

SUGGESTIONS FOR FIELD RECORDING
OF INFORMATION ON THE HIPPOCRATIC
CLASSIFICATION OF DISEASES AND
REMEDIES

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Ethnologists have found in many parts of Latin America that important ideas concerning health and sickness are based on the Graeco-Roman concept of "hot" and "cold" qualities innate in nature; for example, certain illnesses are believed to be inherently "hot," and are treated with "cold" remedies, while other illnesses are "cold" and are treated with "hot" remedies. Food also is often so classified, and the maintenance of health requires care to avoid the mixing of incompatible dishes. The qualities of "hot" and "cold" in this system have nothing to do with physical temperature and nothing necessarily to do with physiological effect; from a scientific viewpoint, the attribution of a substance to one or the other of these categories may be purely arbitrary. Honey, for example, is almost always "hot," while pork is by nature "cold." In El Salvador red and black beans are "hot," while white varieties are "cold."

The historical origin of these concepts in the New World is not generally known to ethnographers, nor have the theoretical implications of the numerous American variants of the system been adequately recognized. Anthropologists appear to have come upon aspects of these beliefs quite by chance and have recorded them as incidental information in an incomplete and fragmentary form; no field worker has yet explored all the ramifications of the system in a single community. Consequently, the available data are not yet adequate for any systematic comparative analysis. The following observations will suggest the type of information which is needed for comparison:

1. In the form in which the Hippocratic classification ("humoral pathology") was brought to the New World, the substances involved were classified as either "hot" (caliente) or "cold" (frío) and either "wet" (húmedo) or "dry" (seco), and each attribute was graded in intensity on a scale from 1 to 4. For example, watermelon (sandía) was "cold" in the second degree and "wet" in the third degree (frío en segundo grado y húmedo en tercer grado; abbreviated F2 h3). This system has been simplified in most parts of Latin America; the "wet-dry" concept and the scale of degrees are not reported from any modern area. Terminology also has become more flexible; The word "irritante" appears in parts of Mexico for "caliente," and "fresco" is widely used instead of "frío." The word "fresco," however, may occur with "frío," indicating a lesser degree of "cold" than the latter. In some areas an intermediate condition is recognized and labelled "templado." This indicates that the substance is neither markedly "hot" nor "cold." Other variant terms doubtless exist as well.

2. The aspect of the problem most neglected by field workers has

been the application of the "hot-cold" principle to diseases. The qualities of "hot" and "cold" classify a particular illness but do not usually explain its etiology. In any given community there may or may not be a correlation between classification and etiology; the ethnographer should investigate these two aspects of disease together so that any existing correlation will become apparent. Classification of a given disease as "hot" or "cold" is usually a necessary preliminary to treatment, for it sets limits to the diet and medicines that may be prescribed. In prescription the principle of opposites is often still followed; a "cold" illness is treated with "hot" medicines and foods and vice versa. Some inconsistencies may be found in the use of the system; for example, a "hot" remedy believed to have particularly strong curative properties may be prescribed for a "hot" illness in addition to the usual "cold" remedies.

3. Herbs are frequently the basis of prescription, and wherever the "hot" and "cold" system is in use, the classification of large numbers of common plants may be general knowledge. The few published lists of herbs are far too short for comparative purposes and rarely indicate the diseases for which the plants are prescribed. Spanish names of the more common herbs are included in the appendix to serve as a guide to field workers.

It would, of course, be desirable to get botanical identifications for each herb, but, as the "hot" and "cold" classification is essentially arbitrary, it is just as likely that the Spanish name of the plant is classified as that the "hot" or "cold" determination is made by species, so herb lists giving only the Spanish names are still of some interest.

Different parts of the same plant may be classified in different categories, so the ethnographer should ask specifically about the root, leaves, flowers, seeds and any other parts that may be used. The classification may also vary according to the preparation used; a dry compress may be classified differently from an infusion, for example.

4. The number of other edible substances classed as "hot" or "cold" may also be considerable, and some substances not usually eaten by well people (dung, cotton, tobacco, hair, lime, etc.) may have a classification because they enter into common prescriptions for the sick.

As in the case of herbs, the classification may be highly specific, different colors, sexes or parts of animals, for example, belonging to different categories. The yolk and white of eggs are frequently classified differently, and the meat, internal organs, feathers and blood of chickens may get separate treatment. Male and female fowl are sometimes distinguished, and in at least one case black chickens belong in the opposite category from white ones.

5. The qualities of "hot" and "cold" were originally attributes of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) of ancient science.

Hence, not merely medicines and foods but all substances were classified with relation to them. Reflections of this usage may still be found; metals, for example, may be classified as "hot" or "cold." Any such extensions of the "hot-cold" principle outside of the realm of curing should, of course, be traced.

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The authors would be happy to correspond with ethnographers working in Latin America, or indeed any other area, who find the "hot" and "cold" classification in use in their communities and wish to discuss any of the problems it raises. They may be addressed as follows:

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Vegetables and Vegetable Foods:

acelgas, ajo, alcachofa, alegría, altramúz, apio, arroz, avena, batata, berenjenas, bleado (amaranth), calabaza, camote, cebada, cebolla, chayote, chícharros (guisantes), chilacoyote, chile (all types), col, coliflor, culantro (or cilantro), ejotes, elote (or choclos), endibia, epazote (or paico), espárragos, espinacas, fideo, frijoles (blancos, lima, negros, rojos), garbanzos, habas, jícama, lechuga, lentejas, maíz (millo, seco, verde), maní (peanut; cacahuete in Mexico), nabo, pan, papa, pepino, perejil, quelite, rábano, ruibarbo, tomate, tortillas, trigo, verdolaga, yuca, zanahoria.

Fruit:

aguacate (palta), albaricoque, anona, breva, capulín, cereza, ciruela, citrón, cherimoya, durazno, granada, guanábana, guayaba, guinda, guineo, higo, jocote, lima, limón, mamey, mango, manzana, melón, membrillo, mora, naranja, níspero (Mexican chicozapote), papaya, pera, piña, pitahaya, plátano, sandía, tejocote, toronja, tuna (nopal cactus fruit), uva, vainilla, zapote, zapote blanco, zapote mamey, zapote negro, zarzamora.

Nuts:

almendra, avellana, bellota, brazil nut, coconut, nuez (walnut), piñones.

Animal Products:

ardilla, buey, cabra, carnero, conejo, chicharrón, gallina, galino, huevos, jabalí, leche (cabra, humana, vaca), manteca, mantequilla, paloma, pato, pavo (turkey), pescado, puerco, queso (fresco, seco), res, ternero, venado.

Herbs:

acedera, achiote, ajenojo, ajonjolí, albahaca, alcanfor, alcaparra, altamisa, alhucema, anís, azafrán, berro, borraja, canela, caña fistula, celidonia, cenizo, clavellina, clavo, eneldo, eucaliptus, guácimo, higuierilla, hinojo, jengibre, laurel, lengua de vaca, llantén, malva, maná, manzanilla, mastranto, mastuerzo, mostaza, mejorana, mirto, poleo, orégano, ortiga, romaza, romero, ruda, sábila, salvia, sasafrás, sauco, tomillo, toronjil, verbena, yerbabuena, yerba mora, zarzaparilla.

Miscellaneous:

agua (caliente, fría), aguardiente, alcohol, algodón, añil, atole, azúcar, bebidas alcohólicas, cacao bean, café, cal, caña, cerveza, chocolate, coca, estiércol (caballo, cabra, humana), hielo, lana, lino, miel, panela, pulque, sal, tabaco, vinagre, vino.