

Nutrition – An Approach from the Study of Social Work: Biographies of Food

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Since poverty is in Europe no longer primarily associated with hunger, moralizing discourses about “healthy” or “wrong” nutrition have been increasingly taking on an ostensibly guiding role. Questions of distribution are presented as having been solved, as though “healthy and proper” nutrition were equally available to all. Responsibility for proper nutrition is imposed on the individual and “wrong” nutrition is ascribed to the lower social classes.

This sub-project serves the location of the topic nutrition/nourishment within the perspective of the study of social work. Of special interest are questions relating to the consequences of certain nutritional practices on individual chances of inclusion. This also places a focus on the individual assessment of the relationship between health and nutrition. The first approach into this field was made through food banks in Lower Austria, thereby aiming to acquire conversation partners who live in Lower Austria and are reliant on welfare support for the acquisition of nutrition due to the most varied forms of exclusion. Subsequent research followed the principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss/Corbin 1996). Following the premise of a contrasting comparison, similarly excluded people in Vienna were also questioned along with largely included people in Lower Austria.

The first results of prior research have shown that individuals are confronted with an overabundance of foodstuffs as well as of information on ingredients and their impact on health. The mastering of this overabundance seems to be class-specific: Members of higher social classes reduce this complexity through, for example, recourse to personal relationships to the suppliers of foodstuffs or through self-production. However, those affected by exclusion do not have this possibility and, following failed attempts to make “informed” choices concerning nourishment, go back very quickly to selecting foodstuffs randomly as the constant reflection on ingredients or moral implications of various food offers are unaffordable from the perspective of an excluded position.

Although the topic of food and nourishment evidently prompts social questions, it has to date been relegated to the study of nutrition, medicine, and food technology. The significance of this research project consequently lies above all in its aim to push food and nutrition in their specificity as “social total phenomena” (Mauss cited in Moebius 2009) into the sphere of attention of the social sciences and social work. It is intended to establish a scholarly basis for the advancement of social work interventions in the field of food and nutrition.