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ADAPTATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF REFUGEES IN AUSTRIAN COLLECTIVE RECEPTION CENTRES EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Living in a refugee camp is one of the main risk factors for mental health of refugees and asylum seekers, besides other risk factors such as traumatic experiences, legal restrictions like limitations of access to work permits, the exclusion from social spheres of activity or experiences of racism and discrimination. The presentation is based on a qualitative, social psychological study focussing on collective reception centres in the Austrian basic benefit system, which are understood as total institutions in the sense of Erving Goffman. It explored how refugees and asylum seekers with insecure permit status perceive their personal agency and self-determination in the conduct of everyday life, experiences of (non-)recognition and the receipt of social as well as professional support. Grounded in critical social psychology, one of the main research questions asked how refugees and asylum seekers can enlarge personal agency and which factors can contribute to an improvement of mental health. Subsequently one of the main focusses was how (psycho-)social support could have an emancipatory potential by contributing to the development and enlargement of personal agency and creating room for intersubjective recognition.

The conduct of everyday life in the collective reception centres is dominated by the feeling of „doing nothing“. The facets of personal agency found in this study were clustered as a) adaptation or coping, b) meaningful action such as creating highlights in everyday life, as well as c) transgression and potentially resistant action. These forms of personal agency build the basis for thoughts on how social support can contribute to processes of empowerment, and when practical and psychosocial support is needed. To what degree social support is seen as helpful depends on the perception of a truly authentic interest and the self being recognized as a unique individual. The main focus of the presentation will be how members of the staff can restrict vs. enlarge agency and give vs. neglect intersubjective recognition, as well as ways of solidarity, social support and intersubjective recognition of inhabitants themselves.

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