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DIET AS A CHALLENGE AND A STRATEGY: ON THE PHENOMENON OF DIET RATIONALISATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Abstract. This article describes the diet catering service (delivering ready-made meals to customers' homes or work in a selected period) as an example of rationalization and professionalization of diet. The article is based on the results of interviews conducted with 15 users of dietetic catering from Poland, conducted between 2021 and 2023. The aim of the interviews was to try to answer the question of what benefits the respondents derived from using dietetic catering in their everyday life. As the results of the analysis show, respondents try to live a healthy lifestyle, which they do not always succeed in doing. Outsourcing the preparation of meals to the specialized companies allows them to save time and receive well-balanced meals, at selected times of the day adapted to their rhythm of work. There is a compromise between meeting healthy eating norms and social norms relating to food consumption, both in terms of mealtimes, the number of meals per day as well as what is meant by a 'proper lunch'.

Keywords: nutrition, dietetic catering, Poland, diet, rationalization.

DIETA JAKO WYZWANIE I STRATEGIA: O ZJAWISKU RACJONALIZACJI DIETY W CODZIENNYM ŻYCIU

Abstrakt. W artykule opisano usługę cateringu dietetycznego polegającą na dostarczaniu klientom gotowych posiłków do domu lub pracy w wybranym okresie jako przykład racjonalizacji i profesjonalizacji diety. Artykuł bazuje na wynikach badań własnych, wywiadów przeprowadzonych z 15 użytkownikami cateringu dietetycznego z Polski, w latach 2021–2023. Celem wywiadów była próba uzyskania odpowiedzi na pytanie, jakie korzyści daje badanym korzystanie z cateringu dietetycznego w codziennym życiu. Jak pokazują wyniki analiz, badani starają się sprostać zasadom prowadzenia zdrowego stylu życia, co nie zawsze im się udaje. Powierzenie przygotowywania

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posiłków w ręce wyspecjalizowanych firm pozwala im zaoszczędzić czas i otrzymywać odpowiednio zbilansowane posiłki, w wybranych porach dostosowanych do ich rytmu dnia. Mamy tu do czynienia z kompromisem pomiędzy realizacją norm dotyczących zdrowego odżywiania a norm społecznych odnoszących się do spożywania posiłków, zarówno jeśli chodzi o pory posiłków, ich liczbę w ciągu dnia, jak i to, co rozumie się jako „porządny obiad”.

Słowa kluczowe: odżywianie, catering dietetyczny, Polska, dieta, racjonalizacja.

1. Introduction

In this article, I would like to describe the service of diet catering, providing clients with ready-made meals for the day to work or home, as an example of diet rationalization and professionalization. I will use the term “diet rationalization” as it was used by Bryan S. Turner (1994: 177), who wrote about the impact of rationalization processes on the human body. It is about the subordination of the body and diet to the norms of rationalization and calculation.¹ Diet is conceived as a means to an end, which is a healthy, fit body. I understand the professionalization of diet as putting preparation of meals in the hands of professionals (Poulain 2017).

I will try to show what benefits diet catering can give to its recipients. In the article, I will use the results of analysis of in-depth interviews with diet catering users, conducted in the years 2021–2023 with 15 diet catering users in Poland.

2. Theoretical background: rationalization, diet, and the body

In his works, Max Weber described the process of rationalization. He distinguished four types of rationality: practical, theoretical, formal, and substantive. Practical rationality, associated with purposive-rational actions, is based on pragmatic individual actions leading to the satisfaction of material interests in isolation from the realization of ideas. Theoretical rationality is related to expanding systems of abstract concepts and increasing role of expert knowledge and science in perception of reality. Formal rationalization guarantees the stability of the social action system by formalizing and standardizing certain practices in the form of action rules. Substantive rationalization is associated with a focus on non-egoistic values. These are organized into general sets (such as “friendship”). Sets of such values are at the root of modern capitalism (see: Kalberg 1980; Kuryłowicz 2021: 85–86). Weber used the notion of rationalization as a conceptual scheme to analyze “regularities of action” within institutions, organizations, strata, classes, and groups (Kalberg 1980: 1148). The types of rationality and the various rationalization processes are often

¹ Diet rationalization in nutritional science includes the selection of products in such a way as to provide the body with all the necessary nutrients. It also refers to the formation of proper eating habits aimed at preventing disease (Biedrzycka 2015: 163)

discussed by Weber in reference to Western civilization distinctive modernization path. Rationalization processes of historic significance in societies and in entire civilizations have often originated when a constellation of factors crystallized that rewarded methodological, rational ways of life (Kalberg 1980: 1148–1149). Weber wondered what the peculiarities of modern Western civilization consisted of and resulted from. One of these is the rationalization of the world, the detachment of individual consciousness from religious notions legitimizing the order of things, the invalidation of the absolutism of tradition, the relativization of ethics and the transfer of the justification of social action to the purposive-rational reasoning (Kuryłowicz 2021: 84).²

Brian S. Turner points out that in one of Weber's works, namely "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (Weber 2010), there is a reference to the rationalization of the human body and diet. In this work, Weber mentioned how religious rules served as a form of control of desire. One of the recommendations to religious doubts and sexual temptations was a moderate vegetable diet and cold baths (Turner 1982: 256). According to Turner, "Weber discusses the rise and development of rationalization in the context of theological systematization, the extension of the principles of calculation, prediction and reliability in the scientific knowledge to all areas of life, the decline of magic and superstition, the growth of bureaucratic forms of organization in the military, state and industry" (Turner 1982: 259). While Weber was not explicitly concerned with the body, he was interested in ascetic practices³ and the development of a sober, disciplined, and rational lifestyle in capitalism (Turner 1982: 259). Turner traces inspirations with Weber's concept of rationality in Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge. In "Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison" (Foucault 1991) Foucault was specifically concerned with the growth of examinations, timetables, taxonomies, and registers which provided the means for the detailed surveillance and disciplining of the body (Turner 1982: 257; 1994: 180). According to Turner, by referring to the examples of institutions which were created to exert discipline on the human bodies (factories, schools, prisons, or asylums) Foucault reproduces Weber's argument form "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (Turner 1982: 259).

Turner sees an example of the systematization of knowledge in the application of science to the problem of food consumption suitable for representatives of different social groups. As late as the turn of the 20th century, the prevailing belief was in the duality of body and mind. The body remained a prison for the soul, preventing the individual from achieving full humanity (Aries, Duby 2000: 99). The mind hinges

² With reference to Weber's concept of rationalization Kuryłowicz proposed to distinguish between several notions: rationalism – the optimal choice of means to achieve a given end; rationalization – systematization of a set of ideas into a logically clear, non-contradictory system of rules and rationality: the influence of ideas on the choice of a given action (Kuryłowicz 2021: 85).

³ According to Turner, the ascetic is someone, who practices self-discipline by a system of rules (Turner 1982: 259).

on the body, which is supposed to function efficiently (like a machine) (Turner 1994: 183). The body was conceived primarily as a “tool” for physical labor. The principles of rationality were supposed to apply to food as well to be able to provide the body with the energy it needed to function. Interest was then taken in the caloric content of meals and how eating affects the body (Vigarello 2012: 273). It was postulated that diet should be adapted to the body’s needs: type of work, age, social class (Turner 1994: 190; Vigarello 2012). With the process of formalization of medicine, the rationalization and medicalization of diet progressed (Turner 1994: 177; 1982: 258). As Turner notes: “the development of the mechanistic metaphors of the body seems decisive for the emergence of a scientific discourse of the body and the development of dietary classifications” (Turner 1982: 259). Dietary tables were typically aimed at forms of consumption which were regarded as ‘irrational’ threats to health (Turner 1982: 267). The dietary programs were originally addressed to the social groups which were exposed to abundance (the representatives of the elite) but in the second half of the 19th century the science of diet was also applied to the problem of inadequate calory intake of the representatives of the working class. The aim was to establish a minimum number of calories whose intake would ensure maximum physical performance.

The rationalization of diet is also a consequence of changes in the ways in which nutrition is organized. Georges Vigarello (2012: 275) wrote about the birth of gastronomy in the second half of the 19th century. Barry W. Higman (2012: 311) places the development of dietetics in the same moment in history (the second half of the 19th century). To the emergence of dietetics and gastronomy we can add the phenomenon of professionalization. According to Jean-Pierre Poulain, the industrial era saw changes in the ways in which food was produced and distributed. Off-farm food production has expanded, and new technical possibilities for large-scale food delivery have emerged (due to the development of means of transportation). At the same time, changes in the labor market have forced a reduction in the time spent in households on meal preparation in favor of buying ready-to-eat products. The food service sector has also developed: restaurants, canteens, cafeterias, allowing people to dine out, which allowed households to relieve the burden of food production (Poulain 2017).

According to Gillian Crowther, public eating was born of necessity: work demanded access to food away from home (Crowther 2013: 191). Crowther mentions two founders of French gastronomy: Grimod de La Reynière and Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. The latter was interested in the healthy working of the human body. This was directly related to the prevailing French concern that the health of the population was tied to the health of nation. Diet was regarded as instrumental to the nation’s economic success (Crowther 2013: 191). Brillat-Savarin, author of the “Physiology of Taste”, as well as the author of the concept of ‘gastronomy’ (the rational science of man as a being who feeds himself; Vigarello 2012: 275) argued that taste was something that everyone had, regardless of their social position. He

made gastronomy open to anyone. Among other things, his work included tips for preventing obesity. He suggested seeking pleasure in eating despite an imposed diet. His works contributed to the transformation of the French cuisine of the early nineteenth century and the change in requirements from quantitative to qualitative (Vigarello 2012: 278).

One of the characteristics of contemporary societies is the lack of time to devote to food purchasing and preparation. Convenience became an important factor in food choices (Crowther 2013: 211). Today, diet is subordinated to the rhythm of work. The continuity of the working day has given birth to ‘nutritional Taylorism’. Nutrition is collective, modern, industrial, and dietary. The rapid preparation of meals and their consumption are the characteristics of today’s times (Aries, Duby 2000: 336).

3. Materials and methods

Currently, there are many companies offering services of diet catering mainly in larger cities in Poland. Some of the companies offer the possibility of delivering their meals over a larger area of more than one city which allows frequent travelers to take advantage of their offer. There are no surveys that illustrate the current scale of diet catering use in Poland. A nationwide survey conducted on behalf of Kukula Healthy Food in September and October 2021 showed that diet catering was used by 37% of surveyed Poles, with one in five (21%) ordering the service regularly (an 8% increase compared to 2020) and 60% of respondents using the service occasionally.⁴

Zborowski and Mikulec point out to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic and numerous restrictions aimed at reducing the frequency of movement as well as to maintain social distance and isolation have undoubtedly intensified the use of this form of food delivery. Among other factors which contributed to the popularization of the use of dietary catering services one can mention the increase in the awareness of the impact of the quality of consumed food on the human body. The undoubted benefit of using dietary catering is the possibility of dietary consultation while using the diet. (Zborowski, Mikulec 2022).

In order to learn more about diet catering offerings, in the first week of November 2023 (1.–8.11.2023) I reviewed the websites of companies offering “boxed diet with delivery” nationwide. The review focused on the offers of the 60 providers most popular in the ranking of the portal cateromarket.pl. This portal offers a search engine of offers of companies providing diet with delivery services in Poland with

⁴ According to Bankier.pl Internet website, Polak “na pudełkach”: krajowy rynek cateringu dietetycznego wart ok. 2 mld złotych i ciągle rośnie, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Polak-na-pudełkach-Krajowy-rynek-cateringu-dietetycznego-wart-ok-2-mld-zl-i-ciagle-rosnie-8441892.html> [accessed: 22.02.2024].

the possibility of searching the offers and taking into account certain criteria (e.g. type of diet) as well as a ranking of the most popular offers and the possibility of reading reviews of each of them. Guided by the popularity ranking, I reviewed the offers of the 60 most popular companies. I was interested in what types of diets are most often offered.

The most popular turned out to be vegetarian diets, weight loss diets (with reduced calories), elimination diets, e.g., excluding gluten, lactose. Very rich was the offer of specialized diets, aimed at people with specific health problems, with diabetes, Hashimoto's disease or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS, the low FODMAP diet). The range of diets aimed at people actively engaged in sports activities was also rich. These included diets with increased protein, reduced carbohydrates (sugars, the so-called low-carb diet), or the ketogenic diet. On average, each of the 60 suppliers whose offerings I checked offered ten different types of diets. Some of the companies gave their customers a choice of menus (for each meal, one can choose from at least two dishes). In addition, the customer can choose the number of meals per day (usually 3–5 meals) and specify how many days per week they would like to receive meal delivery. It is possible to receive delivery only on working days, on all days of the week including weekends, or only on selected days.

Usually, the caloric content of the selected diet and the macronutrients included in the diet are listed on the supplier's website. Only 3 out of 60 offers did not specify macronutrients and calories. Table 1 presents the diets that most frequently appeared in suppliers' offers.

Table 1. Prevalence of different types of diets offered by catering companies

Type of diet	Incidence
Vegetarian	34 (out of 60 offers analyzed)
Ketogenic	34
For those practicing sports	33
Elimination diets (excluding gluten, lactose, milk, fish, etc.)	26
Low glycaemic index	22
Weight loss	17
Low carbohydrates	14
Vegan	14
Diabetic	7
Low FODMAP	4
Hashimoto	4

Some of the companies on their websites also describe what result a certain type of diet can bring. For example: “Are you dreaming of a diet that will allow

you to reach a state of ketosis, burn unwanted body fat and enjoy full health? The Ketogenic Diet, which we have prepared especially for you, may be just what you need”⁵ or “A diet ideal for people who want to eat healthy and look great. The biggest advantage of this diet is that it will help you maintain a healthy and beautiful figure without unnecessary sacrifices. The caloric content of the diet is individually selected for each person”⁶ In the quotes given, it is argued that using the diet will benefit both appearance and well-being. It is also argued that the diet offered has been prepared by nutritionists: “all the meals and juices we offer are created by qualified technologists and experienced dietitians, who have turned “healthy” tables of nutritional values into delicious meals and extraordinary smoothies”⁷.

Reviewing the websites of companies offering the diet catering was helpful in learning more about the specificity of their offer. In addition, in the years 2021–2023, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with people who had used the offer of diet catering with delivery for at least a few months. The selection of participants for the study was purposive. Snowball sampling method was used: interviewees were asked to identify other catering users who would like to participate in the study. Usually, the inspiration to use the diet catering service was a recommendation from friends or people in the work environment. Therefore, snowball sampling was used. The service appeared to be a way to ensure regular meals especially during workdays. (None of my interviewees used the diet catering service on weekends). My interviewees were people living and working in Warsaw. The youngest participant in the study was 22 and the oldest was 46. Among the respondents there were 5 men and 10 women.

The primary research question was: What are the benefits of using diet catering for respondents? Respondents were eager to share their thoughts and observations on this topic. The shortest interview lasted 12 minutes, the longest – half an hour. The interviews were unstructured. The respondents’ views related to their various experiences of using the diet catering service were recorded and then transcribed and analyzed using the “cross-case” analytical approach (Miles, Huberman 2000: 180). The analysis of the material collected in the interviews was carried out without a predetermined list of coding categories. The codes emerged later, during the analysis. Event-by-event coding was used: certain recurring themes were identified in the texts of the interviews, and each theme was assigned a code. “This makes it possible to track the recurrence of certain key themes” (Glinka, Czakon 2021: 126). Below I will try to present the answer to the research question, using quotes from the interviews.

⁵ MójKatering.pl, <https://mojkatering.com.pl/dieta/zestaw-sport/> [accessed: 2.11.2023]

⁶ Dieta Pirata, <https://dietapirata.com.pl/zestawy/> [accessed: 2.11.2023]

⁷ Fitpapu, <https://www.fitpapu.com/jak-to-dziala/zdrowy-styl/> [accessed: 2.11.2023]

4. Analysis

What are the benefits of using diet catering for respondents? Firstly, it allows them to feel that they are eating healthy, or that their daily diet is not entirely “unhealthy.” As one interviewee put it:

It’s healthier than going for some fried food for lunch every day (W1).

Among my interviewees, everyone reached for diet catering at least once to lose weight. The motivation, then, was the desire to reduce body weight. Ordering catering was preceded by a search for information on which diet to choose. Catering companies usually have tools on their websites to facilitate the search for diets – a simple questionnaire, in which, after specifying such parameters as age, gender, weight and height, as well as providing information on physical activity during the week, one gets a proposal for approximate caloric requirements, and on this basis, they can choose among the diets offered. This is what my interviewees did most often:

There is an algorithm on the site, I calculated the result only once, to count calories for me. You enter information on how many times you exercise in a week, how much you weigh, and it calculates your calories (W2).

Guidance on the caloric content of a diet makes it easier to make a choice from the range of diets offered. In doing so, one does not have to delve into the ins and outs of healthy eating on their own:

The first time I used catering was to lose weight, so I paid attention to the very low caloric intake (1200) (W1).

It is worth noting that in the quoted statements there is an assumption of a specific result that the respondents want to achieve with their bodies (weight reduction). There is an anticipation of the effects of the diet. Algorithm is helpful in choosing the diet. From the client’s perspective, this means ceding (to the algorithm, to “professionals”) part of the responsibility for healthy eating, getting help in designing measurable diet results. These are examples of rationalizing of the body and the diet, as the interviewed expect a specific effect in the appearance of the body by means of a specific action (calorie reduction).

Reaching for a diet catering is a manifestation of rationalization in other dimensions as well. When choosing a diet for themselves, respondents are often guided by financial calculation. They strive to get the most varied offer possible at a reasonable price:

When choosing a diet, I consider value for money (W3).

Respondents declare that ordering diet catering is supposed to “pay off” for them. When ordering it, they want to fit in the amount of money that was supposed to be spent on food monthly, which is why some of the respondents decided to reduce the number of meals in the diet (for example, from five to four or three per day). This matters because the service is quite expensive. The cost of daily meals averages PLN 65 per day (monthly expenses of PLN 1300–1500 per one person). The element of rational calculation and budget planning is thus important here.

Diet catering turns out to be a great convenience in the daily routine of preparing meals. It allows to enjoy varied food, but without having to compose the meal on one’s own. Using a diet catering service also gives the opportunity to consume something different every day without having to constantly make a choice. By deciding on a certain diet, at least for a while one can forget about the annoyance of coming up with a menu:

I know they will balance it (the meal) and I can’t count calories (on my own) and don’t want to (W4).

It was all so pragmatic, that is, I don’t have to cook, I don’t have to do the dishes, I have everything brought home directly (W5).

Catering is convenient – I don’t have to cook or go shopping (W6).

Diet catering is a manifestation of rationalization in time management as well. Time spent on buying the ingredients or doing the shopping can be saved:

I don’t have time to figure out how much of what to buy every day, I gave up for such practical reasons: I didn’t have time to prepare fresh things every day (W7).

The use of catering services can also be interpreted as entrusting nutrition into the hands of professionals (Poulain 2017), relying on the authority of professionals in this field. Those willing to use the offer of catering companies trust that their menus are prepared by specialists in nutrition. This increases the certainty that one is providing their body properly balanced meals. The potential user of the service can also be supported in planning meals, establishing nutrition plans, and designing a specific vision of their body.

In addition to the advantages of food catering, respondents also mentioned their doubts about this service. After a certain period of using diet catering, there comes a point when the users for whom one of the most important motivations to use the service was to reduce weight, realize that their expectations were not realistic. At that point, there is a shift in their expectations: they no longer define the effects of the diet in pounds shed but recognize other benefits: that they feel good or that their body takes on a certain shape. Respondents are also aware that getting good results, such as losing weight, requires regularity:

It's all about consistency, so I would either have to order "boxes" all my life or be consistent with calories even when I quit "boxes", because then the weight comes back or even doubles (W7).

Respondents know that food catering is simply a delivered ready-made meal, but the meal itself won't keep them healthy if they don't follow healthy eating rules.

The issue of trust in the supplier also appeared in the interviews. The food in the deliveries does not always meet the respondents' expectations in terms of taste, freshness or variety of ingredients. After some time there comes fatigue with a particular type of diet, which usually leads to a search for a new catering company. To reduce uncertainty about whether the new supplier's offer will meet their expectations, respondents often follow recommendations of their friends who also use diet catering.

The most common expression of trust was when the food provided was described as "close to homemade". Respondents commented in interviews on what distinguishes delivered food from "homemade" food (prepared by a trusted person; see: Crowther 2013: 178). For example, one respondent understood homemade food as low-processed food:

If it's minimally processed, that is I buy it and I open it and I see that there's corn or beans and chicken and I can recognize it, it's like a "Better-Checked Almost Homemade Dinner" (W2).

Other respondents looked for catering that offered familiar dishes, because it was more "homey" food in their understanding.

Respondents also expressed their concerns when it comes to eating dishes containing meat delivered by catering companies: some of those surveyed order vegetarian dishes for fear of eating meat from "unknown sources". Given that catering is a type of mass food production and a for-profit business, fears arise that caterers will "save money on meat":

I try to limit eating meat for environmental reasons and that you never know what meat that is (W8).

I took a vege diet because I was a little afraid of what the meat would be, at this price, what the quality would be (W1).

These opinions expressed the lack of confidence in catering companies.

5. Discussion and conclusions

From the interviews, a picture emerges in which reaching for diet catering can be interpreted as an attempt to control the activities of preparing meals on a daily basis ensuring that they are prepared regularly, in appropriate portions, in accordance with the principles of healthy eating. Cooking seems to many of my interlocutors

to be a tedious and time-consuming activity, and one that does not always yield the expected results. At the same time, they try to live up to the principles of leading a healthy lifestyle, which is not always successful. It can be said that entrusting this issue into the hands of specialized companies (professionals), is a kind of strategy for adapting to urban life. These findings overlap with the results of quantitative research studies on using diet catering services conducted in Poland, which showed that among the main motivations of clients were the desire to support proper eating habits and to reduce body weight. One of decisive factors to use the services of diet catering was also the lack of time to prepare wholesome meals (Pyrzyńska 2018; Zborowski, Mikulec 2022).

Jean-Pierre Poulain described longer commute times and thus reduced time for meals as characteristics of the urban lifestyle. In addition, the urban lifestyle is characterized by more frequent eating out, not only at restaurants or employee cafeterias, but also at the office during the lunch break. As Poulain noted, a lunch box becomes a fixture of the modern city dweller. A meal becomes not only a moment of leisure, but also a “moment for oneself” (Poulain 2017). Diet catering meets these needs: it allows to simplify healthy eating in the conditions of urban life.

The notion of *gastroanomie* comes to mind here. It refers to the dilution of eating rules in modern societies (see: Fischler 1988; Domański et al. 2015; Poulain 2017; Crowther 2013), examples of which include simplification of meals, lack of regularity in eating, and difficulty in carving out time for regular shopping and cooking. The diet catering service allows respondents to provide some predictability and regularity in their meal intake. Since all of the interviewed participants are young adults of working age, but most of them do not yet have families of their own, the rhythm of meals is less determined by their participation in the family structure and eating becomes “a separate marker of their social identities” (Domański et al. 2015: 15). Other transformations in eating patterns described with reference to modern societies can also be noted here: “an increase of purchased food at the expense of that produced independently” in food consumption patterns which Domański et al. (2015: 17) described as the example of the “commodification of food”, the popularization of eating out (rather than – eating at home or “at someone else’s place”), and the individualization of eating patterns (Domański et al. 2015: 17–18).

Gillian Crowther wrote about the creation of “urban mass gastronomy” as of an endeavor which made it possible to eat according to healthy eating principles, which in turn – would translate into an increase in the productivity of society. Therefore, food should taste good to representatives of different social groups: “gastronomy is a field, allowing good food to be made available to everyone, regardless of their taste” (Crowther 2013: 191).

On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu (2023) identified the use of catering services (e.g., restaurants) as a way of marking social differences between representatives of different status groups. This also applies to diet catering. It offers food “to suit every

taste” but also, since ordering diet catering is quite expensive, it can be assumed that using it is a manifestation of high material status and a modern, urban lifestyle. According to Zborowski and Mikulec, the diet catering services are especially popular among young people living in cities (Zborowski, Mikulec 2022). Pyrzyńska noted that the popularity of diet catering services is due to increase of wealth in society (Pyrzyńska 2018).

The beliefs expressed by respondents show that social norms regarding the preparation and consumption of meals have been evolving. Meat is not considered a necessary component of a “decent dinner” by my respondents. Rather, it is important that it be a balanced (in terms of nutrients) dinner. The fact that the respondents put balanced meals before having meat shows that nutritional norms come before social norms (Poulain 2017). Social norms refer to social knowledge about what one should eat for lunch (meat as an indicator of a “proper dinner”).⁸ Nutritional norms refer to the alignment with knowledge about healthy eating.

Other examples of the shifts in social norms regulating the preparation and consumption of meals refer to the acceptance of eating outside of home (e.g. at a workplace) and the fact that the meals are not prepared by the interviewees themselves or their family members.

Justyna Straczuk, describing eating patterns during the communist era in Poland, mentions three important beliefs prevailing at the time. The first was the belief that meat was an indicator of high social status and an essential ingredient of a “decent dinner” (Straczuk 2016: 202). The second was an aversion to eating out, stemming from the important role of the family in the social structure (Straczuk 2016: 204). The third, was the belief that homemade, “one’s own” food was more valuable than already prepared food (Straczuk 2016: 207). Having “one’s own” food, made at home, by family members was associated with self-sufficiency in food production and was an expression of independence from state institutions. “One’s own food” also signified membership in a network of exchange, where food was treated as an important element in building social bonds.

From conversations with diet catering users, it appears that they indeed value homemade food most highly, however, since their day is subordinated to their work rhythm, they choose diet catering. This fits in with the “urban lifestyle” criteria described by Poulain and Crowther, cited above. The choice of diet catering also sometimes stems from a reluctance to cook or a lack of time for this activity. An important benefit which diet catering gives to the research participants is the belief, that their meals are more balanced because they have been prepared by professionals, even if a trusted person doesn’t prepare meals for them. They prioritize adapting the service to their daily rhythm.

Diet catering can also be considered an example of rationalization (of the diet and the body). By rationalization of diet, I understand looking for ways to adapt

⁸ Or – how many meals one should eat in a day.

meals to the principles of healthy eating.⁹ This service is based on the idea that a certain vision of the body can be realized through diet. Among the offerings of catering companies, we can find diets aimed at sports people, people with specific health problems, or addressed to those who want to reduce weight. An example of ‘theoretical rationalization’ described by Weber can be noticed in referring to the experts’ knowledge in preparation of nutritional plans. Practical rationalization can be traced in effectiveness in selecting means to an end (diet catering can be used to achieve a slim, fit, healthy body). Formal rationalization appears in formalizing and standardizing certain practices in the form of action rules. This is exemplified in dietetic recommendations in the form of tables, and measurements. According to Bryan S. Turner, the contemporary preoccupation with such problems as obesity, dieting and weight loss are examples of the extension of rational calculation to the body and the involvement of science as an apparatus of social control (Turner 1994: 192).

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⁹ As B.S. Turner noted, dietary tables were typically aimed at forms of consumption which were regarded as ‘irrational’ threats to health (Turner 1982: 267).

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