

Abstract – Summer School Fulda

Energy poverty: a sociological case study in Styria

In Austria, social scientific research on energy poverty is underdeveloped. These issues are also peripheral in government policy and in the agendas of non-governmental organisations. My first step was a critical analysis of energy poverty definitions and the construction of a locally-relevant conceptualisation for Austrian research. The definition of energy poverty used in my research includes all energy consumed in a home, rather than only energy used in heating, reflecting complex socio-technical assemblages of energy distribution, accessibility and consumption. Furthermore energy poverty can be understood as the combination of rising energy costs for all purposes in the house hold (1), low income (2) and insufficient housing conditions (3).

The consequences of energy poverty reach from an increased possibility of long term illnesses to psychological problems. Due to the cold and moister in the living compartments respiratory illnesses are dangers especially to elder people. An energy deprived live stile can lead to permanent neuroses and social isolation. The lack of proper heating can also lead to the damaging of the dwelling itself.

The first study on energy poor households in Austria identified a dynamic of debt that puts income poor households even more at risk. Due to their bad financial situation and the low standard of their dwellings the energy consumption is over proportional. This high consumption culminates in the inability to pay energy bills and often leads to fines by the energy suppliers. This financial mechanism keeps spinning because of the inability of the poor households to change their situations in any substantial way.

The question I would like to discuss in my presentation is how a science and technology studies perspective would reframe the issue of energy poverty. Are there different socio-technical configurations of energy poverty – e.g. in a ‘traditional’ public service model of energy suppliers versus changed consumer-producer relations in a ‘liberalised’ energy market; or with respect to different technologies such as smart meters or pre-paid meters? The argument would be that such shifts in the socio-technical relations between electricity suppliers and electricity users come along with different cultures of energy use in poor households and different cultures of publicly dealing with energy poverty. A comparison between the British and Austrian situation will deliver the empirical and theoretical basis for this discussion.