#### Timo Heimerdinger

# What is 'Healthy Food'?: Mapping Cultural Uncertainty by Observing Content Shifts in Popular Advice Manuals

In recent years a steady increase has been noticeable in the number and variety of popular nutritional guidebooks appearing on the market. Since 1996, advice manuals in general have constituted the second largest segment of the German book-market, with nutritional guidebooks accounting for a significant proportion of that segment.<sup>1</sup>

These guidebooks contain a broad spectrum of nutritional rules and concepts. In the following essay I would like to discuss two basic questions: firstly, the significance of this fact from the perspective of ethnological food-research in general terms and, secondly, and more specifically, the possible ways in which the 'how-to' books might be used as a valuable source for ethnological research.<sup>2</sup> I do not propose to discuss here the very important current issue of food scandals or the problem of growing distrust of industrially-produced food products and global trading structures. I shall focus rather on the patterns of nutrition preferences and food choices as they are found in popular guidebook literature.

First of all I would like to provide some general theoretical and methodical considerations about the previous use of guidebooks as a source for

<sup>1</sup> Information provided by the GfK (Gesellschaft f
ür Konsumforschung), N
ürnberg, 27 April 2006, on the telephone. The GfK Group is ranked as the No. 4 market research organisation worldwide.

With regard to some of the discussion presented here, see Heimerdinger, Timo, 'Alltagsanleitungen? – Ratgeberliteratur als Quelle für die volkskundliche Forschung', Rheinisch-westfälische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 51 (2006), 57-72.

ethnological and cultural studies. I will then present a modified, alternative way of understanding advice manuals as a cultural phenomenon and  $_{\rm of}$  their use as sources.

Then I propose to concretise these basic considerations using two examples of guidebooks – one historical and the other contemporary. I shall interpret the contents of these two examples as expressions of popular needs and of issues of disorientation regarding the concepts and the practice of nutrition.

Finally, I shall compare the results of the interpretation of the contents of these two examples in order to reveal – and draw conclusions from – the shift regarding popular conceptions of 'healthy food'.

#### 'How-to' Books as a Reliable and Valuable Source for Ethnological Research

First of all I propose to deal with the question of how we can use guidebooks as a source for ethnological and cultural studies. Guidebooks are at once a very fascinating, seductive and problematic type of source. They are fascinating because at first glance they seem to be very close to the behaviour and mentality of everyday life. In trying to offer practicable solutions for all kinds of problems, and in presenting rules of how one could or should act in life, guidebooks seem to reflect issue that arise in everyday life. Guidebooks thus offer exactly what ethnologists are searching for: texts and information close to everyday life. The problem is that the best-known guidebooks contain normative texts which in fact do not tell us very much about everyday life as it is performed in reality. This problem has already been identified very clearly in recent studies and has been frequently discussed. It is obvious, of course,

that we cannot directly move in terms of conclusions from normative texts to actual behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in recent times, while the 'how-to' manuals and guidebooks have often been considered as being useful and valuable sources for our work – not, however, in the sense that they tell us much about the practice of everyday life, but rather that they represent effective and powerful norms in a certain cultural situation.<sup>5</sup> In line with this view, it is evident that these books cannot tell us very much about how the world actually is, but rather how the world should be in a certain cultural context – that is, at a certain time in the perspective of certain groups. According to this mode of interpretation, guidebooks can lead us to a valid cultural superstructure and a 'nominal cultural condition' – in a certain time and place.

Accordingly, they can demonstrate to us those concepts and norms that drive cultures. By interpreting and understanding 'how-to' manuals in that way, the general theoretical problems and the doubts about the usefulness of these manuals as sources, have not only been evaded, but also practically ignored in recent times. A number of studies concerning rules and codes of conduct have proceeded in this way.<sup>6</sup> The value of these studies should not be denied, however, and I am sure that we can learn a lot from them.

But I doubt whether this way of handling guidebooks as sources is the most productive and interesting one. So I would like to consider another, alternative view of this type of text, and to suggest a different approach to its interpretation.

It is clear that there is a dialectic relationship between media representations and the patterns of cultural habits or the order of knowledge, even concerning cultural practice. According to this perspective, every text gen-

<sup>3</sup> Trude Ehlert, for example, discusses the change and variety of functions of cookbooks and concludes that they have functions other than offering advice on cooking meals. See, Ehlert, T., 'Zum Funktionswandel der Gattung Kochbuch in Deutschland', in Wierlacher, A., Neumann, G., Teuteberg, H.-J. (eds.), Kulturthema Essen. Ansichten und Problemfelder (= Kulturthema Essen 1), Berlin 1993, 319-41.

For an overview of the discussion in this regard, see e.g. Timm, E., Ausgrenzung mit Stil. Über den heutigen Umgang mit Benimmregeln, Münster 2001, 19-22, and Schrott, K., Das normative Korsett. Reglementierungen für Frauen in Gesellschaft und Öffentlichkeit in der deutschen Anstands- und Benimmliteratur zwischen 1871 und 1914, Würzburg 2005, 18-38.

<sup>5</sup> Silke Göttsch, for example, argues thus: Göttsch, S., "Motto: Bleibt natürlich!" Zur Vermittlung geschlechtsspezifischer Körpersprache in Anstandsbüchern, Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde 92 (1996), 63-78.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Göttsch, op. cit., or Schürmann, T., Tisch- und Grußsitten im Zivilisationsprozess, Münster /New York 1994.

erates a part of that cultural reality with which it is concerned. I would like to focus my attention in the other direction, that is, to view texts as  $\exp_{res}$  sion of certain needs extraneous to the texts themselves.

Guidebooks are part of our popular culture. As such, they are market-driven and consumer-oriented. Thus, if these books are being successfully sold, they must be responding correctly to certain existing needs of customers and readers – otherwise they would not enjoy economic success. So the question which arises is: what can popular guidebooks tell us about the needs and problems of people have in a certain cultural situation? My idea is that these manuals should not be read primarily as a source for finding out about valid norms and concepts, but rather as indicators of popular questions and needs seeking answers and orientation. When regarded in this way, guidebooks do not tell us how a culture or a certain society works, but, on the contrary, they show us rather what does *not* work in certain cultural and historical situations, and highlight what the popular problems and questions are.

Having provided these general theoretical reflections, I shall now  $p_{\rm TO}$  ceed to exemplify this concept of interpretation on the basis of two concrete and contrasting German examples of guidebooks concerned with the subject of healthy nutrition.

#### Die Frischhaltung ('Keeping Fresh')

The first guidebook to be presented here is a German periodical with a very long and successful history. First published in 1901 under the title 'Die Frischhaltung', it subsequently changed its title several times. After being published under the title, 'Guidebook for House and Family' since 1946, it was renamed 'Guidebook for Woman and Family' in 1984. It is still issued monthly under this latter title and sells about 260,000 copies.

The magazine's circulation reached a peak in the late 1970s when almost half a million copies were sold. For the purposes of this paper and the form of interpretation I am proposing, I shall focus on the period of the late 1950s when about 400,000 copies were sold.

The magazine was founded by the famous Weck company which produced and sold equipment for the conservation of fruits and vegetables by boiling.7 It is thus obvious, and frankly admitted in the publication, that the aim is to promote the company's own products through the publication of their guidebooks. So certain economic interests have played a role as far as the content of the magazine is concerned. However, it can also be stated that the journal is not simply a superficial advertising pamphlet, because, on looking back on the publication's content over the last 50 years, it can be clearly seen that in the late nineteen fifties it tried to deal with subjects that had a broad and general appeal. Even topics which were closely connected to the company's own business interests, were presented in a reputable manner, thus always remaining true to its own basic principles, as expressed at the very beginning of the first issue in 1901, which were: to give advice that was useful for the general purposes of improving one's household and, more specifically, in relation to nutrition and the handling of food.

The question arises then as to what the main topics treated in the magazine in the late nineteen fifties were.

The guidebook – 'For House and Family', as it was called in the 1950s – was a monthly publication touching on many topics and themes, which claimed to have a holistic and broad appeal. It was intended that it would be a guidebook that dealt with almost every area of everyday life. It thus dealt with issues such as the decoration of the home, gardening, flowers, child education, married life, communication in the family, cosmetics, sewing, and so on. Despite covering such a wide variety of subjects, however, the magazine was actually concerned mainly with matters related to cooking, baking, and conserving food, and providing information about eatables in general (Fig. 1).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, http://www.weckcanning.com/docs/about\_weck.htm [accessed 7 May 2008].

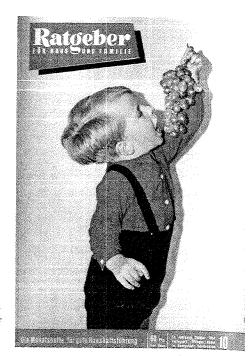


Fig. 1: A young boy is shown with a bunch of grapes indicating the importance of fruit as part of a healthy diet.

The magazine, therefore, contained a lot of recipes and proposals for different kinds of dishes, often combined with short statements regarding preparation and dietetics, which, of course, underlined the advantages of the meals proposed. With regard to the concept of healthy nutrition as indicated in these texts, the requirement was to achieve a modern form of nourishment by using as many fresh ingredients as possible. This would guarantee access to good and vitamin-rich food.

The keywords, therefore, in relation to food and its preparation in this context, can be arranged under three headings: practicability, inexpensiveness, and tastiness. Practicability here means convenient meals ('einfach'), proven recipes ('gute erprobte Rezepte'), and quick cooking ('schnelle Küche'). Inexpensiveness refers to the virtue of frugality ('Sparsamkeit'), the use and recycling of leftovers ('Reste verwerten'), and the idea that ingredients should not be costly ('billig'), which often means that it is advisable to use seasonal products which are available in the garden or at the

market. This final point is also important for the last of the three categories: the fact of being tasty. Apart from the use of good, fresh ingredients, this refers especially to the creation of a wide variety of dishes using a range of foods.

According to the internal logic of the 'Guidebook for House and Family', the aim of achieving healthy nutrition is reached almost automatically, so long as these three principles of being "practicable, inexpensive and tasty' are adhered to. There is absolutely no conflict between the different aims.

Interpreting the guidebook as an indicator of popular questions and requirements, we can summarise our discussion so far with relation to the late 1950s: At that time, a certain level of prosperity and wide material possibilities were attainable by a large segment of the German population. The questions concerning a healthy nutrition which consumers had to solve were above all economic and organisational ones. There was agreement on what constituted healthy nutrition and which rules should be followed in order to achieve it. The challenge in daily life was to attain a healthy level of nutrition in conditions of still limited economic and material resources.

#### GU

Let us now step forward about 50 years to the present and ask the question: How is the guidebook situation today? Our response is to say that there is a vast field of different nutrition guidebooks, and that many firms are specialising in this kind of publication. The leading publishing firm in Germany in this regard is the 'Gräfe und Unzer Verlag', which presents a wide variety of books in the field of nutrition under the label GU.8

The target readership of this publishing house is basically a group of middle-class women at the age of 25 to 45, as the responsible manager for the publisher's programme told me in an interview.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, http://www.graefe-und-unzer.de/international/company.php [accessed 7 may 2008].

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Georg Kessler, 3 March 2006.



Fig. 2: Dickhaut, S., Sälzer, S., (eds.), Leben! Das Hausbuch von GU. 1013 Ratschläge, die man wirklich braucht. München 2005.

One of the recent publications - dating from 2005 - is of interest to us as it has also adopted an almost holistic approach, in that one single guidebook aims to deal with almost every question and situation of daily life. It is thus conceptually very close to the Ratgeber Haus und Familie. The journal in question is titled Leben! Das Hausbuch von GU. 1013 Ratschläge, die man wirklich braucht. Von Lampe aufhängen über Liebesbrief schreiben bis Lagerfeuer machen ('Life!', The Housebook from GU. 1013 pieces of advice which one really needs. From how to hang up a light, write a loveletter, to making a camp-fire' (Fig. 2). As would be expected, one of the chapters in this manual also deals with 'cooking' and 'well-being' - and some extremely general explanations about 'healthy nutrition' such as 'Sometimes less is more, or 'A well-balanced diet is important', are included. These general pieces of advice correspond to our current situation of over-saturation in many aspects of life. Apart from these very simple rules of nutritional behaviour, there are also hints about and links to various dietetic concepts such as, LOW-CARB, LOW-FAT or LOW-CAL.<sup>10</sup>

For all of these nutritional concepts, and even for others such as the so-called GLYX-diet, or the Chinese five-elements-nutrition, particular guidebooks are available in the GU publishing programme.<sup>11</sup> However, what is published by GU is only a small part of the whole large field of guidebook-literature, and this company's possible impact on culture as whole should not be overestimated. However, I would presume that this structure of combining expert advice on the one hand, and the possibility, and even necessity, of consumers' choice on the other, can be regarded as being typical for our whole current cultural situation.

The concept of GU manuals is rather clear: they do not offer one single nutritional concept for all readers, but a variety of different patterns. They emphasise that all these concepts are part of the current scientific mainstream, and no extreme or medically-risky positions are put forward or recommended. But the – mostly female – readership has to make its own choice from the rather broad spectrum of possibilities on offer.

This is conceptually very important because GU is well aware that German middle-class women do not form a homogenous group. GU also knows that it matters not only where a person is culturally situated at a given moment in time, but also the person's social and cultural orientation. So it is also of importance for GU to know which other social and cultural groups provide relevant milieu-models for a person.

This view of our society follows a milieu-concept approach that has been brought into play in many marketing contexts in recent years. From the perspective of ethnography or cultural studies, this can be seen as a very concrete application – or even a feedback effect – of our work, resulting, for example, in the 'milieu landscape' ('Milieulandschaft'; vulgo: 'Kartoffelgrafik') of the 'Sinus Sociovision' company – a company which specialises in offering consultation services involving psychological, sociological and ethnographical perspectives. (Fig. 3).

<sup>10</sup> See Dickhaut, S., Sälzer, S., (eds.), Leben! Das Hausbuch von GU. 1013 Ratschläge, die man wirklich braucht, München 2005, 135.

<sup>11</sup> http://www.gu-online.de/gu-online/kochenundverwoehnen/diaet/ and http://www.gu-online.de/gu-online/koerperundseele/gesundeernaehrung/, (Accessed 17 March 2007).

#### Die Sinus-Milieus® in Deutschland 2007 Soziale Lage und Grundorientierung

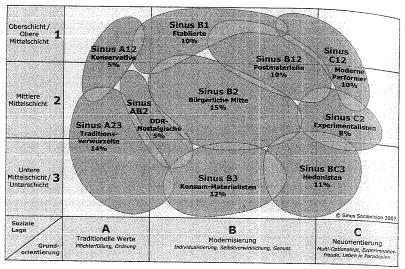


Fig 3: Milieulandschaft - Milieu landscape. 12

Each of the ten sectors in 'Die Sinus-Milieus' in Deutschland 2007' which are defined by a coordinate system of social situation ('sozialer Lage') (ordinate), and ideal preferences ('Werte-Grundorientierung') ranging from traditionality to reorientation (abscissa), symbolises a certain group of persons with specific attitudes towards consumption, lifestyle and ideological outlook.

The middle class ('Bürgerliche Mitte', B2) – which is by far the largest milieu group – is situated in the centre of the field. The GU books are specifically produced for this group, or to be exact, for the female segment of

 $_{
m this}$  group aged between of 25 and 45 years. But, and here GU surpasses the  $_{
m Sinus}$  Sociovision model, as it does not regard the middle class women as heing a homogenous group.

GU in fact distinguishes between three different groups of middle-class women. These are: one which tends towards the established milieu (Etablierte; B1), another which has the post-material-milieu as its model (Postmaterielle; B 12), and the third group which aims at becoming part of the modern performers (Moderne performer; C12). What GU regards as significant about these three types of middle-class women, therefore, is not their current life situation, but rather in each case, the preferred milieu model that drives the group-members' dreams and longings when they think about their identity or future.<sup>13</sup>

The books are designed to correspond to the imagined worlds of lifestyle. Their stringent orientation towards the target groups is one of the main reason for the economic success of the GU publications. The publisher sees himself not as 'trendsetter' (i.e. a setter of norms), but rather as an 'early follower' who serves current 'Megatrends'.

Following that (cultural studies inspired) concept of our society, the publishing house offers various books with different nutritional concepts according to these three attitudes towards 'being a middle-class woman'. The female reader can choose a concept that best fits her lifestyle, cultural context, and her current or desired habitus.

As result, the synopsis of these advisory manuals can be read as a map of cultural desires. Even the GU manager concedes the fictional character of the content of the books: 'All you see here, considered in the cold light of day, are somehow illusions, dreams, or what is little short of *ersatz* religion.'<sup>14</sup>

Such cultural imaginations or visions of one's own, unrealised life, can be consumed symbolically by recourse to the advice manuals. The effort –

<sup>12</sup> Copy courtesy of Sinus Sociovision, Heidelberg, Germany. I was really astonished when I discovered in my interview with the GU-manager how concretely the studies of Pierre Bourdieu (See Bourdieu, P., Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft, Frankfurt am Main 1982, 212-13), or of Gerhard Schulze (See Schulze, G., Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main, New York 1992, 163-5), have been applied in the context of their current marketing strategy.

<sup>13</sup> One could imagine three arrows that point from B2 to the sectors B1, B12 and C12. The graphical realisation of that visualisation was unfortunately not possible due to copyright reasons.

<sup>14</sup> In original: 'Alles was Sie hier haben, mal bei Lichte besehen, sind ja irgendwo auch Illusionen, die Sie hier erzeugen'; they sell 'Träume', or 'fast schon so etwas wie ein Religionsersatz'.

as well as the benefit – for the user on this level of symbolical acquisition is very high indeed. It is not only the contents, but also the stylistic flavour of the various nutritional concepts that count. Healthy nutrition thus becomes a question of lifestyle, and not just a matter of economical house-keeping and a fancy variation of the meals as presented in advice manuals in the 1950s.  $^{\rm 15}$ 

As a result of interpreting the guidebooks as indicators of popular trends and questions, it emerges that, under current conditions of food over-saturation, healthy nutrition – especially for the middle classes – is basically a life-style issue.

It is, of course, a matter of common sense that we should not eat  $t_{\rm OO}$  much and should eat fresh food which is rich in vitamins.

However, the various concepts differ in stylistic details and in their symbolic value. Consequently we get the impression that pluralisation in the field of dietary rules corresponds to the process of cultural diversification and social distinction in our society. The search for our daily diet seems to be combined with the search for our position in the cultural field of milieus and lifestyles.

#### Conclusion: Healthy Nutrition and the Aesthetics of Lifestyle

I would like to suggest the following four conclusions.

First of all, I wish to emphasise that it can be productive to see guide-books not only as normative texts, but also as cultural products trying to respond to popular questions. If, therefore, we read them as sources under this paradigm, they can lead us to the 'hot spots' in popular culture.

In the late nineteen-fifties the issue which mainly received attention was how to organise a varied and healthy daily diet under the influence of economical restrictions. Thus the question of how healthy nutrition should be designed was rarely discussed and appeared to be clear.

The situation today is quite different, however: the pluralisation and diversification of knowledge has brought a variety of nutrition concepts to our attention, corresponding to the diversification of lifestyles and milieus.

We can also conclude that a 'shift' of orientation, that is, from economic and practical questions to stylistic ones, has taken place. With regard to the oversaturated Western middle-class, the achievement of health and wellbeing in nutrition is more a question of lifestyle than one of the availability of certain products. So, by way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that the study of guidebooks can teach us that the very frequently-discussed issue of nutrition would seem nowadays to be the result of prosperity and the search for one's own cultural place, rather than a problem of diet and dietetics.

<sup>15</sup> Even if certain nutrition-fashions and well-being concepts were already in existence in Germany in the 1950s, the focal point for people was still essentially the enrichment of the variety of food available and of consumption possibilities.

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## Sanitas per Aquas

Spas, Lifestyles and Foodways

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