

Anna Starzinski-Powitz

Anna Starzinski-Powitz grew up in Mainz, Germany, and obtained her undergraduate training from the university there, completing her diploma (equivalent to a masters degree) in 1975. She obtained her PhD thesis in cellular immunology under the supervision of Hermann Wagner and Martin Röllinghoff. She was a postdoc in Francois Jacob's lab at the Institute Pasteur in Paris and in Walter Doerfler's lab at the Institute of Genetics in Cologne. She started her independent research career at the Institute of Genetics, finally leaving Cologne in 1990, when she was appointed to a full professorship at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt.

Anna's research interests have always centred on cell-cell interactions. She first investigated the interaction between syngeneic cytotoxic T cells and their target cells, then the formation of multinucleated myotubes during skeletal muscle differentiation. More recently, her interest in cadherin-mediated intercellular adhesion has led to the development of projects on the cell biology of endometriosis.

In the interview that follows, Fiona Watt, Editor-in-Chief of JCS, asks Anna about her experiences as a woman in science.

FMW: *What changes for women in science have you observed during the course of your career?*

ASP: At the time when I started my scientific career, women were quite rare in this field. I was the first female PhD student at the institute in which I did my PhD. In fact the head of the institute was not at all in favour of women in science. He had the very precise idea that doing research is not a female profession and indeed he advised me not to pursue science as a career. It was the strong influence (much appreciated) of my direct supervisors that finally gave me the chance to do my PhD in the institute.

In the two decades following my PhD there have been considerable changes for women in science, and it has become more and more acceptable for women to be competitive researchers just like men. Not only have female scientists become

more and more accepted by male scientists, but also there have been changes in the behaviour of female scientists. I think that today's female scientists are much more self confident and no longer seem so 'exotic' as they tended to be at the time when I started my career. The most significant failing in the system, which I can still see today, is that leading positions in science are rarely occupied by women, at least in Germany. The average percentage of female professors in Germany is close to 10% at the universities, which is still quite low.

FMW: *How has your career impacted on your personal life and vice versa?*

ASP: Actually I believe that my personality has always had a major impact on my professional life rather than vice versa. I am convinced that people with particular types of personality will become scientists, whether they are male or female. Typical traits in my mind are curiosity, a persistence in following ideas (a scientist just wants to know the answer!), a good sense for developing strategies and a high threshold for frustration. Besides this, I personally believe that our male colleagues tend to have a much better sense for becoming influential in study sections and other committees and make use of their networks more efficiently. Women have to learn from men in this regard, while adapting it to their own female personality.

I think that your personal life has to be extremely flexible if you want to be a competitive scientist. From what I have seen in my colleagues' lives I would conclude that in most cases male scientists have a much more regular family life than female scientists. Although I did not have a specific plan not to have children, my professional life has been more flexible as a result. I think that a woman's decision whether or not to have children should be made more or less independently of her professional ambitions. My research interests have been shaped in part by my personal experiences. For example, my endometriosis research brings together my long standing interest in cell-cell communication and my personal experience of endometriosis.



Anna Starzinski-Powitz as a postdoc at the Institut Pasteur

FMW: *Do you feel that being a woman is an inherent advantage/disadvantage for a career in science? Why?*

ASP: I don't know how it is in other countries, but in Germany women are still at a disadvantage in science. The reason is probably that the hierarchical structures in the German system are still strongly male dominated. A typical and authentic anecdote is of a male German professor telling a very distinguished female colleague that she could not be elected dean of the university because the time had not yet come for a dean to be female.

Nevertheless, it seems the situation is slowly changing. A good example is our biology department. I was the first female professor to be appointed and for 11 years I was the only woman out of a total of approximately 30 professors. In some ways this was an uncomfortable situation, just as it would have been for a sole man in an otherwise all female faculty. Fortunately, about two years ago the situation started to change, partly as a result of increased political awareness. For example, since we are now forced by the president of our university to have female members on particular committees it appears to me that I am sometimes 'borrowed' by other departments because they do not have the appropriate female staff. Now there

are two female full professors and one junior professor in my department.

Hopefully, this trend of increasing numbers of female professors will continue. I think a realistic proportion of female professors would be somewhere between 25% and 35%, since we have approximately equal numbers of female and male students in our department. It is, in my opinion, important to reach this percentage level in order to provide the professional female role models for young female scientists.

It is possible to succeed as a female scientist but I am convinced that women have to fight more for their success than men. Of course science presents difficulties for men during their careers too. But I still think that there are specific female obstacles, which relate to the acceptance (or non-acceptance) of females in science. Another reason why women do not go into science in Germany is that the system does not provide enough day care for children. This is a serious problem that has not been solved at a level which is satisfying for professional women (and men) with a family.

Quite often, the individual obstacles faced by women scientists are minor. However, the accumulation of many minor problems can make for a very uncomfortable situation. Here are some examples of what I mean. Some time ago the full professors of our university gathered to hear a speech by a government minister. At the reception afterwards I was taken aside one of my (elder) male colleagues (whom I did not know), who nicely said 'hello' and asked me whom I was accompanying. Obviously, he could not imagine that I might be a professor. Recently I was at a meeting where we had to choose between a female and a male candidate for an academic appointment. The comment of one of my male colleagues was 'since the woman is not better but equal to the male candidate we should take the man...' Finally, a couple of weeks ago somebody called and asked for 'Professor Starzinski-Powitz'. I told him that my name is Starzinski-Powitz and the answer was: 'oh, you are working in the same institute as your husband. But I want to talk to Professor Starzinski-Powitz.....' I also frequently get letters addressed to 'Herr Professor'.

FMW: *What are your remaining career ambitions?*

ASP: My major goal is to continue to carry out first class research. I also want to raise awareness of endometriosis, both in the scientific community and amongst the general public. I would always be open to new and unexpected job challenges, although I would want to evaluate them very carefully because I find my current situation rather satisfying. Finally, I have learnt that mentoring is important, particularly for women. I want to help young female scientists to get on in their careers by introducing them to a network of other female scientists as well as by helping them to make contacts generally, something women often find hard.

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