

## YOUTH IN GERMANY: THEIR ORIENTATION IN LIFE

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In this article the youth's relationship to their body and their form of nutrition shall mirror the present changes of youth and youth's orientation in life. 'Body'<sup>1</sup> and 'soul'<sup>2</sup> are the centre motives for a lifestyle which is orientated towards the present, pleasure and self-portrayal. At the same time these terms represent two contradictory sides of the youth's orientation, namely discipline and fun. This article is based on research reports and discussions about the contemporary German youth. It wants to reveal the young people's possible concepts of identity and beauty which might be socially problematic and problematic in terms of health.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 'western' societies, which mainly follow the 'cult' of body and beauty, nutrition and the eating culture become more and more influenced by factors other than taste and status. Eating is an everyday thing. Everyone does it. Therefore, eating – rather than other areas of life – can mirror the extent to which individual and social developments find their expressions in everyday life (Rozin 2000). Furthermore, life- and self-concepts also coincide with eating or nutrition in many respects. In this con-

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<sup>1</sup> Comment of the translator: the original German expression for body' is Körper', however, in youth language the anglicism body' is used with different connotations to 'Körper'. Therefore the German word 'Körper' has not been translated when it is used in that sense in order to stress the difference to the anglicism 'body'.

<sup>2</sup> This article refers to a part of the discussion of the project Eating Culture in everyday life", at the Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg, financed by the Dr. Rainer Wild-Stiftung, Heidelberg, with Prof. Dr. B. Methfessel being the project leader and S. Bartsch being research assistant.

text eating not only is a pleasure-orientated way of meeting basic physiological needs but also, especially for girls and women, a potential threat to slimness and therefore in their point of view to beauty. For most boys and men, however, it is a prerequisite for the development of muscles and strength. Therefore, at the latest from adolescence onwards, modes of behaviour<sup>3</sup> (in nutrition) cannot be separated from a person's gender, their identity and from their relationship to their body. Although with different connotations and on different grounds, people widely hold the opinion that large parts of today's youth primarily have a materialistic and hedonistic way of thinking (see Hepp, 1996).

While during the 1970s and 1980s movements of protest and the discussion of political topics were relevant for the youth, in the 1990s a change of values has become apparent: the youth predominantly follow the pleasure-principle, things regarded as 'cult' and which allow the individual a 'role on the stage of life' dominate: 'aesthetics instead of ethics', 'fun'. In combination with this different ways of self-portrayal are directions of orientation which not only are found with and said of the German youth. Results of recent surveys allow to deduce a relative change in trend regarding the meaning of life and certain values of youth (see however, the pleasure-principle and the strong concentration on values of appearance still prove to be predominant. They both form a relationship full of tension and with serious consequences for the individual biography).

In the youth's self-definition individuality is a central factor within the framework of development of identity. Individuality as an unmistakable 'own' profile is in fashion. Individuality does not contradict membership of groups, on the contrary, in many youth cultures or scenes of young people individuality is vital. This demonstrates a development which is celebrated as an individually chosen style. Sociologically speaking this results from increasing individualisation in the modern age and it is being discussed critically (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1994; Beck, Giddens & Lash 1996). Traditional structures dissolve, it is no longer possible to follow social or state restrictions or given concepts of life, which results in the pressure to become the architect of one's own future because 'life is what you make it'. The gained freedom and the new chances at the same time include the individualisation of different problems and strategies to solve them and the duty to take on responsibility for one's own life. Young people defend their individual freedom. At the same time they feel under pressure, for example, by their parents' expectations regarding a 'higher' degree of education or a place of work. They are searching for solutions and for their way within an area of conflict between their own expectations of life, social and cultural norms and decreasing social scope, for example on the labour market (see Methfessel, 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Comment of the translator: in the German original the term "Ernährungsverhalten" is still being used as it is common in international discussion. However, as we regard man to be an acting, interactive and creative being, one should rather speak of "Ernährungshandeln" – a behaviour in nutrition which has a more active connotation. This is referred to with the term above.

Even with an increasing individualisation social structures and frameworks keep their outstanding meaning for the individual's development.<sup>4</sup> The widely discussed possibilities and obligations to create an individual and autonomous creation of one's own way of life take place in existing social areas (see Methfessel, 1997). In the discussion of (not only) children's mode of nutrition the emphasis is being shifted to the question of the actively behaving individual and his or her individual conditions. However, this can only lead to a deeper understanding, if, in addition to this, the interrelations between the individual and the cultural patterns and social frameworks are taken into account. This article primarily deals with the actual development of the youth, especially concentrating on cultural patterns, relevant to them.<sup>5</sup> Special emphasis is put on the interrelation of the youth's orientation in life, their relationship to their bodies as well as nutrition and their eating culture.

### 1.1 EXCURSUS: FOUR 'EDUCATORS' OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people learn cultural knowledge, their abilities to cope with life and their way of creation of everyday life while growing up. They are mainly affected by the major factors of socialization, such as family, children and young people of the same age,<sup>6</sup> school and the media (see Fauth, 1999, p.60). Although there are dissimilar balances of power in families and schools between 'the educating' and the adolescents, however, their relationship shows interactivity. The relationship amongst children and young people of the same age is one of relative equality, which means that, generally speaking, from the outset no-one stands above the other. Children and young people have to learn to integrate these different, sometimes contradictory areas and to put to the test differently sized scopes of action.

In the family, which is regarded as a dynamic system, it is known that the prevalent style of upbringing as well as norms, orientations of values and traditions form the family's (eating-) culture. This, on the other hand, has a strong influence on socialization, especially on socialization of nutrition habits. Children and young people establish a reservoir of cognitive and affective resources as well as attitudes regarding their behaviour of consumption and nutrition.<sup>7</sup> As education in being domi-

<sup>4</sup> For details see Hurrelmann (1994).

<sup>5</sup> To concentrate on 'the youth' often diminishes one attention towards the individual youth and easily makes one forget, that he/she only very rarely represents the average and that a statistically developed average or standing out groups can never reflect the range of different developments. This must be taken into account when reading the following. However, the individual is easier to understand if one acquires background-knowledge about the biological, social and cultural context in which his or her development takes place. The following is meant to support this.

<sup>6</sup> Children / young people of the same age are to be distinguished from 'peers' with the meaning of a subjective circle of relations.

<sup>7</sup> In this context we would like to refer to the important surveys and literature dealing with the behaviour of nutrition and consumption in connection with the discussion on lifestyle. They form the basis of this article: Diehl (1999a/b), GfK-Studie (1998), KVA 99 (1999), Leonhäuser (1999), 12. Shell Jugendstudie (1997), v. Berg (1997).

overall culture? (see also Vollbrecht, 1995). The attitude towards protest which was typical of the youth until the 1970s has nearly disappeared. Additionally, the respective youth subcultures do not exist, as increasing individualization, pluralization and reduction of ties binding people to their original milieu make the dividing lines between milieus become blurred (Vester 1993).

### 1.3 YOUTH – HOW IT PORTRAYS ITSELF

Today's youth cultures result from the variety of social lifestyles which have developed and split up because of recent structural changes (tendencies of individualization, pluralization and loosening ties) (Vester 1993). Ferchhoff, who favours the term of "youth cultural styles", has so far catalogued 23 different scenes or typologies of style. The majority of youth, however, does not only assign to one specific style but rather plays with their symbols and uses the elements of style for its self-portrayal. A blending of styles results from this. The social constraint to self-portrayal and self-realization is becoming structural and community-building (Ferchhoff & Neubauer, 1996, p. 32). Ferchhoff and Neubauer describe the character traits and personality of today's young people as being "dominated by outward appearance" and with a "flexible patchwork-personality", constantly following the 'Zeitgeist' (spirit of the age) and searching for the instant-pleasure, the instant-experience on the instant-market. A perfect 'body' with a perfect outfit is a central prerequisite for this. The motto of life is: be in a good mood and express happiness. To put it in a nutshell, a person who is "slightly in high spirits, communicative-active, open for new people and experiences, cheerful, optimistic and successfully self-encouraging" (Ferchhoff, Neubauer, 1997, p. 8, translated by us) will win the race. A lack of obligatory values, norms and patterns of life give freedom but on the other hand also force the individual to make decisions which in the end are also subject to social constraints. Vollbrecht (1995, p. 25) derives from this that the presumptions regarding inevitability, constancy, totality and strategy, which until now have been dominating everyday life, are no longer valid.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.4 YOUTH AND YOUTHFULNESS

Young people today make up a minority within a society in which youthfulness has become an ideal for everybody. Standards are being transported in the individual's conscious by means of omnipresent pictures which no-one in our western world of advertisement can escape from. These pictures, distributed by the media, produce a

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<sup>12</sup> The degree of dependence on social background regarding economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu) is controversial in the discussion on lifestyle. We would rather take this statement more moderately.

perfect ideal of an artificial world which cannot be reached in reality. For example, thousands of 'shoots' of mostly anorexic and perfectly styled models provide the basis for a number of further technical changes. The following example shows this perversion: an 'ideal' general picture can be made up of

- the face of model 1, touched up by computer
- the body of model 2, also retouched by computer and
- the hands of model 3 which specialized in modelling hands.

This means that a picture which represents our image of "beautiful and ideal" in reality is a strongly retouched patchwork which we will never meet in flesh and blood. This finally leads to Lara Croft, a perfect creation, which was born by means of a computer.

## 2. BODY INSTEAD OF SOUL?

Why do (not only) young people nowadays speak of 'body' instead of 'Körper' or even 'Leib'?<sup>13</sup> By looking at the language young people prefer, it can be noticed, that no-one has still got a 'Körper' as this could not be shown in public, but it is something to be ashamed of. 'Body' is 'in'. The Americanization of the word itself is regarded as fashionable, however, more important are the different images which are developing in one's head and the associations these terms create: 'Körper' is associated with not meeting aesthetic standards, restriction, being old-fashioned and regarded as negative. A 'body', however, meets high aesthetic standards: it is slim (without fat), fit and beautiful! "Body" as styling product, as a result of one's own work and discipline. The problematic effects of this development also depend on the respective image of the body which people are striving for. An image of the ideal body as it is portrayed by models such as Naomi Campbell, for example, is a rather androgynous. It is one of the most favoured dream figures (DGE 1992, p. 196), however, neither this nor the figure of most of the other models corresponds to the biological preconditions of the majority of women in western and eastern Europe. Because of this the aim presented to the girls during their development into a woman is one which denies substantial physical sides of femininity (subcutaneous fat on hips, stomach, bottom, thighs). 'Ideal images of Körper' have always been mirroring a society's predominant values: "Together with the new ideal of beauty the new female body has changed. On the one hand it has adapted itself to male builds and norms. It is expected to be slim, athletic and to signal non-reproductive sexuality as well as economic and emotional independence. On the other hand a slim female body with its delicacy, childlike fragility, passivity, need of protection and gentleness stands for traditional femininity [...]. This development takes place in a time in which it be-

<sup>13</sup> Comment of the translator: the German term 'Leib' cannot be translated literally, it would also result in the use of the English word 'body', however, 'Leib' means 'Körper' in the biblical sense.

Already from the early age of eight years on children start to follow the image of an 'ideal body' (Kupfer et al. 1992, p. 158f; Dauschek & Redler, 1994, p. 108) and very much rely on the ideals presented by adults, such as models and basketball-stars. Images of the body and handling of one's body are socially defined and change in accordance with social frameworks. With young people born in the 1960s a relationship to their body in which "experience of one's body and 'body-lust' more and more become the central aspect of life-perspective itself" (Preuss-Lausitz, 1983, S. 104, translated by us) has been found. This trend seems to have continued in youth culture until today (see Methfessel, 1999).

### 3. SOUL INSTEAD OF BODY?

An old German saying goes as follows:<sup>17</sup> "Eating keeps together body ('Leib') and soul". For the modern man's 'body' and 'soul' this seems to be valid only partly. Drolshagen (1996, p. 250) claims that because of the ideal of slimness eating drives a wedge between 'Leib' and 'soul'. Young people in western Europe live in a so-called 'society of experience', which places pleasure – rather 'fun' – in its centre. 'Food for fun', however, contradicts the formula of success which leads to slimness, so that the individual constantly has to decide between discipline (here as a synonym for the formula of success) and experience: discipline in order to create and keep the 'body', fun in order to be a member of a group.

The so-called 'feelings' – the affective components – are closely connected with 'fun'. Advertisements show that 'feelings' (atmospheres, emotions and feeling of being alive) are in the foreground, the product has become the (most important) minor matter. Coca-Cola's success and the success of cigarette advertisements confirm this. The question as to whether a product is going to be a 'scene-product' and to be regarded as 'hip' will not be defined by a product's utility value but by its value of experience. Therefore "experiences ... very often have an end in itself" (Ferchhoff & Neubauer, 1997, p. 26, translated by us) and consciousness is mainly determined by the design of things rather than their real inner value (Ferchhoff & Neubauer, 1997, p. 101). Very often trivialities, such as making coffee and eating a roll, are being "celebrated" as aestheticization of everyday life plays an important part as means of self-portrayal. The right choice of (designer-)socks becomes a question of faith. Most important for self-portrayal, differentiation and separation from other groups is not simply to meet needs but to live a certain lifestyle, the cultivation of a "lifestyle design, full of variations and self-reflexion" (Ferchhoff & Neubauer, 1997, p. 28, translated by us), self-portrayal is enormously important. The three maxims of youth by Ferchhoff & Neubauer "have fun, be in a good mood, express happiness" are

<sup>17</sup> Comment of the translator: this is a literal translation in order not to change the paragraph's meaning.

being served. The ideal of youth "slim – fit – beautiful" is combined with messages such as "if you eat too much, you will put on (too) much weight and will therefore be unattractive for the other sex." or "Only if you eat healthily you will gain a maximum of health and power, the wrong food, however, reduces well-being, leads to illness and shortens your life." (Diehl, 1999b, p. 40, translated by us). Obviously young people have a different understanding of health than older people, because older people do not take health for granted any more. Young people rather think of fitness and good looks.

#### 4. CONCLUDING COMMENT

In western societies the individual's spectrum of choice and development has increased drastically, however, according to Ferchhoff & Neubauer (1997, p. 119) "young people today are to a large degree only responsible to themselves regarding their position within the social structure as well as their 'career'."<sup>18</sup> The tendencies of pluralization also affect the agents of socialization. This means that also in this respect the youth is confronted with a variety of often contradictory values, possibilities of decision and aims. Young people deal with tasks of developments typical of their age by using coping-strategies leading to a formation of identity. This takes place within a context which had undergone social structural changes and in which the young people become a "productive creator of their tasks of development" (Ferchhoff & Neubauer, 1997, p. 120, translated by us).

The field of relationships to one's body and modes of nutrition, which has been discussed in this article, stands for other areas of development of identity and shows the expectations and problems young people have to go through. In a hedonistic culture, in which people follow the maxim "aesthetics instead of ethics", an idealised image of the body is dominant. If "consciousness" is defined by the "design" of things then beauty eventually promises lifelong happiness. But in reality this dream often does not come true and the formulas which had promised luck turn into their contrary "ethics instead of aesthetics" and "consciousness defines design". Because the social and cultural context constantly changes and is very complex, simple and stereotyped strategies are not very useful in everyday life. In order to find concepts which are balanced, differentiated and matching the individual, the young people need educators who make them take on responsibility but on the other hand also allow individual strategies. The aspects of knowledge, ability and skill as well as values, traditions and attitudes have to be taught, however, not in a one-sided normative way, but in a reflexive way, so that young people can follow their individual way in

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<sup>18</sup> From the point of view of the authors the original meaning contains both one's career in profession and of life in general, however, the German original term "Lebenskarriere" cannot be translated literally.

- vom Berg D. (1997). *Eßkultur, Lebensmittelqualität und Ernährungserziehung aus der Sicht von Schülerinnen und Schülern*. In *Ernährungs-Umschau* 11/1997, S. 407 - 408.
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