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“IT’S JUST A CONSTANT EXCHANGE OF CONTAINERS”:  
DISTRIBUTION OF HOME-MADE FOOD AS AN ELEMENT  
OF POLISH FAMILY LIFESTYLES

FOOD AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN A MOBILE WORLD

The paper aims at an analysis of intergenerational food transfers inside urban, non-migrating families in contemporary Poland. Food is passed from parents to adult children in plastic or glass containers, while empty jars or boxes – returned to parents – become symbol of the relationship. The intra-family circulation – plastic or glass food containers transported full and empty in two directions between households of parents and adult children – deserves attention in the context of hybrid, multi-layered Polish modernity and the relationship between stability and change in Polish society.

The circulation of food boxes described in the paper consists of a minor everyday practice, but in fact it is multifaceted and carries a variety of meanings. Undoubtedly, it may be analysed as an example of universal, albeit depending on different factors (country, class or gender), mechanisms of intra-family solidarity that include the exchange of money, goods, and services (Komter, Vollebergh 2002). It should be also perceived in a wider perspective of understanding food as a social bonding tool (Straczuk 2004). In the paper the emphasis is laid especially on the role of home-made food in creating a family and on social reproduction (Moisio, Arnould, Price 2004) in the situation of an individualization of lifestyles.

The historically rooted Eastern European phenomena of extensive informal networks which substitute the weak public sphere (Wedel 2007) were the general background for the analysis. Although these networks sometimes take the form of ambivalent non-monetary “economies of favours” (Makovicky 2009; Polese, Rodgers 2011), they undoubtedly help to establish relationships, show gratitude, attention and respect to other people or build one’s prestige (Patino 2002). The private transfer of food as material objects could be perceived as a part of multi-component, diverse economies of post-socialist societies which include informal production (Alber, Kohler 2008) and exchange (Smith, Stenning 2006), however, they reach far beyond the instrumental needs and cannot be reduced to economic activity as such. Hence

the notion of the logic of gift including the moral component of reciprocity (Mauss 2001 [1950]) was applied to the phenomenon in question. Yet, especially important from the paper's perspective is the meaning of family in socialist and post-socialist Poland: family roles constitute an important source of identity, in particular for women who are perceived as those who feed others (Dunn 2017, pp. 185–228), while the intra-family help has become a trademark of privatised (post-)socialist coping strategies (Stanisz 2014, pp. 253–276).

The findings presented in the paper come from small-scale research concerning cooking patterns in urban Polish families living in a large Polish city (cf. Bachórz, 2018). A total of 10 families and 22 people aged 18 to over 80 took part in the research. The sample was small, so the paper's conclusions should be seen as exploratory.

The analysis applies to the generations of adult children and their parents that live separately (with one exception), although at a relatively small geographical distance from each other (within the same city). In 2015 in-depth interviews were conducted individually with representatives of two (in one case – three) generations: adult children (mostly daughters with the exceptions of three sons) and their parents, mostly mothers. Fathers took part in the research only marginally – just in one case the father was the main interviewee, while in another – a man was an unplanned witness to conducting an interview with his wife, speaking out from time to time. This gender imbalance was not intended, but resulted from general work division in Polish families – when I searched for the people taking care of home cooking, in the case of the older generation I usually reached women. However, fathers were present in the stories I heard from the female interviewees – they were mentioned as those who help running households (for example: doing shopping), follow mother's instructions (helping with kitchen work) and therefore cooperate in sustaining the family system of food distribution. This is the reason why I sometimes write about the parental generation in general, while in other cases – I underline the roles of mothers as a driving force for the phenomenon described.

The informants were educated (all the children and the majority of the parents had higher education) with economic status perceived by themselves as average, good or very good. They can be categorized as middle-class, although some of the interlocutors from the parental generation had rural or working-class backgrounds. One should also bear in mind the characteristics of the class system in Poland with the middle-class as still under construction<sup>1</sup>. Although the sample was undoubtedly biased, its character made it possible to ask questions about the mechanism of social change.

Initially, the main research questions concerned the intergenerational reproduction of practices, views and knowledge about meal preparation. I was interested in how lifestyle patterns and daily kitchen experiences were reproduced between genera-

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion on the Polish middle-class as a not fully developed dates back to the beginning of the nineties when its appearance in the process of transforming Polish society was perceived as both desired and inevitable. In a later period attention was paid to the complexity of this new social category, including the tension between its imitative character – in relation to the Western societies – and local specificity. For the recapitulation of this discussion see: Horolets 2013, pp. 61–65.

tions. After meetings with the participants of the study, the question of maintaining relationships between generations through food clearly evolved into one of the most important topics of the research undertaken. It turned out that some of the researched families were characterised by a high level of functional solidarity (Komter, Vollebergh 2002) that included the exchange of support or services. The interlocutors often talked about how they visit each other, also providing family members with different favours (child care, domestic work). Motives of home-made meals prepared by parents and distributed in takeaway form between two or more generations recurred in the interviews. Stories about full or empty jars and plastic containers which circulated between households were common. Although the phenomenon does not relate to all the informants, it turned out to be emotionally significant for a visible part of them.

Despite being formally separate from each other, some of the researched households are not fully independent in terms of food procurement or meal preparation. In some cases two generations run what may be called a partly shared kitchen and have a shared budget (financial and time resources), even if they do not call it so. Therefore, the system of relationships between parents and adult children resembles a quasi-traditional formula of a large – albeit spatially dispersed – household placed in a modern metropolitan context.

Home-made meals packed in different containers are passed on by parents to their adult (twenty-, thirty-, forty year-old) children and – in some cases – grandchildren, with parents usually being those who give, while children – receive. For example, an adult daughter living on her own almost gave up preparing dinners for herself and visited her parents every day, sometimes inviting them to her place too. This example shows that the opposite direction for this gastronomic flow – children cooking for their parents – is also possible, although less common based on the gathered material. The dominance of passing food in one direction possibly reflects the generally asymmetrical character of intergenerational economic transfer in European families, including Poles (Albertini, Kohli, Vogel 2007; Stanisiz 2014, p. 255). Measurable support, as research indicates, has a downward directionality, from older to younger generations. Nevertheless, the meaning of food-giving reaches far beyond the economic needs and is related to complex, generalised forms of reciprocity which does not demand return of material equivalent of a gift at a certain time, but still is connected to vague obligation (Sahlins 1972).

Passing meals and empty containers from household to household is undoubtedly a material symbol of ties between generations that have not distanced themselves from each other, either spatially or emotionally. The structure of everyday contact between children’s and parents’ households seems relatively stable. Their relationships are tangible: consisting of regular physical short-distance mobility and face-to-face interactions. Interestingly, although the children’s generation may be perceived as an agent of lifestyle transformation in comparison to their parents, it seems that this change is accompanied by stability. Families collaborate in order to protect everyday needs and maintain ways of life considered proper. Thus, not only the emotional dimension of passing food (feeding as a manifestation of care and

love), but also its role in maintaining more complex family stability and coherence, gained importance in the analysis.

Therefore, the paper should also be read against the background of discussion on contemporary mobility, mainly labour migration, as an experience of the wide range of Polish families. While a large number of academic works focus on redefining inner-family bonds with regards to growing mobility, the article tries to reverse the question and ask how the settlement is being constructed by social actors. Settled lifestyle should be understood as a physical and constantly sustained relationship with the place and – above all – with the people and the values they represent. This relationship, however, is not static or immobile: it should be interpreted as a set of actions performed through the network of everyday micro-mobility and social flows.

At the same time the different forms of objects' mobility, although associated with large geographical distances, still become an important reference point for the analysis. Firstly, intra-family food exchange may be partly compared to the social phenomenon labeled as “jars” to be found in the Polish, or more generally – post-socialist, context<sup>2</sup>. The word “jars” was primarily a common term, in some cases contemptuous, used to classify new residents of the Polish capital city. In a broader sense it started to refer to people who have moved from rural areas or smaller towns to large urban centres. According to the widespread image they regularly visit their home towns in order to renew supplies of home-made food which they bring to their new places of residence in old-fashioned containers like jars. Perceived as not only a downshifting strategy, but also as a symbol of lifestyle inadequacy and conservatism, the label “jars” serves as a distinctive tool used establish social boundaries according to the centre/periphery axis and to negotiate regional, urban or class identity (Lewicki, Drozdowska 2017; Mroczkowska 2018), regardless of the subsequent positive or subversive reinterpretations. The short-distance food exchange described in this paper, although similarly symbolised by food containers (jars or plastic boxes) and associated with ambivalent meanings concerning self-reliance/dependence and continuity/change, carries slightly different notions having less to do with social distinction and classification.

Secondly, research on transnational family networks offered by migration studies, although focused on family members separated by large distances and state borders (cf. Patzer 2008; Krzyżowski, Mucha 2014; Urbańska 2015), makes it possible to think about economic flows (money and material objects) as inseparable from transferring emotional support, care, ideas and patterns of behaviour. They also indicate that obligations, expectations and uneasy emotions are an inherent part of the intra-family exchange system.

In the context of tourism, serving as the third reference point attention is often paid to the mobility of objects like souvenirs, including food products, which accompany individual tourist practices and have the power of linking places. Blurring borders between movement and stability or places and flow is underlined when speaking about food in tourism (cf. Bachórz 2016, p. 111). Referring to James Clifford's

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://geekysis.blogspot.com/2015/04/jars-soiki-in-poland-this-has-unusual.html>

well-known blurred opposition between dwelling and travelling, Celia Lury (2003) emphasises the movement of objects as a link between flow and habitation. A similar tension between social (spatial and temporal) stability and dynamics, though in a different context, is the main topic of this paper. Two faces of objects’ mobility – as breaking and maintaining the social order – are taken into consideration.

THE LOGIC OF GIFT: THREE COMPONENTS  
OF PARENTS-CHILDREN FOOD CONTAINER CIRCULATION

Explanations for the circulation of meal boxes among urban families should be sought in various – material and immaterial – spheres of life. Both types of explanation are probably equally legitimate, whilst only some were directly indicated in the interviewees’ accounts. The most explicit, although not the most popular among interlocutors, concerned household microeconomics: sharing food is rarely understood as material support for grown-up children. The economic meaning is not strongly exposed by the informants for, as one can assume, several reasons. On the one hand, this motivation could have been hidden as embarrassing, but on the other – probably it is inadequate for these particular families whose class location was marked rather by upward social mobility when comparing the younger to older generations. If the latter is true, parents’ help in kind becomes a substitution for financial support – some of the participants of the study (those from older generation) indicate this motivation for preparing meals for their adult children. They admit they have no possibility to help materially and therefore chose to share food instead. Interestingly, the very need to support children’s households is rather not questioned by the parents, while the focus is shifted from one type of resource (material goods) to another (immaterial time or skills). Both, however, are important for the family economics and their relation to general macroeconomic processes.

Indeed, time is mentioned as an important value, a deficit of which the children’s generation must face. In the accounts, food giving is perceived as having positive influence on time budgets and the logistics of everyday life. Directly linked to wider social change, food given to adult children by their mothers (or parents in general) is supposed to serve as a remedy for the acceleration of contemporary life: younger generations are forced to live in the new logic of work, while parents are perceived as those who are not subjected to such pressures. Transfer of food is thus located against the background of the weakness of Polish systemic transformation and the fragile character of social mobility experienced by the younger generation. Some research participants feel they are saving their children from the costs of economic mobility: interviewees reveal that children work excessively and do not have time to cook. Therefore, providing them with meals is in a sense a response to structural tensions related to the labour market, the requirements of modern life, etc. Economic stability, according to some of the interviewees, is not provided by the social system. Instead, it is to a large extent based on self-help and bottom-up strategies of access date 1.12.2018. coping.

The third important reason provided by the interviewees to explain the need to support grown-up children with home-made food the concerns exchange of immaterial resources not convertible into the language of countable values. Giving food (especially homemade) is, in general, perceived as a distribution of life and love within a family (Counihan 1999; Moisió, Arnould, Price 2004; Mroczkowska 2014), therefore, it is not surprising that the interviewees' statements reflect this universal mechanism. Undoubtedly, food container circulation in the researched Polish families is accompanied by the exchange of: care, attention and interest towards relatives, emotions or competence. This "invisible" exchange does not have to be symmetric or homogeneous and does not have to be evident for the social actors, although some of the interlocutors may refer to it directly as in the quotation below:

*The idea [of cooking in large quantities and distributing meals among family members], is, above all, [...] that I share with my relatives what... what in my opinion I manage to do best, right? If I could make super knitted socks, I would make them. So if I cook, I share it. As if there was a piece of me in that, right? That's how I treat it. And it is nice to go out with your family to a restaurant, but – not speaking about the costs that are disproportionately larger than cooking at home – you put a bit of love in this [home-made] food. That's how I treat it... [female, 57]*

Stating the undeniable existence of emotional meanings attached to food does not end the analysis. Different motivations and explanations visible in the mechanism of container circulation do not exist in isolation – they are linked to each other and deserve more complex analysis. Despite the fact that sharing food is mostly described in positive colours as connected to individual affection and commitment, it forms an ambivalent system that cannot be reduced to a manifestation of love, family feelings and emotional well-being. As shown in the analysis of Aafke Komter and Wilma Vollebergh (2002) who conducted research in Dutch society, the sense of obligation, undesirable dependence or even a feeling of oppression in certain situations come to the fore – becoming the most important part of intergenerational solidarity based on the exchange of services and support. Thus, the intergenerational system of meal container circulation can be interpreted using the classic logic of the gift which helps to grasp the complexity of voluntariness and coercion within it.

Gift-giving should be understood as a system of moral transactions which serve to maintain social bonds. Objects – in this case food containers – taking part in the exchange are not separate from gift-givers (Barański 2007). On the contrary – they are strongly connected to their personalities and express social ties rather than simply pragmatic or economic needs. The acts of exchange are in theory voluntary, while in practice – obligatory (Mauss 2001 [1950]). The personal dependence and symbolic character of the material objects compel recipients to accept a gift and respond to it. The logic of gift, therefore, as described primarily by Marcel Mauss (ibidem) consists of three obligations: **giving, receiving and reciprocating**. All of these components are present in the exchange of meal boxes practiced by the interviewed families and they organise the following part of the paper.

As already shown in the section above, the obligation of giving concerns mostly parents (in the analysed sample: usually mothers) who have a sense of duty to support

their adult children with home-made meals, preserves or half-finished food products. They usually do not speak about it in terms of coercion. The mixture of obligation and pleasure, however, is visible in the language some of the interviewees use. For example, one person speaks about her daily food preparation using “I have to/must” modality:

*Well, cabbage rolls... I have to [take] such a [big] cabbage and make them, because I must give them to [my daughter] Anna<sup>3</sup>, I must give to [my daughter] Maria, and you know how it is.*

***So when you cook is it always a larger amount for the whole family?***

*Yes.*

***Does it happen that you cook only for yourself and for your husband?***

*No, I never cook so that only the two of us eat it. Because I know that if I cook something, it always happens that somebody will appear. [female, 72]*

Similarly, other interviews, like the one quoted below, also indicate that parents often have an internalised imperative for producing food for more than a single person or a couple:

*[...] I do not cook every day, but when I cook – I cook in large quantities in order to share with my children and with my elderly parents. [female, 57]*

Although the level of parents’ engagement in domestic work may decrease after children leave home, the rule of managing a household of several people still remains at least partly valid and affects the structure of expenses, shopping and cooking habits, as well as the daily and weekly schedule. Meals may still be cooked for a group of people, but transported between districts, instead of rooms. Despite the fact that nobody refers to direct expectations of family members to be gifted, a motive of “fair division” between siblings appears at least in one case as if someone judging the gifts was waiting on the other side of the exchange chain.

What is important, some of the research participants consider not preparing meals for the extended family as unreasonable, while doing so seems rational to them. They use the argument of economic effectiveness: for example, there is no difference in time or cost, as some of them declare, between preparing one or more portions of the meal. The habit of large-scale cooking is judged as pragmatic and the assumption of its “obviousness” is made.

Moreover, declarations of not knowing how to prepare single portions appear repeatedly in the material. People refer to their competence of preparing large quantities of food as if automatically, confirming the embodied and automatic character of domestic work (Sutton 2001). Not only the deep-rooted bodily competence, but also work organisation and domestic labour division together with adequate kitchen equipment may facilitate preparing large quantities of home-made meals. For example in the case of one of the interviewed families both mother and father cooperate: the husband helps in technical aspects, while the wife gives the concept of the meals (which is probably a widespread pattern). In this family it is the mother who advocates for sharing food and the father, although he does not undermine the idea of

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<sup>3</sup> All the names mentioned by the informants have been changed.

giving out meals in general, sometimes moderates mother's engagement in feeding adult children as too excessive. Their daughter notices that large-scale meal preparation is what her parents consider normal, while cooking for one seems strange and abnormal to them. At the same time she would agree that her mother plays the main role in the whole process of food distribution being the one for whom such a scale of food production is "natural":

*My parents – they cook at home all the time and for sure they will continue doing that. Actually they cook for everyone, because – my mum in particular – she is not able to make “a bit”, just for herself. We are, if not literally “a jar system”, more like “a box system”. Simply, there is a constant exchange of containers. My mother, when she cooks soup, she never cooks such a [small] pot, but she cooks in a 10-litre one, because she prepares more at once. There are constant discussions to make her cook less. She also cooks for my grandparents, so she claims that if she does so – she may cook for us too. Then she gives a jar of soup to us, another one to Maciej and Agnieszka – so we always manage to get some. And even when she tries to make a small portion of something, she is not able to. It is impossible for her to make a small amount of certain things. [female, 32]*

The quotation above should also be read as a sign of ambivalence assigned to the logic of home-made food production in its intergenerational version. It is true that, in general, the younger generation does not refuse support from their parents. Some would probably agree with pragmatic explanations of the households' interdependence. However, traces of irony, impatience or embarrassment may be heard in children's statements. It is clear that support offered by parents reveals complex entanglement with empty or full food containers as symbolic rather than practical objects. Giving and receiving is not so much a one-time act, but becomes a long-term chain with elements of coercion not only embodied in parents' cooking practices, but also connected to children's obligation to reciprocate a gift.

The acts of reciprocation take two forms, not equally represented in the habits of the interviewees. Literal exchange “a meal for a meal” is mentioned only by some of them. According to the research findings, families visiting each other and symmetrically carrying away food boxes are less common than children being supported with the meals by their parents. A food-for-food exchange can be in a way postponed: the interviewees do not say that, but the assumption that children will somehow support their parents in the future is possibly made. However, the representatives of a younger generation indirectly refer to a lack of equivalence of exchanged goods (the exchange is heteromorphic then).

The adult children sometimes declare that they do not so much need home-made food: even if they do not have enough time or skills for home cooking, they can easily substitute it by using an offer from the food-service industry. In a few cases people even admitted they prefer – or at least are able – to eat out or order food from caterers. They may also think that parents unnecessarily spend their financial resources on extended cooking or needlessly get tired. Thus in children's opinions food is not worth the time/cost/effort their parents think it is. All the doubts, however, do not change the fact that they still receive food jars or boxes from their parents and take part in maintaining the food box circulation.

A key feature of the analysed case is the fact that the movement of objects (food jars and boxes) in space is not separate from the physical movement of people: it deserves attention in comparison to the situation when food travels alone like in long-distance migration chains (transported by other people, sent through formal or informal chains etc.). The people I talked to carry the food containers – both full and empty – themselves and it is the people, not the objects, whose visits are expected. In this case mobility of containers is linked to the trajectories of everyday life. For example, a young woman visits her parents after work for dinner and takes away an extra meal on that occasion, being instructed to return empty boxes in the future. It turns out that both the food containers and their contents are, in fact, just carriers for something other than food and what should be reciprocated is time, attention, physical presence. While Lury (2003) pointed out that the mobility of objects is in a sense separate from the mobility of people, the opposite situation may be seen in the research material.

The meaning of empty containers must be underlined here. Adult children receive boxes or jars full of food and what they should return when appearing in the parents’ homes are, in some cases, the empty ones – this is a single exchange round. As a researcher I was gifted with dumplings by one of the interviewees, however, on a different basis than her children usually are: I was not obliged to give the empty plastic container back. The interlocutors relate that mothers usually do not allow the boxes to be thrown away after the food has been eaten. One can interpret it this way: the empty container occasions a visit and this is why it becomes a currency, even though it may be old or disposable.

*For example: my mother’s [used] ice cream plastic boxes. [...] Whenever somebody buys ice cream, he/she brings the boxes to my mum, because... She also has such food containers bought for this purpose, but, despite everything, she really likes those ice cream ones and she gives them away. When she gives them to guests, she tells them to throw them away, but we [children/grandchildren] have to return them. [female, 36]*

**So you prepare [meals] not only for yourself and your husband, but for a larger number of people?**  
*Yes, [I prepare] more. They take it with them. Magda, any time she comes, she asks: “will I get something to take away?” And I have one cupboard just for the [food] containers. But then I say: “return it”, because...*

**Return the containers?**

*Yes, return the containers, because otherwise I do not have anything to put [the food] in. How many times have I collected these... you know... one kilo ice cream tubs. You can wash them. You can wash the boxes nicely, these plastic ones. And I store them, because when I bought different [special boxes for storing food] – they took them away. [female, 68]*

The possibility of multiple use of food containers makes them prone to represent permanence and continuation of the family relationship. In fact, the circulation may work because it is based on imagining other people’s expectations and demands. Boxes and jars embody two necessities anticipated by the members of researched families: a necessity of support offered to children by packing home-made meals and a necessity of visiting family homes.

Not only may preparing food by parents be accompanied by a shade of internal coercion as described above. It is more than likely that some children perceive expectation of physical presence (cf. Mroczkowska 2018) in this giving-receiving relationship with their parents as a complex and uneasy pressure. Some of them, for example, feel guilty when they refuse to visit the parents. In one case this guilt was explicitly explained as the shrinking time of the parents' lives and the feeling that they would need support after retiring when their former activities decreased.

This coercion, however, is associated not only with long-term commitment, care and feeling of duty towards the loved ones, but also with tension concerning autonomy. Regular acceptance of meals by adult people may be perceived as a manifestation of the hierarchical relationships within the family: on the visible level children are the ones who need material/logistic help. Receiving food is, indeed, interpreted by some of the interviewees as a lack of self-reliance which causes their impatience or shame. An example could be one of the research participants: a woman in her thirties who reacted with astonishment, but also relief, on hearing that she is not the only one being regularly gifted with meals packed in jars.

What interests me most, however, is not the potential psychological difficulty linked to receiving material help as a proof of dependence, but the inequality of immaterial resources, like knowledge and skills. The obligation of receiving a gift defines children as those whose cooking is deficient and incomplete and therefore needs "supplementation". The jars and boxes that circulate are not only important as constantly refilled packages, but also as carriers of the idea of home-made, food even though the latter bears a conventional and clearly constructed character (cf. Moisio, Arnould, Price 2004). For example, accepting meals from parents is one of the strategies of maintaining trust in food, with the older generation considered to be closer to tradition (Bachórz 2018). Thanks to their shopping and food production competence (coming from their family background – rural origins, from a previous historical period when they practiced procuring food beyond official system, or simply achieved thanks to their time resources) some of them try to resist food industry malpractice on their own (cf. Jehlička, Smith 2011).

Moreover, the box exchange should be understood as a negotiation of "proper" views about nutrition and/or cooking techniques. This partly explains why, for some, an acceptance of their gastronomic gifts is a small victory confirming cooking skills, taste and experience:

*I will tell you, that everyone likes my cooking. It needs to be said. For example, my sister-in-law's daughter comes here. [...] And she says: "aunt, how do you make this sauce?". I say: "Normally, you need some butter, because you have to give a little, and spices. Tomato sauce likes basil. And I add some pepper and red pepper powder. And I add a little bit of ketchup, then it is not too spicy. Then I season it with cream, to make it thick. And when she comes here, she says: "aunt, please, pour it into the jar, because my mother...". [female, 72]*

Furthermore, offering food means telling children what is good for them, sometimes in conflict with the younger generation's evolving food habits which change under the demands of new health regimes or lifestyles. The distribution of meals is

not only a manifestation of love, but also reveals the “food fights”. Feeding, in general, may not only lead to recreating uneven gendered relationships, but is the empowering mechanism that equips women with agency and becomes a source of identity for them (Mroczkowska 2014; McCabe, de Waal Malefyt 2015). In certain situations it makes it possible to keep control of someone else’s body (Certeau, Giard, Mayol 2011, pp. 174–175) and as a strongly normative practice may lead to conflicts (Short 2006, p. 3; Wilk 2010). The circulation of food boxes does not break away from this pattern. Effectively giving food becomes a confirmation of authority, while receiving is tantamount to accepting these power relations. Sometimes it may be seen as a form of oppression. Mothers, when distributing food, keep their adult children close to themselves, to a certain degree determining their lifestyle and, at the same time, sustaining a continuity of their own eating habits.

In light of this interpretation, refusing food means a lack of recognition of the older generation’s views going far beyond eating itself. For example, when parents’ cuisine is perceived as too labour-intensive, irrationally time-demanding, unhealthy, based on bad quality products, in fact it concerns issues like: the body, economics, attitudes towards others, creativity or free time. Food received from parents can, thus, be placed not only in a culinary or emotional frame, but should be understood more broadly as a metaphorical message on desirable or undesirable models of family life, raising children, health, time organisation, etc.

In particular, as domestic cooking is a gendered practice, the lack of autonomy and feeling of guilt associated with receiving food boxes especially affects women who have already become mothers themselves (cf. Bachórz 2018). Giving meals becomes a response for the assumed culinary deskilling of younger generation, while receiving sometimes relates to a failure to meet the criteria of a “good mother” as the one who is expected not only to feed, but to feed in a proper way (cf. Dunn 2017, p. 149; Harman and Capellini 2015; Parsons 2015, p. 51). For example, one of the mothers who regularly supports her relatives with home-cooking comments on her daughter’s difficulties with organising everyday life and calls the younger generation “lazy”. In another interview an adult daughter, a mother herself, repeats that she should cook better and, above all, more often. She would like to limit eating-out or buying ready-made soups for her one-year-old child. These poorly valued practices, in her opinion, led her mother to compensate for these “food deficits” by transferring meals to her grandson. Indeed the mother would agree with the daughter in this respect. The following statements come from parallel interviews with her daughter (the first one) and the mother (the second one) from the same family. They illustrate the interplay between giving and receiving as entangled in negotiating gender roles:

[Mother] *makes a larger amount of soup, she mixes the best bites for Krzys [son and grandson], puts them in the jars, twists when hot and the child has delicious, home-made food from grandma’s jars.*

– ***So she thinks he shouldn’t eat ready made things?***

[spoken probably with a shade of irony] *My mother thinks so. She thinks I am a terrible mum when it comes to cooking and if it was not for her, then the child would suffer a lot eating “jars” [ready-made meals for children available in shops] for dinner. [female, 36]*

*She does not like to be in the kitchen, she does not like to cook and that's it. But I told her: Krzys is small now, but when he is grown up, she will have to do something. Because now, for example, there are those soups at least [...], but you cannot eat these "jars" constantly. So when I cooked a broth for him yesterday, chop, chop, chop, I chopped a carrot, parsnip, everything, I chopped meat, I put everything in two jars and sealed them. [...] And I give it to her and say: "Maria, you cannot feed him with these [ready-made, bought] jars". Some of them are good, but some taste bad. [female, 72]*

The mother's statement – didactic and revealing certain expectations towards the daughter – undoubtedly placed home-made food production in the moral framework of obligations, which corresponds to Risto Moisio, Eric Arnould and Linda Price's (2004, pp. 374–375) findings. They indicate that, according to their research conducted in the US, the notion of home-made has changed with subsequent generations, while the feeling of moral duty is the strongest among seniors (above the age of 60). For the youngest (below 36 years of age) the experience of home cooking is mostly self-oriented and associated to creativity and self-expression. For the middle aged people (36–59 years) – home cooking is other-oriented and its value lies in family members' appreciation. If these conclusions are also applicable in the Polish context, then the pressure resulting from receiving the food containers may also symbolise a conflict between food preparation perceived as an optional pleasant activity or entertainment and as a daily duty.

The juxtaposition of the two quotations by members of the same family reveals another paradox of food container circulation. On the one hand it expresses the parents' effort to "do everything as it used to be done" – to maintain values that the older generation believes in. On the other hand it allows 30–40 year old children to preserve their partly immature status of someone who – under certain conditions – may be allowed not to fulfill some obligations and loosen a daily domestic discipline. In fact, the exchange of containers illustrates not only the idea of reproducing the social order through the food, but also – the intergenerational change taking place in Polish families.

## CONCLUSION

Both the importance and systemic character of food exchange within the family are confirmed by the interviewees' declarations. In the light of their experience, this contemporary practice to some extent fits into the long rooted tradition of intra-family, private strategies of coping with structural deficiencies. Repeated transfers of meals from parents to adult children are, however, paradoxical and reveal the tension between continuity and discontinuity in geographical and temporal dimensions.

With regard to spatial relationships, unobvious links between mobility and settling down are demonstrated in the paper. The circulation of full and empty food containers between households – as a system of short distance and repetitive movements – stabilises the everyday life of families. The exchange system which is based on the everyday trajectories of people makes it possible to keep a family together without

generating larger geographical discontinuities. The reciprocation of dinner, soup or dumplings includes visits of children and therefore, in a sense, “not leaving” home completely, both in an emotional and spatial sense.

The meal transfer is also paradoxical in temporal dimension because it combines stability (as reproduction of knowledge, views and “home-like normality”) with an undoubted intergenerational dynamic. On the one hand, parents/grandparents defend the family’s microcosm from radical transformations, despite social change. On the other hand, the very fact of transferring meals, as shown above, is in some cases a corrective or a disciplinary action towards children’s habits or towards the structural constraints which result, above all, from disrupting of food habits.

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„IT’S JUST A CONSTANT EXCHANGE OF CONTAINERS”:  
DISTRIBUTION OF HOME-MADE FOOD AS AN ELEMENT  
OF POLISH FAMILY LIFESTYLES

**Key words:** domestic cooking, intergenerational transmission, home-made food,  
mobility of objects, the gift, reciprocity

This paper deals with intergenerational home-made food transfers inside Polish urban families. It is based on the material gathered by interviewing representatives of two generations. Not only economic, but also emotional and symbolic function of food distribution are presented. The circulation of food containers which travel between parents’ and children’s households is interpreted as systemic, according to the logic of gift. Three components of the system – giving, receiving and reciprocating – are analysed in order to reveal the tensions hidden in the food exchange. The relation between stability and dynamics in contemporary Polish families is also described. Both reproduction of the social order and the inter-generational change are embodied in the system of food exchange analysed in the paper.

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