



# A carrot isn't a carrot isn't a carrot: tracing value in alternative practices of food exchange

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## Abstract

Questions of value are central to understanding alternative practices of food exchange. This study introduces a practice-based approach to value that challenges the dominant views, which capture value as either an input for or an outcome of practices of exchange (value as values, standards, or prices). Building on a longitudinal ethnographic study on food collectives, I show how value, rather than residing in something that people share, or in something that objects have, is an ideal target that continuously unfolds and evolves in action. I found that people organized their food collectives around pursuing three kinds of *value-ideals*, namely good food, good price and good community. These value-ideals became reproduced in food collectives through what I identified as *valuing modes*, by which people evaluated the goodness of food, prices and community. My analysis revealed that, while participating in food collectives in order to pursue their value-ideals, people were likely to have differing reasons for pursuing them and tended to attach different meanings to the same value-ideal. I argue that understanding how value as an ideal target is reproduced through assessing and assigning value (valuing modes) is essential in further explorations of the formation of value and in better understanding the dynamics of organizing alternative practices of food exchange.

**Keywords** Value · Alternative food practices · Practice-based approach · Ethnography · Food collectives

## Introduction

The past two decades have shown a rapid increase in alternative ways of organizing food supply from farm to fork that challenge the industrial food system, which is sustained by practices of mass production, distribution and consumption (Goodman et al. 2012; Holt Giménez and Shattuck 2011). Simultaneously, grassroots food movements have called into question conventional quality standards established predominantly by a small number of experts, industry representatives or political authorities, and introduced alternative approaches to valuing “good food” (Goodman 2003; Pollan 2010). These have included, for instance, promoting new standards and pricing mechanisms (Raynolds 2000; Reinecke et al. 2012), developing new discourses and labels (Pratt 2007; Van Bommel and Spicer 2011), and establishing

new practices of local food exchange (Brunori et al. 2012; Hinrichs 2000; Werkheiser and Noll 2014).

Questions of value are essential in all market exchanges (Helgesson and Kjellberg 2013), but appear particularly interesting in the context of alternative food practices (Dahlberg 1988; Forssell and Lankoski 2015). In moving away from globalized impersonal markets towards direct exchanges, people need to establish new quality standards and ways of valuing (Weber et al. 2008). On the one hand, studies have shown how formation of value is contingent on *values*, such as cultural frames, norms and discourses that motivate action (Doran 2009; Thompson and McDonald 2013). On the other hand, scholars suggest that value is formed through the properties of an object (such as its qualities or characteristics) as captured by labels and standards, or through a price reflecting multiple attributes or values attached to an object (Miller 2008; Reinecke and Ansari 2015; Van Bommel and Spicer 2011). But while these studies have broadly explored the formation of value and shed light on various valuation practices (for reviews, see e.g. Kjellberg et al. 2013; Lamont 2012), scholars have tended

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to treat value as either an *input for*, or an *outcome of* human practice (Muniesa 2011; Orlikowski and Scott 2013).

Motivated by examining value not as a fixed variable, but as collectively enacted accomplishment (Gherardi 2009; Graeber 2001), I mobilize a practice-based approach (Gherardi 2012; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011) to examine how value is formed in alternative food practices. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, this paper is based on an open-ended and emergent research design (Wiedner and Ansari 2017) with insights arising from a longitudinal ethnographic study on food collective organizations in Finland. Food collectives are groups of households who procure local and organic food directly from small-scale farmers and other types of food suppliers and distribute it among the participating members. Food collectives provide an excellent setting for studying the formation of value, because they have emerged in a situation in which commonly agreed standards for local food as an object of exchange, or regulations for food collectives as an alternative practice for food exchange, have not existed. Therefore, food collective members have needed to work out for themselves what to value and how.

This study found that food collectives were organized around three *value-ideals*: good food, good price and good community. These value-ideals are contextual and continuously unfolding signifiers that guide action. In food collectives, value was formed through what I identified as *valuing modes* that engaged people in continual evaluation of the goodness of the value-ideals. While enabling people to evaluate the goodness of food, prices and community, valuing modes simultaneously functioned as ways of re-producing these value-ideals. I argue that this dynamic movement between evaluating and re-producing value-ideals is essential in understanding the formation of value. This study contributes to a better understanding of value as constituted in action (Graeber 2001; Heuts and Mol 2013; Hutter and Stark 2015; MacIntyre 2008) and adds to the previous research by problematizing the general belief that value resides in something that people share, or in something that objects have.

## Formation of value in practices of exchange

Questions of value have attracted attention within a plethora of different academic fields (Aspers and Beckert 2011; Lamont 2012; Otto and Willerslev 2013). Research within the fields of economic sociology and anthropology question the dominance of economic approaches that equate (exchange) value with price (Graeber 2001; Muniesa 2011) and argue that in the economic sphere, like in other spheres of life, the formation of value should be understood as a culturally and materially mediated process. In this vein, an increasing amount of research labelled as valuation studies (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013; Lamont 2012), and research

within economic sociology and anthropology more broadly, has suggested that scholars should look into how various practices enable people to assign or assess value (Fourcade 2011; Graeber 2001; Kjellberg et al. 2013).

Understanding how value is formed is central to understanding alternative practices of exchange (Dahlberg 1988; Hughes 2005; Parker et al. 2014). Prior research has, for instance, found that prices do not merely measure the value of the product but mediate various moral, environmental and ethical values (Fourcade 2011; Zelizer 1978) and thereby lead to action. A good example is Fair Trade pricing, which signals valuing the work of farmers, but has also been suggested to reflect the values of those buying the products (Doran 2009; Murray and Reynolds 2007). Similarly, other types of valuing schemes such as eco-labels and quality rankings enable the production and categorization of value (Brunsson et al. 2012; Karpik 2010; Lamont 2012). At the same time, however, higher prices for specialty products like organic and fair-trade food may signal “elite” values and inhibit action despite initial motivations that people have towards buying “ethical” food (Johnston et al. 2011). In this sense, while standards and pricing enable the creation of value through certifying and framing activities, they may also come to represent unwanted, controversial or “false” values (DeLind 2011; Pratt 2007).

While the existing literature has shown that values play a significant role in alternative food practices by motivating and guiding action (Brunori et al. 2012; Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019; Seyfang 2007; Weber et al. 2008), there seems to be a tendency to try to capture value in the form of shared values (ethical, environmental, economic, etc.) or in the value of an object (price, quality ranking, eco-labels) and thereby see “value” as more or less stable. This is perhaps because many scholars build on either economic or sociological premises that treat value as the product of, or the starting point for, valuing practices (Aspers 2008; Aspers and Beckert 2011; Muniesa 2011; Orlikowski and Scott 2013). This, argues Graeber (2001, p. 49), makes it difficult to imagine “a theory of value starting from the assumption that what is ultimately being evaluated are not things, but actions”. Along with anthropological scholarship (Graeber 2001, 2013; Otto and Willerslev 2013), sociologists have also called for a more comprehensive understanding of value and proposed studying value as a verb (“to value”) rather than as a noun (Hutter and Stark 2015; Kjellberg et al. 2013).

Through empirical investigations, anthropological research has provided important insights into how valuing occurs in different practices of exchange (Malinowski 2002; Mauss 1954). Understanding these practices is crucial since, as several scholars suggest, they reveal that it is not the object per se but the reproductive action (rituals, practices) around these objects that is valued (Graeber 2001; Lambek 2013; Mauss 1954). Thus, by showing how objects like

food ultimately end up constituting social relations, scholars have problematized the common assumption that it is the value of these objects, referred to as exchange or use value, that is produced in and through practices of exchange. In other words, understanding the formation of value requires us to look beyond *what* is being exchanged (the object of exchange), and explore *how* exchange happens in practice.

A good example of the importance of understanding the performative nature of value is the concept of local that appears central to understanding value in alternative practices of food exchange (Feagan 2007; Hinrichs 2003; Werkheiser and Noll 2014). Several studies suggest that “local” is not a mere quality of a product, or an attribute of a community, but commonly refers to the nature of relationships formed with the food and between the people (Albrecht and Smithers 2018; Delind 2006; Hinrichs 2000; Trivette 2017; Weber et al. 2008). These studies show how, through the formation of relationships, a sense(s) of closeness, connectivity, and trust local is produced in practice.

In order to better understand the performative nature of value (Graeber 2001; Hutter and Stark 2015; Lambek 2013), I adopt a practice-based approach emphasizing everyday action as the primary source of knowing and theorizing (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Schatzki 2001a). Practices can be understood as recurrent patterns of socially sustained and materially mediated action (Schatzki 2001a). They form what Nicolini (2009b) refers to as the “sites of knowing” that provide a context for people to make judgments on what is to be held as good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, beautiful or ugly, valuable or worthless—and how these assessments should happen in practice (Gherardi 2009; Heuts and Mol 2013). Several practice scholars point towards a definition of practices which emphasizes that practices are normatively shared and assume a common understanding among the participants of the ends (aims, values) of the activity that constitutes a practice (Gherardi 2011; Schatzki 2001b). Exploring value from a practice-based approach, then, involves examining what ends people pursue through their practice and how they evaluate that what is collectively held as good, valuable, and worth pursuing (Hutter and Stark 2015; MacIntyre 2008; Thévenot 2001).

## Methodology and the context of the study

Along with providing theoretical tools, the practice-based approach extends to methodological considerations on how to study practices (Miettinen et al. 2009). This study draws on a 6-year ethnographic study among 22 food collectives in Finland conducted over the years 2010–2016. Food collectives are groups of households who procure local and/or organic food directly from farmers and other small-scale food suppliers such as hunters, gardeners, fishermen, or

“mushroom grannies” and distribute it among the members of the collective. Many food collectives also supplement their supply with purchases from organic wholesale distributors. Food collectives operate on a non-profit basis and are located in specific neighbourhoods, regions, or cities. Legally, the majority of these organizations are not formal in the sense of being registered as non-governmental organizations or co-operatives.

Food collectives can be found across the country, with the densest concentration in the capital region. Furthermore, their sizes vary, accounting for anywhere from a dozen to a couple of hundred households. Food collectives bring together several interconnected practices like farming, ordering, transporting, distributing, and cooking, among others that need to be coordinated in order to enable the exchange of food on a regular basis. To do this, the members of each food collective establish and maintain relationships with suppliers, negotiate terms of delivery, create ordering systems and manage orders, distribute the food, and communicate among the participating members and with the farmers, among other tasks.

Unlike many other practices of local and organic food exchange, such as farmer’s markets, food co-ops or food box deliveries (CSA shares), food collectives are initiatives organized primarily by households, not farmers. Moreover, as orders are placed collectively, it is not individuals who engage in exchange but the collective as a whole. The households thus organize the entire web of interconnected practices from production to consumption and are in charge of the whole value chain. This requires a lot of work and forces people to reflect on what is held valuable in food collectives, how, and why. These factors make food collectives very interesting sites for studying the formation of value.

## Fieldwork and data sources

My fieldwork included participant observation, site observation and shadowing, open-ended in-depth interviews and informal conversations, and following social media discussions. I supplemented these sources with information from food collectives’ web pages and member-surveys conducted by the collectives. These methods allowed me to gain deep insight into the practices of food collectives (Gherardi 2012; Nicolini 2011).

## Participation, observation and shadowing

Participating in and observing the everyday activities of food collectives provides the basis for the analysis. As a participant in three different food collectives, varying in sizes and locations, I was able to actively follow how the procurement and distribution of food as well as communication and coordination were organized in the

collectives. I began observing the first food collective in spring 2010. As a member of the collective, I participated in the weekly orders and pick-ups of food, and voluntary work, such as receiving food deliveries, sorting and (re-) packing food, guiding people at the pick-up events, and sanitation work. I got to know the coordinators and had the opportunity to shadow (Czarniawska 2014) private moments of planning that dealt with the food collective's organizational tasks.

After 6 months, I joined a much smaller food collective located in my own neighborhood. This collective was "closed" to people outside the neighborhood and could only be joined by invitation from one of the members. This collective required more intensive volunteering that made me switch to the third collective, which I studied as a participant observer for 5 years. At this stage, I also began to search for new farmers and help with (re-) organizing tasks related to changes in distribution places or product selection. Additionally, I conducted on-site observations 1–2 days long in five other food collectives.

## Interviews and informal conversations

In addition to several informal discussions, I conducted 25 open-ended interviews among 22 food collectives with food collective founders, coordinators, and members (see Table 1). These interviews lasted from half an hour to three hours. With the aim of gaining better understanding of what people valued in food collectives and how their particular food collective functioned in regard to what they valued, I began each interview with an open inquiry about their reasons for participating in a food collective. I then asked the respondents to reflect concretely on how their food collective functioned and how they personally engaged in the collective, and what were the "goods" and "bads" of procuring food this way. I soon discovered that the respondents brought up similar themes (reasons for participating in food collectives, vivid stories about encounters with the food, challenges in the practicalities related to organizing a collective) and paid close attention to asking follow-up questions on these and guiding the respondents to describe the related activities in concrete terms. In some cases, I followed-up the interviews and discussions by e-mail to gather additional information.

**Table 1** Data on food collectives

Food Collective (type)	Location	Members	Distribution	Available data
FC 1 (organic/local)	Capital region	300	1/week	Observation 6 months, shadowing 2 days, 2 interviews, informal conversations, emails, photos, web page
FC 2 (local/organic)	Capital region	330	1/week	Observation 5 years, 3 interviews, informal conversations, Facebook, emails, 3 surveys, photos, web page
FC 3 (local/organic)	Capital region	25	1/week	Observation 6 months, 1 interview, informal discussions, emails, photos
FC 4 (local/organic)	Southern Finland	31	1/month	Observation (distr. event), 1 interview, informal conversations, Facebook, photos
FC 5 (local/organic)	Southern Finland	30	1/month	Observation (distr. event), 1 interview, informal conversations, photos
FC 6 (local/organic)	Capital region	80	1/week	Observation (distr. event), 1 interview, informal conversations, emails, phone calls, Facebook, photos, 2 surveys, web page
FC 7 (organic/local)	Southern Finland	100	1/month	1 interview, email conversations, photos, web page
FC 8 (local/organic)	Eastern Finland	70	1/month	1 interview, photos, web page
FC 9 (local/organic)	Eastern Finland	250	1/month	1 interview, photos, web page
FC 10 (local/organic)	Central Finland	40	1/month	1 interview, web page
FC 11 (local/organic)	Capital region	60	1/month	1 interview, photos, Facebook, web page
FC 12 (local/organic)	Capital region	92	1/week	1 interview
FC 13 (local/organic)	Capital region	15	1/week	1 interview (2 interviewees), photos
FC 14 (organic/local)	Northern Finland	12	1/month	Observation (distr. event), group interview, informal conversations, photos
FC 15 (local/organic)	Eastern Finland	100	1/month	1 interview, Facebook
FC 16 (local/organic)	Northern Finland	10	1/month	1 interview
FC 17 (organic/local)	Southern Finland	60	2/month	1 interview
FC 18 (organic/local)	Western Finland	120	1/month	1 interview, photos, web page
FC 19 (local/organic)	Southern Finland	60	1/month	1 interview, emails, phone calls, photos, web page
FC 20 (local/organic)	Southern Finland	18	1/month	1 interview, emails, photos
FC 21 (local/organic)	Capital region	15	1/month	1 interview, emails
FC 22 (local/organic)	Eastern Finland	25	1/month	1 email interview

## Social media discussions and online data

During my fieldwork, some of the food collectives began using Facebook for communicating and organizing their everyday activities. I gained access to six closed groups, including members from various food collectives around the country and collected social media discussions from these group conversations. In these discussions, the participants of food collectives, sometimes including the farmers, exchanged information regarding the food and the suppliers, coordinated ordering and distribution, and shared information on various other practicalities. Additionally, I collected the information available on food collectives' websites, which some collectives maintained, in order to obtain an understanding of how a food collective is described to a broader audience.

## Data analysis

My fieldwork was driven by a broad question: how and why food collectives were organized around the exchange of organic and local food. At an early stage, it became evident that understanding questions of value was essential in understanding the functioning of food collectives. This was an observation that I brought to the centre of my analysis. In an abductive analytical process (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), I iterated between the data, the existing literature and different theoretical concepts. In studying the formation of value in food collectives' practices, I focused my analysis specifically on both the doings and sayings (Nicolini 2009a) of the participating household members.

In the first stage, I went through all the data looking into what “things”, including material, abstract and activity-based things, were valued in food collectives. This task produced 78 first-order codes (coding in the language of the original data) from which I identified three broader categories, namely food-related, price-related, and community-related “things”. What sparked my interest was that pursuing “goodness” (of food, prices, and community) seemed to unite all these three categories, which I then named the “core value-ideals in food collectives”.

This led to the second phase of the analysis, in which I looked more specifically into individual food collectives, and analyzed *how* people pursued good food, good price and good community through the different practices of food collectives. By identifying the different practices in which people participated (see Appendix 1), I was able to see that people encountered what Hutter and Stark (2015) call “moments of valuation” that engaged them in assessing the goodness of food, prices and community throughout different situations in different practices.

In the third phase of the analysis, I looked specifically into the moments of valuation, which I used to analyze the

relationship between *what* people valued (value-ideals) and *how* they assessed their goodness. I identified these as *valuing modes*. Valuing modes refer to actions incorporating both sayings and doings that emerge in and evolve throughout the different interlinked, materially mediated practices of food collectives.

## Valuing modes and formation of value in food collectives

Due to the lack of local food standards on the one hand, and benchmarks for exchanging food through a food collective on the other, households and farmers needed to establish for themselves what to value and how. I found that food collectives were organized around pursuing three value-ideals, namely good food, good price and good community. While separated for analytical purposes, in reality these value-ideals were entwined and interdependent. Moreover, not all value-ideals appeared significant in similar ways. In performing the core activities of the collectives, individual people as well as a particular food collective as a group could prioritize one value-ideal over another—with some emphasizing the nature of food, some being more conscious about pricing, and some being driven primarily by communal aspects.

In pursuing good food, good price and good community, people engaged in evaluating their goodness through what I identified as *valuing modes* (see Fig. 1). Valuing modes refer to embodied and materially mediated activities comprising sayings and doings by which people engaged in assessing the value-ideals that were pursued in food collectives.

I found that good food was assessed through the valuing modes of *sensing quality* and *knowing the origin*, good price through *making comparisons* and *reflecting on profits*, and good community through *encouraging participation* and *sharing work*. In the following, I draw on the analysis and show how people assessed the value-ideals throughout the different practices of food collectives through these valuing modes. Each chapter begins with a quote referring to the value-ideal in question, after which the findings on the valuing modes are presented.

### Valuing good food—from feeling bad to feeling good

I: This idea that there are these good products here [pointing at the kitchen where distribution is taking place], local food and organic food...and then, good food.

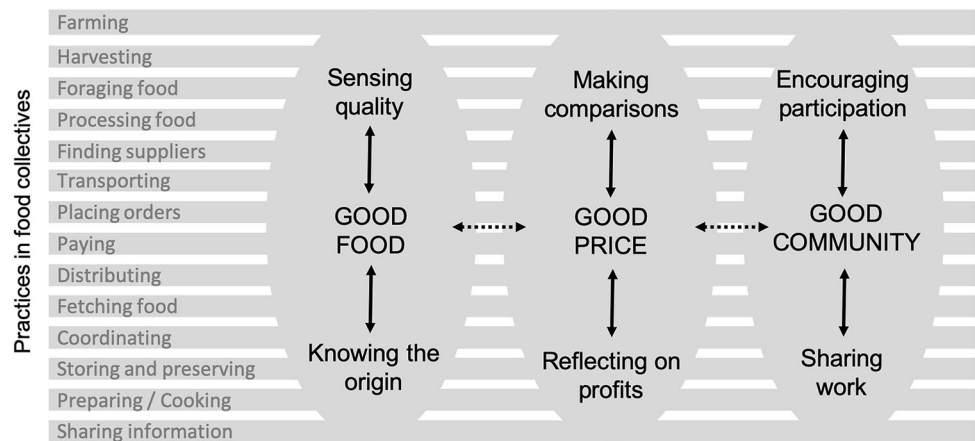
Q: What is good food?

I: Well, pure food.

Q: And what kind of food is that?



**Fig. 1** Value-ideals and valuing modes in food collectives



I: Well, that you know where it came from and how it was produced, and then these pure and raw ingredients from which you can prepare good food at home. (field-notes, coordinator, FC5)

Members in all food collectives studied claimed to be pursuing *good food*. They most commonly described good food as being pure, fresh, and tasty—and the kind of food whose origins one knew. Practically, this meant procuring locally-grown and organically-produced food. However, local and organic did not always go hand-in-hand in practice, as an organic label did not guarantee proximate production, and locally grown food was not necessarily certified as organic. Since standards for *local* did not exist, the members could not be reliant merely on external evaluation such as the common (industrial) food quality standards or eco-labels. Instead, in order to assess the goodness of their food, the members used their senses to assess its quality and built connections with the origins of the food.

### Sensing quality

The great majority of food entering food collective exchange was unprocessed or very little processed. Generally, the basic supply included (root) vegetables, such as potatoes, carrots, onions, and other row crops, and often also eggs and grain, which formed the basis for farmers' regular deliveries. On top of these, each collective worked out its unique assortment, including specialty items like dairy and meat products, fruit and berries, and other foodstuff that the members wanted. Since most of this food came directly from local farms, its appearance varied greatly in terms of shape and size, variety, and packaging. Additionally, some products were only available through food collectives and could not be found in grocery stores, like certain parts of animals, or raw milk. The non-standardized nature of food and originality of the assortment came to signify good food and thus formed an essential part of its evaluation.

As many of the core practices of food collectives, such as ordering, coordinating and distributing were shared, the quality of food was often collectively checked and explored. Each food collective received the food in bulk, requiring volunteer members to sort and repack the foodstuffs before distributing them among the members who had placed orders. This meant unpacking sacks and boxes of root vegetables covered in soil, using tools to sort the food into smaller packaging, and encountering oddly-shaped vegetables or feathers stuck onto eggshells while re-packing eggs into smaller pods. Through continual exchange of information with farmers and through dealing with the raw nature of food, soil on vegetables came to signify purity, the smell of grain freshness, and feathers on eggs naturalness. Carrots often functioned as the quality proxy for good food; besides their taste, people assessed their colour, size, shape, and the texture of soil they were covered in.

Subsequently, this enabled the members of the collective to share their personal experiences of “dealing” with the food when they were preparing and processing, cooking, and consuming it at home. In food collectives, all the observed and interviewed participants cooked regularly. Dealing with raw ingredients as well as collectively learning about the quality of food enabled people to describe their senses and the qualities of food in very concrete ways, as my conversation with one of the active members revealed:

Q: Do you notice the quality in other [things] than taste? You have told me a lot about how good this [food] tastes...

I: Well, flour for example. I did not believe it when they [the other members] told me that this flour that we order from [name of the farmer] is so good. It has no additives. Grains have been milled fresh and so on, and so people have told me that baking is totally different with it. And at first I thought, “this is nonsense”. But now I have become a believer. We have a gas oven, and it is extremely difficult to bake in it. But now, it still

isn't perfect, but it's much better, the dough doesn't slump and dry in the oven. There [when baking] I can feel it. (fieldnotes, active member, FC12)

On a few occasions, I observed that the quality of food was put in question. For instance, some members brought up that sometimes the local root vegetables “were getting leathery” after the winter and claimed that storing root vegetables diminished their quality. In one case, a farmer delivered potatoes covered in black spots. Surprisingly, while the looks did not influence the taste directly, the members did not find the potatoes aesthetically appealing and many complained. Depending on their relationships with the farmers, collectives dealt with this sort of discontent differently. In some collectives, assessments led to changing the suppliers, while in others communicating with farmers led to mutual learning about the why's, what's and how's of evaluating the quality of food.

Finally, evaluating the goodness of food through sensing was as much connected to experiences with the food as to concrete feelings. Many claimed to “have more energy”, to “feel good”, and some people brought up that they didn't have any allergic reactions, unlike with the majority of vegetables that were sold in grocery stores. However, sensing food was inseparable from knowing its origin.

### “Knowing” the origin

It was important for the members of food collectives to know where the food came from and that it had been produced ethically and using organic methods. But assessing these issues was not always straightforward. While sorting out foodstuffs at a distribution, I had the following conversation with another volunteer, revealing the key challenge of evaluating the origin of food:

I: That [this] food is organic is important to me.

Q: Why is organic important?

I: It makes you feel better; you feel good.

Q: Right. So how about local food, do you find it somehow...? [interruption by the volunteer]

I: If it is not organic then I don't think it is any better. But if there is Finnish organic food available, I prefer that.

Q: But what about this [showing a bag of onions] farmer then, he does not have an organic certificate...

I: The certificate is not that important if the food is pure. That I know it [is]. But if I don't know the farmer personally, then I can't know for sure. (fieldnotes, volunteering member, FC1)

In food collectives, assessing organic, which commonly meant “pure”, was often a question of trusting the farmer

rather than the label. Thus, finding good farms and food suppliers formed an essential part of assessing the origins of food. In practice, the founders, leaders, and other active members of food collectives searched for and contacted local farmers, inquiring about their production methods and other information about the farm. Forming direct relationships with a unique set of farmers and other food suppliers, including “mushroom grannies”, fishermen and home bakers, allowed the members in charge of these relationships to repeatedly exchange information and talk to the suppliers. Often, when suppliers delivered their products to the collective's distribution point, they provided information about the harvest and shared details of the production process, like the influence of the weather on the growing season, or characteristics of specific varieties. Most importantly, from time to time, the farmers shared stories about farming and through these opened a window onto their farming philosophy.

Interestingly, however, most of the members of the collectives never met any farmers because the farmers almost never stayed for the actual distribution. This was also the case with the person quoted in the conversation above—a piece of information that appeared contradictory to me. It seemed that, in food collectives, knowing and trusting were inseparable: “knowing” the origin meant on the one hand *trusting that someone within the collective knew*, and on the other hand it meant *having a possibility of knowing*—that is, the opportunity to talk to the farmer, or to visit the farm, as articulated by one of the founders:

Last year we only visited [name of the farm], but many of us are very interested in knowing what the farm is like. Visits give you a totally different picture, or information about farming that you could not transmit in any other way, really. Of course, you can read from the homepage, but there [at a farm], you can see with your own eyes, and you can ask questions and talk with them [farmers]. (interview, founder, FC6)

Traces of information about the origin of food could be found throughout the practices of food collectives. When ordering the food, the members saw the names and contact information of the farms and the suppliers, and received information about varieties and occasionally also about the harvest days. In addition to farmers' stories circulating in food collectives, many were active in following the media and acquiring information about food production from multiple sources. This information was shared during distribution events, in Facebook conversations, and in some cases, when meeting another member on the street. The increased awareness about the origin of food also made people more conscious about its pricing.

## Valuing good price—from profits to what is reasonable

Well, the economic side, it's clear that the farmer gets a better price and the household gets a better price. Because there are no margins for the middlemen. And then, prices here [in food collectives] do not reflect the volatility of global market prices. Our prices have been the same all the time. There has been no rise or fall. And we don't expect that either, there is no reason to demand that from the local producer. Middlemen of course buy where it is cheapest and refer to global prices. But that's such a perverted and unfair business practice. (interview, founder, FC10)

Another shared value-ideal in food collectives was *good price*. From the households' perspective, good price meant affordable prices for organic and local food and fair compensation for the work of producers. But cutting out the middlemen and procuring food directly from farmers or through wholesale distributors required extra work from the members of the collectives. Because volunteer labour that enabled lower prices was not measured in monetary terms and because there existed no uniform standard for good food, assessing the goodness of price was not at all straightforward. I found that making comparisons about the prices and qualities of food and striving for transparency regarding the non-profit nature of food collectives appeared central in evaluating the price.

### Making comparisons

People participating in food collectives were generally quite conscious about food prices, and had a good idea about what organic and local products cost in supermarkets, marketplaces or specialty stores. Members often tried to use these sales channels as proxies when they compared "regular" prices with the prices they paid in a collective. There existed a common understanding that the prices for organic and local food in supermarkets and in other stores were high and it seemed important for many to emphasize that this was not the case in their collective. Some people calculated, for example, that in a food collective they paid the same amount for organically produced food as they would pay for conventionally produced food in a supermarket. Others suggested that they paid half of what they would have paid if they had bought the same amount of organic/local food in a supermarket.

However, attempting to compare prices disconcerted many people, because in the course of comparing they often ended up concluding that one couldn't find "this food" elsewhere. While some explained that the

quality was totally incomparable, others simply referred to the unavailability of organically produced local food in supermarkets:

[...] you can't compare the prices of many of these products because they do not exist in supermarkets. Like back then [when we started] and even now...well, now you might be able to find some sort of organic meat, but not really... And eggs for example, specifically these local ones you can't find... (interview, founder, FC16)

In some cases, people appeared upset about the low prices of food, or consumption habits in general, and seemed to need to justify that what they were doing was actually investing in good food. As the following conversations at a food collective's distribution reveals, comparing prices included broader reflection and evaluation of one's priorities in consuming:

Q: So, how about the price then?

I-1: Well, it's a matter of importance. When something is important, you invest in it. Some consider a car important. For me, this [food] is important, and I am ready to put effort into it, to invest in it.

I-2: Why do people think that food should be so cheap? When beer and booze can cost whatever. Tobacco can cost whatever. But food needs to be cheap. (fieldnotes, FC14)

Due to the lack of uniform quality standards for good food and the very limited availability of organically produced local food in supermarkets, comparing prices was not easy. Additionally, and surprisingly, people's perceptions of good prices extended beyond food to reflect broader understandings of what was important in life in general and worth investing in. As people in food collectives often eschewed for-profit businesses, reflecting on profits and assessing the non-profit nature of collectives was equally important when evaluating the price.

### Reflecting on profits

In food collectives, along with pursuing affordable local and organic food, good price meant that farmers would have fair compensation for their work. All the observed and interviewed members wanted to support small-scale farmers rather than have their money go to the profits of the middlemen. Direct exchange relationships meant that people knew that their money went directly to the farmers. Thus, and contrary to market logic, negotiating prices with producers was not common in food collectives. Rather, the members paid what the farmers asked, as expressed by one of the coordinators:



I think it is important not to think that [we buy] cheap at all costs, or that we would run after the producers who sell at the lowest prices. Not like that. (interview, coordinator, FC18)

While most collectives operated without any internal fees, some charged a yearly membership fee or took a small margin in order to cover operating costs. For this reason, and contrary to the operating logic of food collective organizations, some outsiders mistook them as middlemen distributors. In order to justify internal fees and to emphasize their non-profit nature, food collective founders and coordinators talked openly about their financial situations and, as the following conversation reveals, sought to communicate that they sought no profits:

Q: So, do you take some percentage, if you need buy, for example, a scale or if you have other expenditures?

A: Yes, we take 2–5% margins to cover some costs. But we don't make any profits by any means. (interview, coordinator, FC20)

Due to transparency regarding fees and margins, the members were able to learn about the income of the producers, and also to reflect on how the income of the collective was spent. Transparent practices also enabled people to trust that no one was cheating or pursuing profits, which in turn influenced the perception that prices were “good”. But being dependent on investing not only money but also time in organizing and participating in a food collective made people assess the communal aspects as well.

### Valuing good community—from being a consumer to being a member of a collective

For many, communality is important. But how do you get people to participate? That would be important. Even though the main idea of a food collective and the way we operate unites people, it is totally different if people really engage [as volunteers]. The question is, does one want to experience oneself in other ways than just [being] a consumer or a customer? (interview, founder, FC11)

Alongside good food and good price, *good community* was one of the core value-ideals in food collectives. In practice, however, community signified different things for different people. But while the members had varying reasons for participating in a collective, many of the observed collectives were founded in pursuit of communality. Furthermore, the community enabled access to local and organic food at a certain price level and the opportunity to influence one's own food choices, which appeared important for many people participating in a collective. Many felt happy about food collectives uniting likeminded people, bringing together

mothers in the same life situation, or connecting people living in the same neighborhood. Simultaneously, being part of a food collective community required both commitment and work. Community was then evaluated by how it encouraged participation, and how successfully work was shared among the members.

### Encouraging participation

Because people seemed to pursue many different things as members of food collectives, how and how much they participated in creating and sustaining the community differed. Due to the nature of collectives, there was great potential to form relationships and catch up on a regular basis. As food collectives operated very locally, people could quite easily get to know others living in the same area. In fact, for some, this appeared to be one of the main reasons for founding a food collective:

One of my main motivations to start a food collective was absolutely communality, to get to know people in my neighborhood. In almost a year that we had lived here [name of the neighborhood] I hadn't actually gotten to know any “neighbors”. Now, with this food collective, I have gotten to know other people living here. Even within one week I have been able to greet a person at the bus stop, or when doing groceries. This neighborhood has started to become more my neighborhood. (Facebook, founder of a food collective)

In food collectives, interaction and engaging in a deeper exchange at a more personal level was encouraged. I observed that a sense of community was easier to achieve and maintain in smaller than in larger collectives, in which close relationships were usually formed among a relatively small core group of members. In many collectives, the members were encouraged to participate not only by regularly ordering the food but also by taking an active part in volunteering. But although it was the household members who were responsible for organization, in many collectives the ideal community included not only the member households, but also the farmers:

And then we organize farm visits this summer so that the relationships between these two [parties], which the conventional shops have kept as far apart as possible, eventually form and get established. (interview, coordinator, FC10)

Being a member of a food collective also meant having a greater ability to influence one's own food choices. This was important for many members as they felt that, as consumers, they had no choice but to purchase what the supermarkets offered. Unlike food collectives, chain stores appeared to

discourage participation, as the following conversation with one of the coordinators at a distribution event revealed to me:

I: I have also very strong feelings [...] when someone decides what I eat...then I decided that I will stop going to these chain stores.

Q: So, do you feel that your ability to influence is small?

I: Yes, it is... It is useless [shaking head], so absolutely useless to say anything. No one there [in the chain stores] listens. And believe me, I've tried.[...] It [not responding to my feedback] is so unscrupulous [...] But now my ability to influence is so great. That we collectively search for these good products and have real choices. (fieldnotes, coordinator, FC2)

Some people emphasized that, in food collectives, making conscious, informed, and ethical choices was a norm rather than an exception. Often, being able to influence one's own food choices was not merely related to having limited choice with respect to the quality or the assortment of food, but equally important was the ability to choose to support the farmers. However, despite all the benefits of the communality of food collectives, not all members sought to form relationships with each other or wanted to participate actively in community efforts. Specifically, in larger collectives, many members acted more like regular consumers, which could easily become a problem, since in order to function, a food collective required more engagement than what was expected from a regular supermarket customer. Hence, evaluating community was also closely related to how well work was shared among the members.

### Sharing work

As the members of food collectives were responsible for organizing the exchange, there was a lot of work that needed to be shared. Group size often influenced how this happened within a collective. In smaller food collectives it was easier to share work more equally than in larger collectives, where there were more "free riders" and work tended to pile up on a few people's shoulders. Thus, figuring out fair ways to share work among the members was crucial.

On a weekly basis, the members of the collectives needed to accomplish several tasks. These included taking care of orders, organizing deliveries, communicating with the farmers and the participating member households, distributing the food, paying the bills, and keeping the books. Usually, certain key people took responsibility for coordinating these core tasks for an agreed period. Distribution was the most laborious and time-consuming task, and each collective needed to come up with a workable solution for sharing this work among all the members. Overall, the amount of

work depended on how the food collective's distribution was organized in practice and on how many members had placed an order at a particular time.

Small food collectives with up to 35 members relied on what could be characterized as *obligatory volunteering*, as explained by one of the active members:

I: This is based completely on volunteering, but with the principle that everyone needs to do something.

Q: And do you then recruit volunteers, or?

I: The distribution crew is always formed of those people who have ordered. And then there is this solidarity principle that if you have been a couple of times in a row, I can come this time. And from the beginning we have had this [principle] that everyone does something. (fieldnotes, active member, FC14)

In smaller food collectives, where everyone knew each other, it was easier to divide the workload and circulate different tasks more equally among all the members. Small group sizes also created social pressure to fulfill one's volunteering duty. In larger collectives (with more than 35 members), however, it was more difficult to oblige people to do volunteer work and to keep track of the members' volunteering. This put a lot of pressure on the few most active members. Larger collectives relied on what I characterize as *voluntary obligation*. This meant that the coordinators faced situations in which the continuity of the collective was at risk and they had to communicate that volunteering was an obligation for keeping the collective alive:

At times it is somewhat challenging. And at times you find people [to volunteer] quite easily. Then like last winter we had to send this email reminding people that this needs to be done collectively, that we are not a store and that we hope that everyone participates at least in some ways or we won't be able to organize the distributions and continue [to exist]. (interview, coordinator, FC9)

Sharing different work tasks was one of the most important ways of taking part in the community—and of evaluating how good the community was. Sharing work was also a way of enforcing communal feeling, as people could meet each other, talk and exchange on a more personal level, or take part in decision making and thereby enforce the feeling of being part of a collective. Thus, goodness of community was evaluated through how well people in a food collective succeeded in sharing work and in encouraging participation among both households and farmers.

In this chapter, I have offered an account of how valuing happened in food collectives. My analysis showed how people engaged in continuous re-evaluation of the value-ideals around which their food collectives were organized. Instead of providing uniform criteria, valuing modes denoted

ways of assessing the goodness of food, price and community in food collectives. It is important not to confuse valuing modes with a scheme or instrument for defining value, but see them as action that is valuable in itself; action that contributes to and is inseparable from the formation of the pursued value-ideals. Conceptualizing value as something one *does* creates an opportunity to reflect on value(s) as something intrinsically connected to action and relationships (Graeber 2001) rather than to things or people. In the following, I elaborate on this idea further as I discuss the implications of the findings and the contributions they make to the existing literature.

## Towards a practice-based understanding of value

The study of food collectives reveals how formation of value is a dynamic, relational and continuous process that engages people not only in the pursuit of what they find valuable, but requires them to continually assess what they are pursuing. Developing a practice-based understanding of value is important, because it directs one to zoom into what people do and what they say while doing it (Nicolini 2009a), and thereby allows us to theorize value as intrinsic to and emerging from action (Graeber 2001; MacIntyre 2008). Building on the findings presented above, I wish to discuss two particularly important contributions made by this study.

First, this study introduces an understanding of value through the notion of good, suggesting that *value* is ultimately not only contextual but also an ideal target that is impossible to fully reach. Hence, I coin the term *value-ideals*. Furthermore, contrary to what both practice theory and prior research in alternative food movements imply (Schatzki 2001b; Weber et al. 2008; Werkheiser and Noll 2014), my analysis suggests that, despite pursuing the same value-ideals, people are likely to understand them and relate to them differently from each other. This, in turn, may invoke dissonance within the practices. Second, the concept of *valuing modes* draws attention to the movement between assessing and assigning value and thereby captures the formation of value as a socially dynamic, materially mediated and continually unfolding process. In the following, I discuss these contributions in more detail.

### Value-ideals—understanding value through the notion of good

The economic and sociological traditions seem to have created a divide between value and values by enforcing definitions of what, and by trying to figure out where (a) value is (Miller 2008). Claiming that value is an ideal target that guides action, and that it does it without a guarantee of ever

being achieved, requires an ontological turn to practice. My ethnographic study made visible how value is to be found in the pursuit of *the good*, supporting an argument that some practice-oriented scholars have made (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Dewey 1939; Hutter and Stark 2015; MacIntyre 2008; Thévenot 2001), that people's actions are guided by their concern for the good. The question then revolves around *how* something is made good, rather what makes something good. Thus, like the concept of value, the concept of *good* should not be understood as a quality of “a thing” (e.g. of food, price, community), but as something being continually (re-) produced in a particular practice.

In food collectives, this was visible in the lack of standards and common metrics that would explicitly define what comprised good food, good price and good community. The non-standard quality of the food, direct relationships with farmers and buying as a collective effort produced incommensurability and created a sense of uniqueness that people did not directly attach to a specific food but to the food procured through a food collective in particular. Thus, the practice of exchange—the ways in which food collectives operated and engaged people to participate—functioned as a guarantee of the goodness of the value-ideals. But as the same value-ideals could signify various things to different people—even within the same collective—it is here that the belief of *shared* value(s) needs to be questioned.

As several practice scholars note (Nicolini 2011; Pantzar and Shove 2010), practices cannot simply be copied, but need to be adapted to local contexts. The findings of this study reveal how the locations and sizes of food collectives led to local adaptations and specific characteristics, making individual collectives sensitive to particular conditions and resources. This, in turn, produced various practical understandings of “the same” value-ideals. Some people valued primarily locally and seasonally sourced food, others organically produced food; some were after vegetarian food, others after ethical meat; some participated because of affordable prices, others did not mind paying extra; some tried to build a community, and others eschewed it. But sharing the same action qualified all these different interpretations of value-ideals as *good* in the context of food collectives. In support of what some authors have previously acknowledged (DeLind 2011; Kloppenburg Jr et al. 2000; Werkheiser and Noll 2014), my findings suggest that “the same” value(s) may encompass various meanings within the same practice, and thus while people share particular kinds of action and pursue similar value-ideals, they may be guided by variable “goods” within the same value-ideal. This, I believe, is a very important insight as it reveals how dissonance may exist in alternative practices of food exchange along with aspiring to the same value-ideals.

Further, the findings imply that the so-called two sides of direct food exchanges, producers and consumers, each

of which is often treated as a monolithic group sharing “the same” values and goals (Albrecht and Smithers 2018; Trivette 2017), should be more closely investigated before being considered as such. It may well be, as the case of food collectives reveals, that the disharmony within a group of producers or of consumers becomes more visible. Understanding how, despite differing meanings, the practical, embodied and materially mediated ways of sharing action re-produce the (perception of) goodness of value-ideals is therefore important. Value(s) thus cannot simply be treated as harmonious triggers or as unanimous outcomes of practices of exchange—in this case, food collectives—upon which conclusions can be based.

### Valuing modes—formation of value through assessing and assigning

I have previously argued that value should not be taken as a static entity, but that its formation is a continuous process in which people actively (though not necessarily reflexively) participate in and through different practices. Building on what Lambek (2013) and Vatin (2013) have noted, namely that in examining the formation of value there appears to be a tendency to make a distinction between evaluation (assessment) and production (assigning) of value, the findings of this study suggest that both are equally essential and inseparable features in the formation of value. To capture this movement between assessing and assigning value happening as part of the very quotidian participation in the practices of food collectives, I coined the term of *valuing modes*.

By participating in the different practices of individual food collectives, people encountered several situations in which food, price and community became collectively assessed. Valuing modes produced very practical and embodied understandings of what was considered *good* in the context of food collectives: they enabled people to judge “wrong” actions and justify “right” ones by expressing and reflecting on their bodily feelings and attitudes. Depending on the food collective, some valuing modes came to occupy a more central role than others. Specifically, in larger food collectives that included not only many members but also numerous different producers, some of which were not local, the community ideal was often put in question as valuing modes of *encouraging participation* and *sharing work* were likely to be in conflict. In this sense, trying to be inclusive and to encourage the participation of various members and farmers with multiple needs reduced the sense of connectedness and intimacy, which appear crucial for building relationships and local embeddedness (Feagan 2007; Feagan and Morris 2009; Hinrichs 2000), and distanced the collectives from achieving this goal. Also, needing to continuously balance between sharing and daring—that is, to find ways to share work in an egalitarian way while acknowledging the

different situations that people were in—made people reflect on and sometimes even question the goodness of the different value-ideals.

However, despite the challenge of not being able to fully realize the value-ideals, my findings reveal that the very acts of assessing the goodness of the value-ideals concurrently also assigned (produced) value. In other words, as Thévenot (2001) notes, evaluating performance simultaneously produces *the good* through the ways in which people learn within their practices to feel, understand and make judgements (Gherardi 2009; MacIntyre 2008). Using one’s senses is a good example of how assessing and assigning are intrinsically entwined (Hennion 2004; Mann et al. 2011; Mol 2009). In food collectives, while sensing made it possible to evaluate the quality of food, at the same time people developed their sensing (c.f. senses)—tasting, smelling, touching, observing and handling food—through collectively shared and reflexive activity influenced by different material intermediators (such as the oven, the lack of wrapping, diverse appearance) and this, in turn, produced understandings and experiences of quality. Similarly, the valuing modes by which people assessed the goodness of price and community became to be considered as *good* in themselves, which, in turn, contributed to (re-) producing the value-ideals. It is therefore important to understand that different kinds of valuing modes (standards, labels and rankings) are not static and objective instruments that merely help people to make choices, but that they also assign value and thereby re-produce the actions and qualities that people end up considering good.

The findings raise further interesting questions on the nature of trust in practices of exchange. There seems to be a common understanding that alternative practices of food exchange are based on and bring about trust because of interconnected relationships between farmers and consumers (Feagan 2007; Hinrichs 2000; Trivette 2017). However, despite the existence of direct exchange relationships, in food collectives it was not common for each member to know the farmer personally, nor the other way around. In food collectives, trust was formed through the different valuing modes that increased transparency and created *the sense of knowing*. Thus the participants did not feel that it was necessary to know the farmer or the farming practices personally. These findings suggest that creating trust in alternative practices of food exchange does not necessarily require direct personal relationships. In this sense, valuing modes also made visible how a particular practice of exchange can in itself become trustworthy and thereby inform value.

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## Appendix 1

### Practices in food collectives

Practice	Description
Farming	Producing food by cultivating crops and growing vegetables, growing animals
Harvesting	Harvesting crops, vegetables, and berries from the fields, collecting eggs, etc.
Foraging food	Catching fish, picking berries or mushrooms in the forest, hunting
Processing food	Processing harvested food, e.g. milling the grains, butchering, producing juice out of berries
Finding suppliers	Member households engage in seeking small-scale farmers and other food suppliers to procure food from. In order to ensure variability in selection, food collectives order from several suppliers
Transporting	Food needs to be transported from farms and processing units to the food collective's distribution point
Placing orders	Orders must be placed in advance. Member households place orders via some technological medium, such as Excel sheets, Google docs, email, webstores, or Facebook
Paying	Member households pay for the food either in cash when picking up the food, or via bank transfer. Each member can either pay individually directly to the producer, or the food collective may act as a medium for payment

Practice	Description
Distributing	Food is delivered in large quantities and variable qualities, and needs to be distributed among the member households according to their orders. Food is sorted by volunteer members and put into piles or bags for members to pick up
Fetching food	Member households need to come and pick up the food from a particular place at a specific time. Depending on how distribution is organized, a person may be picking up a ready-packed bag, or placing orders into their own bags
Coordinating	Food collectives need to assign volunteers, communicate with producers and among member households, negotiate terms of delivery, place orders with suppliers, manage monetary transfers between member households and farmers, and keep the books
Storing and preserving	Households need to store or preserve the food due to the large quantities and variable qualities of foodstuff (e.g. by making jam, freezing food in small portions)
Preparing/cooking	Unprocessed or very little processed food needs to be handled, processed and prepared in order to make them ready for cooking and eating
Sharing information	Food collective members exchange recipes, and share information on food quality and practices of food production; they also organize events around local food

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