

CHAPTER 4



The Teresa Texts

Thick Description of Living through Misfortune

The occasion for this data collection was a graduate class in qualitative research methods for psychology. The class undertook a group project in which students decided on a topic. Each wrote a first-person description that would provide data relevant to that topic. Students then formed pairs and conducted interviews with each other, focusing on the life events about which they had written.

After discussing possible topics for the research, the class settled on that of trauma and resilience. In order to avoid technical terms, students decided to refer to their subject matter as “a situation in which something very unfortunate happened and how the person responded.” The class formulated instructions for the written description that follow below. Each student wrote one description and submitted it to the class anonymously. After reading all 12 descriptions and considering possible themes for further investigation, the class decided on two relevant issues of interest that would guide the gathering of interview data: the roles of “social support” and “spirituality.” Students were free to pursue any other topics of individual interest, including specific ones present in the written description. Interviewers were asked to write a short introduction describing the interview situation and their approach.

The participant, whom we have called Teresa, was 26 years old, the daughter of a Venezuelan father and Filipino mother, and a developmental psychology doctoral student. Although the researchers did not have this information during their analyses, Teresa has subsequently reported, for our readers, that her ethnicity is Philipino-Chinese-Venezuelan-Scottish. The interviewer was a 28-year-old male doctoral student in a psychometrics doctoral program, and this was his first experience conducting an interview.