

"Research is Hard Work, it's Always a bit Suffering. Therefore on the Other Side it Should be Fun". Anselm Strauss in Conversation With Heiner Legewie and Barbara Schervier-Legewie

Appendix: Anselm Strauss as a Research Supervisor. A Memo¹

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In May 1994, on the occasion of a visit to San Francisco together with my wife Barbara, I had the opportunity to participate in a research seminar with Anselm Strauss and afterwards in an individual supervision of the research of a student in health care. This is my memo from that supervision: [1]

Maria is a Mexican-American nursing student in her early thirties. For about 10 years she has lived in the USA. She asked for a one-on-one discussion but had nothing against the presence of the two visitors from Germany. Anselm receives her in his tiny office at the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences on the Campus of the UCSF² Medical School. The door is left open. The student sits down as a well-behaved pupil. [2]

Maria has done interviews with 20 overweight Mexican-American women on a diet. The interview is focused on the conditions that either promote or hamper good nutrition, diet and exercise. At first Maria talks about how difficult she finds it to phrase her categories in English in order to provide a serious, scientific account. Anselm asks whether this requirement derives from the examining board or from herself? Why doesn't she use Spanish categories? It turns out that she is under pressure from herself, discusses a lot (too much?) with other students and in the process becomes unsure of herself. Maria has prepared an illustration, at the centre on which is written the core category "voluntad propia," *the own desire to lose weight*. The implementation of a diet plan is impeded by a row of external and internal harnesses connected to this core category. External hindrances arise from the socio-cultural environment and system of values among Mexican immigrants and the life situation of women close to the poverty line. Sometimes they have 4 to 6 kids to look after and moreover additional family members. Husbands either disapprove of, or are indifferent to, the diet, although the women can be severely overweight and showing symptoms of bad health. In this regard, the female ideal of beauty of the plump woman is important (turning to us, Anselm says that the Yiddish term for this is *saffig*), as is the opinion among men that an overweight wife will not be attractive to others. The issue is further complicated by the higher cost of healthy food and the woman's responsibility for cooking. Yet another problem is caring for the children which makes it difficult for many women to attend courses in the community—a Mexican man would hardly be prepared to take on this commitment. In spite of these

1 Slightly revised reprint from *Journal für Psychologie* 1996. English Translation by Gustav SJÖBLOM, revised for FQS by Robert FAUX.

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difficulties many women find ways of carrying out their diets, sometimes concealing it from their husbands. On the other hand, many women state inner reasons (whether "voluntad propia" is available or missing) as an important or even decisive factor for the success or failure of their diet. [3]

Anselm asks Maria to draw a number of comparisons: How does the *will to lose weight* look among women of the American middle classes? How is it likely to look among their daughters in about twenty years? In what cultures does the American slimness ideal exist? [4]

Maria is a first generation immigrant, she is plump and her husband does not like it when she loses weight. Anselm asks her where her ideas of overweight come from. Maria describes herself as rooted in the traditional values of her culture of origin. Her ideas of the harmfulness of overweight are shaped exclusively by her professional knowledge as a nurse. Forty percent of Mexican women suffer from cardiovascular diseases, very often as a result of overweight. [5]

Anselm stresses that actually it is a wonder that: 1) these women have developed a concept of overweight at all—a matter of a new perspective on the body and of gender identity, 2) that they can carry through a diet under these circumstances, and 3) that they do this partly invisibly. He instructs Maria to tell the "story" of her study, taking this point of view into consideration, i.e. describing in more detail the positive achievements of the women in the direction of change. Maria is somewhat helpless and bewildered. She wants to give up and expects support or a solution to her problem from Anselm. It would be easy to summarize the study in a few sentences. However, Anselm does not do this favor for her. [6]

It becomes evident that Maria is under heavy pressure, presenting her work weekly in student teams and easily letting herself be dissuaded from her own ideas by the advice of others. Anselm dismisses her with the assignment to formulate the "story" of her study. Maria thanks us almost effusively for our presence during the session. [7]

In the conversation after the supervision Anselm emphasizes that the student would not have been helped by his suggesting a solution to the problem. By the way, if he had been alone with her, he would have gone into more detail concerning the personal significance for Maria of her subject and its influence on her points of view. [8]

I was impressed by the consistency with which Anselm directs his supervision towards the rules which he has described in "Basics of Qualitative Research," and at the same time how creatively and highly imaginatively he proceeds, thus contributing to a deepening of the student's understanding of her problem. And, of course, by his warmth, composure, and humor. [9]

Citation

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