



Intergenerational mobility and omnivorism in eating



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on three hypotheses concerned with cultural consequences of social mobility, we investigate whether intergenerational class mobility influences omnivorism in eating, regarded as a new dimension of lifestyle. Using data from a national survey carried out in Poland in 2013 and diagonal reference models, we find most support for the hypothesis of maximization saying that upward mobility encourages conformity to the habits of the class of destination. It shows that in Poland, as in other societies, the upwardly mobile tend to align their behaviour with that of their highest status reference group. Accordingly, the downwardly mobile representatives of the top category conform more to the norms of the class of origin than those of the destination class. At the same time, individuals who experience intergenerational inflow to the highest managerial and professional categories display higher levels of highbrow tastes than their non-mobile counterparts from the origin classes. Contrary to the thesis about replacement of traditional class barriers by omnivorism we see that the omnivore/univore divide does not obliterate the highbrow/lowbrow one.

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Following Bourdieu (1984), class distinctions can be said to translate into differences in tastes for music, fashion, eating, and other cultural practices. The observation that cultural preferences tend to vary across classes has been demonstrated in many studies of lifestyle and cultural habits (DiMaggio, 2001). For instance, empirical evidence confirms that individuals in advantaged positions are more likely than those from lower classes to consume high-brow culture (Warner et al., 1949; Gans, 1974; Lamont, 1992; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007; Bennett et al., 2009). The objective of the present paper is to contribute to the literature on the link between social class and lifestyle by studying the effect of social mobility on eating patterns in Poland. The aim is to throw light on contemporary culinary culture, rather than health or food security, so it examines attitudes and behaviors (rather than nutrition) in eating occasions. Overall, there are three important arguments for tackling this issue.

First, since Sorokin (1959 [1927]), sociologists have been concerned with cultural consequences of social mobility. Research in this area has emphasized the tension between the “new rich” striving for acceptance in their new class positions and their continuing connection with their social origins. However, the study of the influence of social mobility on cultural behaviour has not

attracted as much attention as research on the impact of mobility on other dimensions of people's lives, especially their political attitudes (Blau, 1956; Clifford & Heath, 1993; DiMaggio, 2001; Jackson & Curtis, 1972). So far, relatively few studies related to the cultural consequences of intergenerational transitions have been published. Of those that have been published, most have concentrated on tastes for music (for overview Peterson, 2005). Given this limitation, our study seeks to disclose how the association between social mobility and cultural activities extends to patterns of eating.

Our second argument for sociological thinking about the relationship between mobility and cultural habits refers to debates on cultural shift in Western societies — related to the influence of mass culture, individualisation and “diversification” of consumption (Bauman, 2000; Featherstone, 1991). For a long time, it was commonplace to note the “homological” dimension of cultural forms (Bourdieu, 1984). Research on cultural consumption consistently shows that high-status persons are more likely to be involved in high-brow culture which was reflected in a liking for classical music, attending opera, art galleries, and expressed in exclusionary “cultural symbolism”, whereas representatives of lower classes celebrated popular culture including country music and rock (Warde et al., 1997; Warde & Martens, 2000; Van Eijck & Mommas, 2004).

In contradiction to the homology argument, a large part of further research on cultural habits focuses on the shift to the

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“omnivore” lifestyle (Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Kern, 1996). According to this approach, social divisions of cultural habits can no longer be defined in terms of low-brow vs. high-brow culture, but rather in terms of openness to diversity. As noted, cultural omnivorousness dominates among the upper middle classes in contrast to the univorousness of the working class, and generally, lower-status categories. The former seek variety and eclecticism and are intrinsically inclusive in their tastes, in contrast to the univores, who — displaying a taste for a narrow range of activities or objects — are intrinsically exclusivist and intolerant.¹

If the “high-brow snobs” have been replaced by the cultural omnivores and the “low-brow slob” have remained univorous, then the mechanisms underlying cultural stratification are likely to have changed as well. In spite of this prediction, empirical studies continue to show that members of the higher status groups are still more active in high-brow culture than members of the lower status groups. In the musical field, for example, the omnivore-univore contrast corresponds with the distinction between high-brow and low-brow tastes rather than eliminates it. People listening to both opera and rock tend to retain tastes distinctive from those of people who only listen to the latter (Coulangeon, 2013; Emmison, 2003; Peterson, 2005; Veenstra, 2015). Thus, the rise of cultural omnivorousness does not translate into the declining significance of high culture as a status marker. Our study contributes to the ongoing dispute between the homology and cultural omnivorousness perspectives by investigating relationships between eating patterns and class mobility in Poland. It appears to us that, conceptually, these two positions are mutually consistent rather than inconsistent. To demonstrate that we must show how this simultaneity can occur and how it can be assessed in a manner not heretofore recognised. Our findings support the assertion that omnivorousness does not extinguish high-brow choices displayed by representatives of advantaged positions.

Thirdly, this paper adds evidence to the ongoing debate on Westernization of the post-communist countries, especially in the context of development of the middle class-society and democratic order (e.g. Ekiert, Kubik, & Vachudova, 2007). Let us remember that the end of the “shortage economy” brought with it the end of political rationing of goods, of various coupons and vouchers, the low density of distribution of restaurants, and other maladies of the communist system that kept consumption at an artificially low level. The collapse of the communist era led to openness and diversity of eating. We propose that the following three factors contributed to this diversity.

First of all, Poland, like other East-European countries, experienced a growing scale of immigration that brought different food products and various forms of culture. The increasing inflow, especially of Ukrainian, Chinese, and Vietnamese citizens, tended to enhance the choice of new habits of eating. At the same time, the growing rates of international mobility of Poles regularly bridge a number of culturally diverse niches.

Another factor is the increase in the educational level. Since the 1990s, the Polish society has faced an expansion of tertiary education (Statistical Yearbook, 2015: 341–342). It seems likely that a lasting impact of the growing number of university graduates (from 56.1 thousand in 1990 to 424 thousand in 2013) is an enhanced recognition of a wide array of food products and increased tolerance for those with different values. The well-educated consider

themselves experts in diverse folkways and aesthetic choices. It has been largely confirmed that education trains the individual intellectual ability to process complex information, inducing preferences for cultural activities that demand more complexity — particularly, the wide ranging omnivore style (Ganzeboom, 1982; Torche, 2011).

Finally, more cosmopolitan orientation may stem from the growing standard of living. According to Peterson and Kern (1996), the shift to omnivorousness is a society-wide trend related to value changes toward greater tolerance of alien culture. In Western societies, this tendency began in the 1950s in response, in part, to Nazi brutalities and the traumatic experience of the Second World War (Takaki, 1993). In the case of Poland, the rise of omnivorousness should rather be seen as resulting from a growing access to a wide range of consumption choices after blockades produced by the former regime.

The impact of socio-economic position on cultural consumption has been well-established. Empirical evidence suggests that indeed omnivorousness in reading habits has become the norm among educated readers in post-Soviet Russia (Zavisca, 2005). Similarly, research conducted in Poland finds that the combination of preferences in classical and popular music is stratified by socio-economic position (Cebula, 2013). In the case of Hungary, Bukodi (2010) disclosed that the probability of individuals being exclusive or omnivorous in attending art institutions and participating in various domains (music, visual arts) increased with educational level and socio-economic position. Concerning intergenerational mobility, she found that the upwardly mobile tend to follow the cultural practices to which they were socialised in their childhood, this being more consistent with the socialization hypothesis than with the maximization hypothesis emphasizing the dominant role of the current position. Moving beyond musical and reading tastes, we explore whether these associations extend to patterns of eating. In the following section, we discuss four versions of the social mobility argument and show how far they receive empirical support from recent survey data.

1. Hypotheses

There has been a great deal of studies on the connections between food habits and socio-economic position concerning East European societies that demonstrated considerable heterogeneity in cultural consumption (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008; Kopczyńska & Zielińska, 2015). One limitation of these studies is that they do not offer a systematic analysis of the socioeconomic correlates of eating, and the vast majority of them provide only a snapshot of cultural stratification profiles. Based on the above description we investigate whether the upwardly mobile conform more to the habits of their class of destination than to the habits of their class of origin. In addition, we make supplementary analyses that compare upwardly vs. downwardly mobile individuals in order to understand how the experience of mobility may differ among mobile individuals. Furthermore, we establish whether mobile respondents are more likely to fall into a highbrow rather than into an omnivorous profile of eating tastes.

We propose three hypotheses.

Concerning the effects of social classes of origin and destination, the first hypothesis refers to the way in which eating is influenced by socialization in a family background. Empirical evidence suggests that the experience of upward mobility, especially in its long-range movement, is often associated with significant tensions. The upwardly mobile are frequently left with a troubling emotional sense that they are between two environments or culturally disrupted (Friedman, 2012). One may then expect that the upwardly mobile would be less likely to accept new cultural habits, and are

¹ For the purpose of our study, we define *omnivorous taste* as consisting of the appreciation of cultural genres across conventional hierarchical distinctions, low-brow as well as high-brow. By contrast, individuals with a preference for high-brow food may be characterized by conspicuous eating of refined and exclusive food.

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