

The astounding career of the calorie

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Contemporary Western societies place great emphasis on health and physical fitness, but what does the recent focus on performance tell us about how we live now? A new project at LMU looks at the causes and effects of the fitness boom.

A new research project at LMU, made possible by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation, will explore what modern attitudes to health maintenance and [nutrition](#) reveal about the cultural ideals that shape societies. "Current concerns regarding the increasing incidence of obesity served as the point of departure for the design of the project. At the same time we are experiencing an unprecedented emphasis on health and fitness, which asserts that each individual has a duty to ensure that he or she remains healthy, fit and productive," says Paula-Irene Villa,

who holds a Chair in Gender Studies at LMU's Institute of Sociology.

The success or failure of our efforts to live up to this ideal of physical and mental fitness not only provides insights into our state of health and level of productivity. "Our physical attributes are taken to indicate how self-disciplined and responsible we are and therefore signal how much we contribute to stabilizing the existing social order," says Villa.

LMU's partners in the new project, entitled "Nutrition, Health and Social Order in Modern Societies: Comparative Studies of Germany and the USA" are the universities in Erfurt and Leipzig, together with the University Medical Center in Hamburg-Eppendorf. The primary aim of the interdisciplinary research program is to analyze the changes in perceptions of nutrition and health in the course of the modern era. The project encompasses eight separate study areas.

The role of voluntary self-control

One of these subprojects focusses on the period from the 1860s into the 1920s, during which the accelerating pace of industrialization in the US led to novel conceptions of the body and the individual's duty to look after its welfare. "Scientific terms – such the calorie as a unit of energy or carbohydrates as a particular source of energy – entered popular discourse, largely because they appeared to provide objective measures of nutritional quality and levels of health, and therefore promised to guarantee the continuing productivity of industrialized societies," says Villa.

Nowadays, digital technology and batteries of automatic sensors not only make it possible to monitor one's nutrition, vital functions, fitness and body weight in real time, one can also publish the (flattering) results on social networks. One of the goals of the project is to assess the significance of such quantified self-technologies for the [health](#) and self-

image of those who make use of them. Do such individuals perhaps see themselves as behaving in an exemplary way, as exhibiting a particularly high degree of maturity, because they voluntarily assume responsibility for reducing potential social costs? "The analysis of perceptions – one's own self-image and how one is seen by others – is a major component of all the planned studies. The dominant ideal of the body beautiful is in turn closely linked to notions of good and bad lifestyles, and one's position in this form of social ranking is determined in part by one's perceived level of fitness," says Villa.

Other studies will look at the evolution of nutritional norms in Germany in the period extending back to the 1930s, the conceptualization of food and nutrition in West and East Germany between the 1960s and the 1980s, and Germany's changing relationship with the US as reflected in debates relating to nutrition and diet in the two countries.

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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