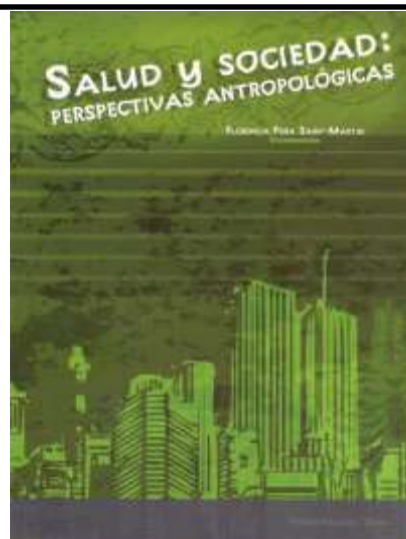




### Book Review

## *Salud y sociedad: perspectivas antropológicas [Anthropological Perspectives on Health & Society]*

Florencia Peña Saint-Martin (editor)  
PROMEP-SEP and ENAH-INAH-CONACULTA  
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Reviewed by Elia Nora Arganis Juárez



This book originated in the sessions organized by the Academic Group on “Contemporary Biosocial Diversity” during the Juan Comas XIV<sup>th</sup> International Colloquium on Physical Anthropology, held in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico in November 2007. The authors either belong to or collaborate with this group; they include undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD students of physical anthropology at the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico City.

The book is divided into three sections, each with a different editor. Together, they offer us an overview of the various anthro-

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pological and interdisciplinary approaches to the interrelation between health and society.

The first section, *Anthropology and Health in Contemporary Groups*, edited by Dr Florencia Peña Saint Martin, includes the following chapters:

- “Physical Anthropology, Life Cycle, and Health”, by Florencia Peña Saint Martin, demonstrates how the complexity of interactions between individual biology and social dynamics led to a three dimensional understanding of continuous recursive interaction between 1) psychological phenomena, 2) cultural interpretations of these phenomena, and 3) social practices involved in their symbolic representation. We also find two different perspectives: that of relations between macro-social processes and individual develop-

ment, and that of individual histories derived from specific groups or individual actors. The life cycle approach is seen as a way to integrate these two perspectives since it adopts a bi-directional vision and connects macro-social change with structure and individual action. Life cycle analysis enables a better understanding of the biological specifics of individuals and populations, particularly in conditions of cultural heterogeneity and social inequality.

- “Experiences of Aging with Chronic Illness” by Elia Nora Arganis Juárez reports on an ethnographic study of a group of elderly people living in Mexico City. Both the biocultural process of aging and chronic illness impact on their daily lives. Their identities—which are imposed from outside and self-created—

determine not only the way old age is experienced, but also the kind of support that can be given to them. During old age we see a number of factors coming together which can create quite different experiences. The need for support increases and family relationships change according to the previous characteristics of the family. For the old people interviewed, old age transformed their identity and social position. It also changed the composition of their social networks. Gender plays a significant role, with women acting as the main caretakers of both men and women who are sick or infirm.

- In “Gender Differentials in the Impact of Ozone on the Respiratory System of Schoolchildren in the Southwest Mexico City: An Unresolved Problem” Bonfiglio Remigio Muñoz Bojalil highlights the major respiratory impact of ozone, a pollutant present in the atmosphere of large cities. He studied children at a primary school in San Nicolás Totolapan. Anthropometric and spirometric measurements were taken for each child, along with data on any current cough, sputum production, or acute respiratory infection. Comparison between boys and girls showed that ozone reduces pulmonary function more in boys than in girls. Explanations center on differences in the X and Y chromosomes or in glucocorticoid and sex hormone receptors. Differences in these receptors account for superior immune function in women. Since autoimmune diseases are also more frequent

among women than men, we are led to conclude that same immune processes which help protect against aggressors may also increase the risk of other diseases.

- “Couples’ Life Histories and the Experience of Diabetes in Men and Women in the Eastern Area of the Valley of Mexico”, by Juan López Molina, analyzes the effect diabetes has on the relationships of two couples, one member of whom had diabetes. He uses the concepts of relationship trajectory and life cycle. In the course of their lives, people construct various histories (work, educational, matrimonial, reproductive) in which they play different roles. A sick person’s most intimate network is the one with their partner. This study looks at how the couple’s history transcends the experience of diabetes and quality of their life together. Analyzing these histories, it becomes clear that the illness experience is not accidental; there is a history which conditions it. Illness may allow old conflicts to be settled or even offer opportunities to the sick person, although both gender and power relations play a role in this.

- “The Experience of Change and its Impact on Living and Health Conditions: Case studies of a Community in the Oaxaca Valley of Oaxaca”, by Sergio López Alonso, describes perceptions and representations of rural inhabitants concerning the impact of social and cultural changes on their physical and health status. Dr. Lopez presents and comments on interviews done with

two men and two women past child-bearing age who live in a rural Zapotec community in the Tlacolula Valley, Oaxaca, Mexico. For the men, growing up as peasants meant a life full of hardship. The women had had to learn domestic chores. Their living conditions had now improved thanks to remittances sent by their migrant children. Corn, beans, and chili are still their staple diet, although processed foods are now consumed. They see the body as something useful for physical activity. Macrostructural changes driven by modernization are making themselves felt. The most adverse changes for Indian families relate to migration and the impoverishment of the rural area.

- “Diabetes as Social Drama”, by Laura Moreno Altamirano, explains the health-disease-health care process of diabetics using Victor Turner’s concept of “social drama.” The drama begins the moment the individual becomes aware of their illness. As he or she goes through a series of transformations, their social isolation increases. As changes in social standing and place come about, the diabetic acts to limit their separation from others. Finally, in the fourth phase, the diabetic is reintegrated into his or her social setting. At different stages of the social drama the mechanisms vary in type and complexity according to the extent and significance of the social estrangement, the social inclusion of the crisis, the nature of the social group in which the estrangement occurs, and the dia-

betic's autonomy with regard to external systems of social relationships. Different health care models are built on distinct conceptions of the human with varying understandings of the body and its physicality. In contrast to these differences, the author argues it is always possible to understand illness as social drama.

- "Bigorexia [*Muscle Dysmorphia*] and Cultural Consumption at a Mexico City Gym" by Hugo Alcántara Moreno, outlines fieldwork carried out at a gym in the Roma district of Mexico city. The author analyzes the concept of bigorexia, recently incorporated into medical diagnostics. In this ethnographic study he identifies a group of males displaying behavior associated with bigorexia. He considers why people want a muscular physique and relates this to the cultural consumption of a chosen identity.

The second section, *Gender, Sexuality and Culture*, edited by Dr Marinella Miano Borruso contains the following chapters:

- "Beyond Identity: Towards a Nomadic Sex Life", by Joan Vendrell Ferré, begins with a review of theoretical/conceptual discussion on sexual identities. She defines young sexual nomads as people who have had sex with individuals of both sexes at different times of their lives, either alternately or simultaneously, without necessarily taking on specific sexual identities as a result. She analyzes two cases of heteroflexibility - which can be seen as a moment in the process - and contrasts it with a case of

sexual nomadism. These interviews point to interstices in the social structure which pigeonhole people into preset "identities." The author concludes that these interstices could open the way to a different form of liberation beyond identity.

- "The Neapolitan *Femminielli*", by Aurora Cuomo, Serena Ferrara, Vincenzo Romano, Nicola Sisci and Paolo Valerio, attempts to clarify the relations between gender, culture, and tradition in archaic Neapolitan culture. This paper offers preliminary findings from a broader historico-psycho-social research project based on a literature review, analysis of pictorial art, interviews with *femminielli*, and conceptual analysis of the term. The *femminiello*, a particular form of southern homosexuality, is situated within the masculine/feminine, active/passive dichotomy which neutralizes the disturbing aspect of homosexual behavior. The potential disappearance of *femminielli* can also be seen as a consequence of the profound transformations Naples has been undergoing in its modernization.

- "Reflections on Sexuality, Gender, and Female Sexualities", by Lilia Campos Rodríguez and María J. Rodríguez Shadow, analyzes the premises which have given rise—in different times and contexts—to diverse semantic contents and assumptions with respect to sexuality. It focuses on how female sexuality has been constructed and considers the socio-political and cultural contextual framework for these con-

structions. Throughout history and across different societies, the sexuality of women has been denied, excluded, or highlighted according to the political and social interests of the patriarchal order whose discourse has profoundly influenced the collective imagination. Since meanings assigned to women's sexuality originate within the imaginations of men, the authors insured it was the women themselves who described their sexual experiences, which tend to be polysemic and polymorphic.

The third section, *Anthropology, the Body, and Health*, edited by Dr Anabella Barragán Solís, comprises the following chapters:

- "The Body in a Dilemma: to Eat or Not to Eat", by Sara Elena Pérez Gil Romo and Ana Gabriela Romero Juárez, tackles the subject of food and the body, which are analyzed from the point of view of consumption. They examine the main determinants of the decision to eat or not to eat among rural women in Morelos and Oaxaca. They find that food practices are changing to an unprecedented degree and rate. Not only are processed foods entering the diet, but other products are gradually gaining acceptance among the population despite not necessarily providing any nutritional advantages. Attempts to modify "negative" or "suboptimal" eating practices will need to take into account medical discourses, explore popular representations about food and the act of eating, and local experiences and social

situations surrounding food. This will provide additional support to help achieve the necessary dietary changes.

• In “A Puebla Shaman’s Experience” Pedro Yáñez Moreno offers us a preview of the research for his thesis in physical anthropology on the experience, practice, and representation of the body in the medical knowledge of a Nahuatl healer in the North Sierra of Puebla, in Mexico. Taking as his frame of reference the interdisciplinary field of physical anthropology, the author describes the shamanic worldview of the body. The shaman’s power is a gift which is strengthened by the oral tradition received from his father. His medical diagnoses and treatments make use of Nahuatl magico-religious conceptions while also incorporating newer medical and therapeutic resources from other parts of the world. His treatment of disease is linked to his vast knowledge of anatomy. The healer-patient relationship is central to restoring the sick to health.

• “Obesity in a Liminal State”, by David Francisco Ayala Murguía and Anabella Barragán

Solís. This chapter offers an approach to obesity from a physical anthropological point of view, with a multidisciplinary perspective in which anthropology and psychoanalysis complement each other in the search for new approaches and responses to this complex public health phenomenon. The ethnographic data is drawn from surveys and interviews done by physical anthropology undergraduates with overweight or obese men and women, mainly from Mexico City, in addition to sketches the subjects made about their family and body image. The review of the collected material shows how symptoms are manifest in the body and the difficulties concerning its symbolization.

• “Experiencing the Body: The Drama of Chronic Pain”, by Anabella Barragán Solís, provides a theoretical and methodological reflection on corporeality based on an ethnography of the experience of chronic pain in a group of patients and physicians at the Pain and Palliative Care Clinic at the Hospital General de México. These patients had a variety of diseases. Based on exper-

iential data obtained through participant observation and in-depth interviews, a correlation was established between patients’ representations and those of their physicians. Chronic pain is a worldwide health problem; analyzed from the point of view of the anthropology of experience, it can be considered as a social drama. The experience is communicated through language as a continuous process of metaphors. The metaphorical meanings of pain are set out in explanatory tables which show that men, women, and physicians have different ways of describing painful sensations and the magnitude and types of pain. Metaphors reflect the world and construct it; similarly, chronic pain is a metaphor of daily life, of each sick person’s history.

As we can see, the various chapters of this book provide food for thought on the importance of using anthropological methodologies to provide a better approach to the complex problems of the interaction between biology and culture.



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