council. The data will be used in program development and at the policy level—locally, statewide, and nationally—to influence the delivery of education and health services to Puerto Rican families with children with disabilities. The Pediatric Disabilities Research and Training Center will train education and medical personnel, develop language screening instruments, and set guidelines for the management of impairments in Hispanic communities in the state. Since the literature on disabilities among Puerto Rican and other Hispanic groups is limited, the project is intended to highlight the need to consider ethnicity as an important variable in disability research (Schensul, Allen, Orozco, and Borrero 1984).

The Problem of Language Training for Professionals:
The Language Laboratory

Many urban areas of the United States are characterized by large, non-English-speaking populations. The presence of such communities has led to demands on schools and other local institutions for bilingual and culturally appropriate services. Strategies responding to this matter include training and/or relicensing members of the newly arrived ethnic group to provide the needed services; hiring and training interpreters; and providing second language instruction to mainstream language teachers or other service personnel. Second language instruction through total immersion is often the method of choice since it is believed to be cost-efficient and rapidly accomplished, and it requires few changes in local institutions serving the non-English-speaking populations.

Total immersion language classes usually are offered by native speakers of the language through private sector or special university-based programs. They tend to focus on spoken language competence, ignoring the social, behavioral, and specialized semantic aspects of language use in specific cultural settings. Thus, trainees may be linguistically competent to speak with students or others receiving services, but they are not likely to be culturally competent. For example, they are unlikely to be familiar with belief systems, social interaction, paralinguistic behavior, and other aspects of culture that affect directly the quality of interaction in a classroom or clinic. In addition, language training alone does not offer a critical perspective on service delivery, nor a relationship with community advocates who might assist in the reorganization of services to native speakers.

One solution to this dilemma is a language and culture immersion program designed around specialized aspects of service delivery and an understanding of the cultural and community context of service. In 1979, the Hispanic Health Council was asked to create such a program
to meet the needs of community nursing personnel. The program, designed jointly by a community administrator and an educational anthropologist, integrated language and culture, the university and the community, services to individuals and community development, and service providers and community residents.

A bilingual teacher working with medical students developed the first elements of technical vocabulary and grammar. Building on these materials, a sociolinguist generated a technical Spanish curriculum for use with service providers, with the help of local language informants (Lotito 1984). Next, two bilingual teachers, working with an educational anthropologist, formalized the “culture” section of the curriculum by integrating available ethnographic materials on the history of the Puerto Rican community in Hartford. The case files of the Hispanic Health Council furnished language-oriented case materials for class discussion in Spanish.

In 1981, anthropologists at the University of Connecticut Medical School contracted with the Hispanic Health Council for a Spanish language and culture program for health personnel and medical students interested in Latin America. This arrangement combined the classroom curriculum of the university-based sociolinguist and the research data and community research experience of the Hispanic Health Council in a six-week immersion program during the summer of 1983.

Language instruction in the classroom focused on topics that the Hispanic Health Council research staff considered crucial in understanding the Puerto Rican community. These included the migration process (Backstrand and Schensul 1982; Borrero 1982; Dressler and Bernal 1982), the organization and functioning of the family (Pelto, Roman, and Liriano 1982), encounters with educators and service providers (Borrero, Schensul, and Garcia 1982; Schensul, Nieves, and Martinez 1982), and ways of identifying and addressing typical language problems (Lotito 1984). Each class included grammar, vocabulary, and questioning skills, topic-specific interviews with key informants, and discussion about the topic. In addition to classroom exercises and interviewing, trainees attended community meetings and festivals and visited a spiritual center. Guest speakers from the Puerto Rican community were invited to the classroom to lead discussion on community issues.

To enhance familiarity with the community, as well as to create the setting for total immersion, the program hired local Spanish-speaking families as “language/culture instructors” for trainees. These families worked from ten to fifteen hours a week with students. In addition, they integrated the trainees into family and community social life. Trainees’ experiences with families were analyzed in the classroom. In this way the program was able to incorporate the results of ethnographic research in the Puerto Rican community with ethnographic methods, including participant observation and open-ended interviews.
During the summer, families and trainees developed an independent relationship that continued beyond the course. Trainees continued to visit with families and to increase their fluency in Spanish. At the same time, families learned to utilize health services more effectively and improved their technical English. Both groups have learned to communicate with each other across ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Most importantly, Spanish language trainees understand the importance of language and culture in service delivery. Consequently they are able to advocate for more bilingual/bicultural teachers and service providers in the area. The program continues to offer immersion experiences and has expanded to draw summer students from the New England area.

Implications for Applied Educational Anthropology

The approach discussed here begins with a community interested in improving service delivery in health, education, or other areas of community development. It requires one or more sectors of a college or university to recognize that existing curriculum is inadequate to provide services to this community. Of further importance are service institutions that recognize the limitations of their service delivery capabilities. Links among these loosely related systems are facilitated by anthropologists working with colleagues interested in a specific problem that can be solved only by combining resources across settings.

The programs described here are fundamentally anthropological in nature. They are sensitive to the culture, social organization, and behavior of the community in question—in this case, the Puerto Rican/Hispanic community of Hartford. Information about the local community is collected, using traditional ethnographic methods that include both qualitative and quantitative data. This information is incorporated into training curricula and serves as a base for specialized research projects on education-related topics of concern in the community. Results of special projects then are utilized in a variety of approaches to community change. Central to the data collection process is collaboration between the education-oriented anthropologist and concerned actors in the community, the university, and local service sectors. These actors provide the context within which research problems can be identified, relevant data collected, theoretical frameworks developed, and the research results utilized.

The projects are systemic in their approach to service, to utilization of information, and to the development of training materials. That is, individuals—clients, students, and other trainees—are viewed within their broader social setting and it is recognized that understanding of the setting is critical to providing service and developing change strategies. Each arena of activity is seen as embedded in a larger network of individuals, organizations, and historical events that must be taken into consideration.
Anthropologists from the central collaborating institutions played important roles in each of the projects. In the case of the language program, anthropologists worked with linguists at the university level and with community researchers and trainers to conceptualize and carry out language and culture curriculum. Fundamental to the Puerto Rican Research and Training Program was the collaboration of anthropologists and their colleagues at the university, and the overall coordination and implementation of the program in the community setting. The otitis media project depended on the collaboration of educational anthropologists, community researchers, and state and local health education service providers. In these settings, anthropologists were involved in building internal relationships with nonanthropological colleagues who, as primary change agents, united around the development of research projects, programs, training curricula, and approaches to change.

Reports continue to point to significant problems in the American education system. Solutions to these problems are said to be found in improved teacher training, financial incentives, more relevant curriculum (for example, emphasis on computer literacy), and the creation of collaborative relationships between government, the business community, and the schools.

Missing from this national debate are two key factors: understanding the connections among these proposed solutions to educational mediocrity, and the role of local communities in determining educational policy. These gaps are cause for serious concern. If we cannot see that the problems, and therefore their resolutions, are interconnected, or that students and their families must be involved in a rapidly changing education system responding to an even more rapidly changing economy, we cannot expect to see desired results. This is especially relevant for minority and other groups that have unequal access to basic services.

The challenge for applied educational anthropologists is to find ways to use applied research methods to bring all sectors together to assess, develop, and utilize new approaches in education that bear on the interests of the communities in which they carry out their research (Lindquist 1973). Clearly, the work of anthropologists and their collaborators in all settings is crucial to this goal. Nevertheless, the historical role of communities in initiating and advocating educational change, coupled with the experiences described here, suggests that the collaboration we are proposing is unlikely without the existence of well established community research institutes. If our primary interest is in the successful interface of education systems and local communities, creating and sustaining such institutes may be the first priority of applied educational anthropology.
Endnotes

1. Functions of Language in the Classroom, edited by Courtney Cazden, Vera John, and Dell Hymes, has been reissued by Waveland Press in a 1985 edition.

2. These included sessions by anthropologists Robert Carrasco, Thomas Carroll, Frederick Erickson, Pertti J. Pelto, and Patricia Weibust; sociologist Michael Borrero, and members of the Hispanic Health Council community research team.

3. Those involved in the Puerto Rican Research and Training Program included Maria Borrero, Eugenio Caro, Roberto Garcia, and Dalila Soto; and anthropologists Pertti J. Pelto, Jean J. Schensul, and Patricia Weibust.

4. Those involved in the otitis media research and education project included Maria Borrero, Nydia Orozco, Mariano Ortiz, and Maria Serrano; anthropologists Lisa Allen and Jean J. Schensul; and physician Joseph Cullina.


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