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Between Passion and Rejection – Attitudes to Farming among Young University Graduates in Rural Areas of Poland*

Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse the significance of farming and agriculture in the lives of young rural university graduates in Poland. Their educational and professional choices are discussed. How many of them graduated from agricultural higher education institutions and agricultural disciplines? Do such decisions translate into taking up farming after having completed the studies? What are the reasons that young people with higher education living in rural areas may be or may not be interested in farming? Another objective is to identify the main factors potentially “pulling” them towards agriculture and those “pushing” them out of this sector. The article is based on 92 in-depth interviews with university graduates aged 25–34 and 27 in-depth interviews with competent local informants conducted in ten purposely selected rural municipalities across Poland. The results show that farming and agriculture are more present in young university graduates than their educational and professional choices suggest. However, the interviews reflect the dominance of the modernisation paradigm shaping the perceptions of farmers and agriculture in Poland.

Keywords: young people, university graduates, higher education, farming, agriculture, rural areas.

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to analyse the extent to which farming is present in the lives of young rural university graduates in Poland. What role does it play in their educational and professional choices? Are they interested in fields and disciplines related to agriculture? Are they willing to take up farming?

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The objective is also to identify factors potentially “pulling” rural young university graduates into farming, i.e., making them enter the agricultural sector, and factors that may discourage them from doing so (“pushing” ones), thus shaping their overall attitudes to agriculture and farming.

In the most recent decades, marked by Poland’s transition to democracy and free markets, as well as accession to the European Union, Polish rural areas have been changing significantly in terms of their functions as well as the socio-economic structure of their population (Wilkin 2018). Recently intensified deagrarianisation results in a greater diversification of rural space functions—alongside the productive one focused on agriculture, others, such as recreational and residential, become increasingly important (Kłodziński 2010). As the number of rural residents living off farming alone has decreased significantly, farmers are no longer a dominant professional group within the rural population, giving way to workers employed outside of agriculture and a growing rural “middle class”, in some areas also reinforced by newcomers from the cities (Halamska 2016).

However, this does not mean that agriculture has lost its significance in terms of the economy, food provision, as well as local community life. The concept of a multifunctional development of agriculture emphasises its other than productive functions: social ones (maintaining vitality and social cohesion in rural areas; providing stability and security), cultural ones (including protection and enrichment of rural cultural traditions, strengthening of rural identity and creating of cultural capital), as well as natural ones (e.g., preventing soil erosion and degradation of agricultural land) (Wilkin 2008, p. 9–21). Globally, the dominant “industrial” model of agriculture, assuming the transformation of small-scale farmers into entrepreneurs running agricultural businesses involved in global trade relationships, is increasingly being challenged by alternatives focused on the resilience of small-scale “peasant” farms and their positive impact on rural communities (Ploeg van der 2008; Zegar 2012) or promoting agricultural cooperatives (Ermanno, Valentinov and Iliopoulos 2013), as well as other collective forms, such as agricultural producers’ groups (Tomczak 2009).

Therefore, one cannot say that agriculture is in a lost position. Different paradigms related to agriculture are competing and clashing, creating barriers but also new opportunities for those who are fond of the countryside and are willing to take up farming, either in a form of a highly modernised agricultural enterprise, or a small-scale farm of a less commercial character. Undoubtedly, advanced knowledge, skills and competences are needed to be able to farm, as well as to operate successfully within the complex legal frameworks and modern markets, and wisely draw on existing possibilities of support.

In interwar as well as post-war Poland, younger generations were the ones more likely to take up the challenge of introducing new ideas and approaches to agriculture (Mróz 2008). In the case of the former, members of the peasant youth movement taking part in courses on agriculture were the vanguard of its pending modernisation (Chałasiński 1984). As for the latter, young people, often graduates of agricultural schools, greatly contributed to further modernising and mechanising agriculture, in many cases against older generations (Chałasiński 1969; Siemieńska and Bijak-Żochowski 1975).

As a consequence, it is important to explore whether and to what extent young university graduates living in rural areas in Poland are interested in becoming farmers. Are those who undertake agricultural activity genuinely attracted to it or rather pressed to do so by their families? What factors may prevent them from running a farm? The questions posed above will be answered on the basis of reflections and experiences of young university graduates living in rural areas, as well as statements by other local informants reflecting on local rural economies and their future development. This fits well with the ongoing debate about the ageing of European farmers and problems with passing on family farms to younger generations due to the lack of young people's interest in farming, especially in a small-scale agriculture (White 2012). According to existing evidence, however, age is one of the most influential factors in a farmer's attitudes towards sustainable and efficient agriculture, as well as the welfare of farm animals (Zagata and Sutherland 2015).

The empirical material in this article is drawn from the qualitative part of the author's own research on young university graduates in rural areas of Poland. 92 in-depth interviews were conducted with rural residents aged 25–34 who had a university degree. Another 27 interviews were conducted with representatives of local government, local public institutions, and local leaders. The research covered ten purposely selected rural municipalities across Poland.

Firstly, a brief literature review on young highly educated rural residents and agriculture will be presented. Secondly, the methodology of the study will be discussed in detail. Thirdly, the research findings will be displayed, focusing on young university graduates' socio-demographic characteristics, the position of agriculture in their educational and professional choices, as well as factors "pulling" them towards and "pushing" them out of farming. These will be followed by conclusions.

2. Young Highly Educated Rural People and Agriculture

In Poland, historically speaking, the share of young people of peasant or rural origin among university students was rather low, due to various barriers related to structural inequalities on the one hand (e.g., differences in quality of rural and urban primary schools or the post-war Polish state prioritising industrialisation, needing workforce), and socio-cultural factors (e.g., lower cultural capital in rural families, poverty) on the other (Wasielewski 2013). For example, in the 1934/35 academic year, students of rural origin constituted 20.9% of students at all 24 public and private universities (Wasielewski 2006, p. 284). In post-war Poland, despite incentives introduced by the state, in 1964/65 youth of peasant origin constituted 21.0% of all students at all faculties, and in 1973/74 it was 18.8% (Wasielewski 2006, p. 286).

Institutions and fields of study related to agriculture were perceived as among the most appropriate for rural youth. In the interwar period, above-average shares of students of rural origin were found at such faculties as agriculture (35.8%) and mining (32.0%). The only faculty/specialisation in which rural students predominated was theology (61.4%) (Wasielewski 2006, p. 285). In post-war Poland, the tendency for educational choices with a strong preference for agriculture was sustained. In the 1969/1970 academic year, the percentage of students of peasant origin in higher education institutions focusing on agriculture reached 39.7% – more than twice as much as in regular universities and higher education institutions with a technical profile (Siemieńska and Bijak-Żochowski 1975, p. 37). However, the majority of these students used agricultural higher education institutions as a vehicle for social mobility, aiming to move to the city or find a clerical job. Only about a third of their graduates settled in the countryside and worked as agronomists, veterinarians or other specialists directly related to agriculture (Siemieńska and Bijak-Żochowski 1975, p. 37).

After the systemic transformation of 1989, higher education became much more accessible for rural youth due a growing number of local public and private higher education institutions, as well as the possibilities of extension studies – paid, but not requiring a permanent residence in the city (Wasielewski 2013). In addition, the increasing educational aspirations among the rural population contributed to increased participation in higher education by rural youth (Domalewski 2015). According to the most recent estimates of the Central Statistical Office, rural residents amount to about a third of all students in Polish higher education institutions (HEI). In the 2018/2019 academic year, the highest percentages of such students were in agricultural higher education institutions (45.5%), HEIs affiliated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration (44.6%), and pedagogical HEIs (41.5%). The lowest percentage of students from rural areas was in artistic

HEIs – 22.0% (CSO 2019, p. 15). It seems that agricultural higher institutions are still a popular choice among rural youth, however, not a dominant one but equal to several other types of HEI. Presumably, just as in the past, the selection of such a school does not translate into a willingness to run a farm. Piotr Pietrzak's recent pilot study on 1,935 graduates of ten public higher education institutions who obtained their MAs or MScs in agricultural sciences in 2015 showed that the great majority of them (83.4% on average) were registered in a general social security system (ZUS) (Pietrzak 2018, p. 106–107). It is unknown how many of the remainder would be registered in the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS) for farmers.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that young farmers (up to 34 years) taking over family farms are increasingly better educated. The share of HEI graduates among this group increased from 2.1% in 2003 to 8.9% in 2009 (Szafraniec 2012, p. 206). However, in general, since the mid-1990s, work in the agriculture sector has attracted fewer and fewer young people from subsequent generations entering the labour market. Recently, the shares of young people employed in agriculture have reached record lows. In 2018, such a share among those aged 20–24 amounted to ca. 5% for men and ca. 2% for women, and among those aged 25–29 it was 6% and 3% respectively (Stanny and Strzelecki 2020, p. 48). According to existing evidence, young people are the most interested in taking over family farms in central and eastern parts of Poland and in Wielkopolska, i.e., where there are no significant local alternatives to agriculture or in a region characterised by well-established traditions of successful farming (Szafraniec 2012).

3. Methodology of the Study

The empirical data analysed in the text is derived from 92 individual in-depth interviews with young adults with a higher education, i.e., graduates with a BA or BSc or an MA or MSc, living in rural areas. The research covered those aged 25–34. At this age, people aim to achieve their aspirations and make decisions which are of significance for their “life strategies” (family, place of residence, job) (Szafraniec 2010, p. 16–17). The interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics are described in detail in the next section of this article. The interview script included questions related to their origins and family background, educational and professional choices, motivations for living in the countryside, as well as local community engagement.

Apart from this, 27 in-depth interviews with competent local informants were also analysed. These interviewees included: village representatives (7), mayors (5), directors of a local cultural centre (5), municipal clerks (4), municipal councillors (2), village councillors (1), members of volunteer fire brigades (1), members of local NGOs (1), a parish priest (1). This group of interviewees consisted of 16 women

and 11 men. In this case, the interview script included questions about the strengths and weaknesses of a given area, characteristics of its local economy, as well as the level of its attractiveness for young people, and possible directions of future local development.

The interviews were carried out in ten selected rural municipalities in provinces belonging to four historic macro-regions differing in terms of agriculture, population and the direction of local development (e.g. Stanny, Rosner and Komorowski 2018). The municipalities were selected according to the following criteria: the share of the population with higher education in the district (*powiat*), the type of the local economy, and the distance from larger urban centres. Consequently, two municipalities were selected in each region – an “agricultural” municipality (with more than 60% of its area as farmland according to the 2010 National Agricultural Census) and a “tourist” municipality (e.g., with nature-related tourist attractions or heritage monuments, or located close to them). These represent two main types of rural areas: those focusing on production and those focusing on consumption (Gorlach 2004). In order to avoid large suburbs, all the municipalities are located at least 80 km from a town or city with a population of over 100,000. Between eight and ten interviews were carried out with university graduates, and two or three competent local informants were interviewed in each municipality (see Table 1).

The first young university graduates interviewed were indicated by competent local informants, while others were identified via snowball sampling. The research was carried out between June and September 2016 and in May and June 2017.¹ The interviews were transcribed, coded using MAXQDA 12 software and subjected to a qualitative analysis.

It has to be emphasised that farming and agriculture were important, but just one of many other themes touched upon in this research. It therefore allowed for the identification of some interesting tendencies, but the group of highly educated young farmers definitely requires further and more systematic investigation. The results of the study are not representative of all rural municipalities in Poland but the selection of municipalities for research makes it possible to make generalisations limited to particular types of local context.

¹ At first, the research was to be conducted only in eight rural municipalities located in different parts of Poland. However, in 2017 two more municipalities from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie province were included in order to ensure the diversification of western and northern areas added to the Polish territory after WWII.

Table 1. List of rural municipalities selected for the research and number of interviews
Tabela 1. Wykaz gmin wiejskich wybranych do badania wraz z liczbą przeprowadzonych w nich wywiadów

Region	Western and northern areas		Former Russian partition		Former Prussian partition		Former Galicia (Austrian partition)		
	Province	District	Province	District	Province	District	Province	District	
	dolnośląskie	walbrzyski	warmińsko-mazurskie	etcki	mazowieckie	siedlecki	wielkopolskie	małopolskie	nowosądecki
	głogowski	walbrzyski	szczyeciński	etcki	pultuski	siedlecki	koniński	leszczyński	gorlicki
Municipality	Pęcław	Walim	Kalinowo	Świątajno	Gzy	Mokobody	Krzymów	Wijewo	Moszczenica
Type of municipality	agricultural	tourist	agricultural	tourist	agricultural	tourist	agricultural	tourist	agricultural
Interviews with university graduates	8	10	9	9	10	9	9	10	10
Interviews with local informants	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2

Source: Own study.
 Źródło: Opracowanie własne.

4. Characteristics of the Local Context

In general, from the interviewees' perspective, the local economies and employment opportunities in the municipalities examined vary to some extent. Usually, the most important employers outside the agriculture sector are local public institutions and small local industrial entities, as well as retail. Agrotourism seems to be most developed in Gródek nad Dunajcem (Małopolska). Economic emigration to the cities or abroad was most frequently mentioned in municipalities in Małopolska and Warmińsko-Mazurskie. In the municipalities examined in Wielkopolska and Dolny Śląsk, especially in case of Pęcław and Krzymów, a significant number of people work in nearby industry, in the towns or cities or in Germany. The municipality of Wijewo (Wielkopolska) is described as having an entrepreneurial spirit – characterised by numerous small businesses providing various services, such as carpentry, construction and transport.

As for agriculture, Gzy and Mokobody (Mazowieckie) are characterised by relatively small family farms, usually up to about a dozen hectares, and production includes various types of crops, some corn and some beef-cattle rearing. Additionally, in Mokobody there are some dairy farms and mushroom production. In both municipalities in Małopolska (Gródek nad Dunajcem and Moszczenica), typically for this region of Poland, farms are often very small (just a few hectares) and highly fragmented, including a variety of plant production and breeding. In Dolnośląskie, the municipality of Pęcław is characterised by large-acreage farms of several hundred hectares owned by “outsiders” (joint-ventures or a German owner). In Walim agriculture production is really scattered, as the area is hilly and arable land is used mostly as grassland. In Wielkopolska, the agricultural sector in the municipalities of Krzymów and Wijewo consists of small family farms and few larger ones. Both municipalities in Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Kalinowo and Świętajno are characterised by the largest farms of several hundred hectares, focused on milk production, as well as some crops and rapeseed oil. In Kalinowo, there are several farms of over 1,000 ha, previously belonging to state-owned farms (PGR) and now managed privately. In Świętajno, there is also a large-scale mushroom-production business (several dozen production halls).

In all the municipalities examined, the processes characteristic of rural areas across Poland (e.g. Bukraba-Rylska 2008; Halamska 2016) were also mentioned: concentration of agricultural activity within few larger farms in the area, a tendency by smallholders to keep the land as a safety net or due to EU subsidies, the improvement of the farmers' quality of life and further modernisation of their farms after the Poland's accession to the EU (especially in the municipalities in Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Dolnośląskie, where the farms' acreage is the largest).

In each municipality some examples of young people taking over family farms were mentioned. However, these were often described rather as exceptions than a broader trend.

5. Socio-demographic Characteristics of Young University Graduates

The interviewees were 63 women and 29 men. About half of the men and women belonged to each of the categories of over-20-year-olds and over-30-year-olds. The great majority of the interviewees, particularly men, originate from villages where they currently live. In many cases, their parents and grandparents often also come from the area. The interviewees are therefore usually well “rooted” in their respective local communities.

The majority of the interviewees held an MA or MSc: 41 women and 16 men. It is worth pointing out that the men had tended to leave higher education with a BA or BSc degree more often than the women. The great majority of my interviewees, especially the women, indicated that they were among the first generation of university graduates in their families. Their parents usually had a basic vocational or secondary vocational education and had mostly been in working-class jobs as craftsmen, minor officials or farmers.

As for the interviewees’ own family life, the majority of women were married with children, a few of them had informal relationships and ten women were single. As many as 15 of the 29 men were unmarried/without partners. This result fits the documented tendency of young rural women to leave the countryside more often than young men, due to education and professional aspirations (Michalska 2013).

Importantly, nearly all the interviewees were in work. Most of them had found employment no more than 20 km from their place of residence, mostly in local public institutions (municipal public offices, cultural centres, social welfare centres, schools). Interviewees running their own businesses or family farms are not too numerous – nine people (five men and four women) in the case of the former and six (two men and four women) in the case of the latter.

6. Young University Graduates: Educational Choices and Agriculture

The interviewees had no significant preference in agricultural higher education institutions (HEI). The relatively most numerous group (about a fifth of all interviewees) were graduates of private HEIs focusing mostly on social sciences. Other, less frequently selected HEIs included: public universities, state higher vocational schools (*państwowe wyższe szkoły zawodowe*), public HEIs focusing on

life sciences or agriculture,² as well as polytechnics and other HEIs with a technical profile. Few interviewees had graduated from public economic and pedagogical universities or physical education universities.

The low position of agricultural studies among the interviewees' educational preferences is also clearly visible when looking at fields of study from which they graduated. The most frequently chosen fields included: pedagogy, special education, public administration, management, and technical studies, such as land management and planning, geodesy, transport, information and communications technology, as well as production engineering. Agricultural sciences (agriculture, horticulture, forestry and veterinary) were not among them. The underlying reasons in opting for these varied. In the case of a few men interviewed, selecting agricultural studies was directly related with their plans to take over a family farm and expand it in the future: "I think that university studies are essential, because agriculture has changed significantly, the pace of robotization in this sector has been increasing. [...] Someone who worked on a farm all his/her life, if such person tried to use a modern tractor, they wouldn't even be able to start the engine and get it moving" [8.Kalinowo_M.27]. However, a few female interviewees who were agricultural studies graduates foresaw their professional career not on a family farm, but in public administration institutions supporting farmers and the agricultural sector: "I thought that, after Poland's accession to the European Union, there would be many jobs related to supporting farmers in terms of funds and knowledge, namely in agricultural advisory centres, The Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, that they would need specialists" [2.Mokobody_K.30].

7. Young University Graduates: Professional Choices and Agriculture

As mentioned above, the interviewees describing themselves as farmers are not numerous, six of them altogether (two men and four women). Their farms vary in terms of size and type of production, including both small, ecological family farms and large-scale, highly modernised "farming enterprises". In case of the former, a spouse of an interviewee working on a farm is employed outside agriculture, whereas in the latter, both an interviewee and his/her spouse work on a farm. For one female interviewee, her ownership of a farm exists only "on paper". In fact, her father still does all the farming, but the property transfer was necessary in order to apply for EU funds for young farmers. The interviewee was focused on raising her daughter and did not feel confident enough to be able to truly take over managing the farm in the future.

² The selection of an agricultural higher education institution, however, does not mean studying a field related to agricultural sciences, as such schools offer also a variety of other disciplines.

Interestingly, agriculture and farming are present in the lives of over a dozen interviewees other than those who described themselves as farmers. Several men work on farms owned by other family members (parents, siblings) and combine that with a job outside agriculture. Other interviewees mentioned a family farm owned by their parents or in-laws, although they are not engaged in daily farm work. A few indicated that they help their parents or in-laws from time to time, when the farm work is particularly intense or when such help is requested as farm owners cannot do certain work by themselves: “Only sometimes [...] During the harvest” [3.Wijewo_M.32]; “We go there and help, during digging up potatoes, harvest, haymaking and so on. When my in-laws are invited to the wedding, they cannot tell their cows: ‘We are sorry, but nobody will milk you today’” [5.Kalinowo_K.31]. They help in farm work due to a sense of a family obligation, but they do not plan to become more involved in agriculture in the future. A few others use a family farm as a means to stay in the social security system for farmers (KRUS) while working elsewhere. The KRUS is highly subsidised by the government and therefore requires much lower premiums in comparison with the Social Security Institution (ZUS) covering everybody else but farmers. Several interviewees had witnessed the disappearance of farming activity from their families. A few of them mentioned that their grandparents were the last generation in their family cultivating the land. In other cases, the interviewees’ parents were the ones who had stopped farming. Often, such a process was seen as an inevitable: “A life in the countryside was different back then, it was different when I was a child. There were more farms and people could live off farming. We do not maintain our family farm anymore” [8.Krzyszów_K.25].

8. “Pulling” Factors

8.1. Farming as a Profession and a Source of Income

Only two interviewees, a man and a woman, are engaged full-time in farm work and agriculture is their only source of income. Both live in Kalinowo, where the farm acreage is the largest among the rural municipalities examined, and with their spouses they run family farms of about 100 ha, focusing on dairy (ca. 200 cows) and crop production. In both cases the farms were inherited within a family. The current owners developed the farms further and advanced their modernisation through investments based on the EU funds available e.g., for new machines. Their stories show the complexity of modern farming, requiring not only professional knowledge and skills related to agricultural production and breeding, but also laws and regulations regarding managing a farm and its finances. The male interviewee is a graduate of agricultural sciences who always knew that he would like to be a farmer in the future. The female interviewee, a law graduate specialising

in civil law and regulations related to agriculture, runs a farm with her husband, who inherited it from his parents. She chose her specialisation deliberately, because, back then, she was about to marry a farmer and knew that they would stay in the village: “today, working in the countryside doesn’t mean only working in the field or tending animals. There is a plenty of writing and paperwork, too” [4.Kalinowo_K.33].

In other cases, family farms where the interviewees work are much smaller (from a few to a dozen hectares), and therefore the income from agriculture is combined with other sources from outside the sector. Sometimes, various sources of income create a “patchwork” of different jobs and activities performed by family members (Halamska 2016). For example, one male interviewee is involved in a small family farm focusing on ecological production based on a small herd of six cows, selling milk and homemade cheese combined with agrotourism services. The interviewee runs it together with his parents, whereas his wife works in a private company in a nearby city and occasionally helps with running the farm and attending to guests. For others, combining different sources of income takes the form of a more “classical” two-job model, where one spouse is responsible for farm work while the other is employed outside agriculture. An example is a small-scale cattle farm run by an interviewee and her husband, who also works as a postman. This is reminiscent of the “peasant-workers” model well-known from the past (Gałaj 1964).

According to competent informants, the most successful stories of family-farm successions are related to large-scale and already prosperous farms: “When a farm is large, young people are more willing to come back and take it over” [12. Mokobody_K.40]; “I know a graduate from the University of Agriculture in Cracow who inherited a horticulture farm from her parents. [...] She took over a family business including flowers, vegetables, greenhouses, and she is doing very well” [11.Gródek_K.54]. A farm needs to provide a sufficient income in order to attract younger generation of potential farmers.

8.2. Farming as a Passion

Interestingly, some male interviewees involved in agriculture do not describe themselves as farmers and do not see farming as an important source of income. A family farm and agricultural activity are important parts of their lifestyle and family history, as well as the rural landscape. They work outside agriculture, but at the same time want to preserve it in their lives as well as local communities. The family farm they work on is not their property yet and, in some cases, never will be, as their sibling was appointed as an heir.

One example is a male interviewee, a professional fireman, who also works on a family farm owned by his parents. For him, farming is a passion and a relaxing

activity allowing him to put his mind at ease: “this is more a hobby than a job, because I am just helping my parents. I can escape from my stressful everyday obligations” [9.Świątajno_M.27]. In terms of a professional identity, he describes himself as a fireman, not a farmer. Farming, however, plays an important, almost therapeutic role in his life. Even though the farm will be inherited by his brother, the interviewee completed a postgraduate course in agricultural sciences and plans to stay involved in the farm in the future. Another example is an interviewee employed full time as a guard in a pre-trial detention unit in the city where he commutes according to his shifts. At the same time, he works regularly on his parents’ 30-ha farm. Farming is his passion and a way of showing his respect for his family’s legacy as well as rural traditions. He wants to develop the farm further and is thinking about applying for EU funds to modernise it. However, he would like to keep his city job, as farming itself would not provide sufficient income. Such tendencies to relate farming with rural traditions that should be kept are also reflected in some interviewees’ stories about other family members.

The part-time or hobby connection of young adults with farming was also observed in Northern Ireland. Even when the farm is too small to be commercially viable, farming provides them with a bond with the land and previous generations of their families (Stockdale and Ferguson 2020). A sense of comfort provided by “doing some farming” may also reflect the interviewees’ feelings of belonging to a rural space, a village and local community (Farrugia 2016).

8.3. Farming as a Family Obligation

In some cases, interviewees taking over or getting more involved in a family farm were motivated primarily by their sense of obligation towards their parents, the respect for their lifetime achievements and willingness to preserve a family legacy. However, such attitudes were accompanied with a genuine interest in agriculture or even a passion for it. Clearly, the interviewees were not to become family farm heirs against their will.

Nevertheless, statements indicating strong family pressure for taking over a farm, sometimes against a young person’s plans, were mentioned by competent informants. A good example of this is a story of a young man with ambitions in terms of education and leaving the countryside, who felt forced to take over a family farm due to a tragic set of circumstances:

He was always keen to study. He was attending a secondary vocational school. Back then, it was something, because only few attended such a school, most people went to basic vocational schools. He wanted to live in the city. But

then, a family tragedy occurred, because his brother had a fatal car accident, a brother who was to take over the family farm. In consequence, he was the only child and became the heir. He took over the farm after his father and grandfather [13.Mokobody_K.35].

However, despite the tragic and unwanted beginnings, the man in this case, now aged slightly over 40, successfully manages the inherited farm.

9. “Pushing” Factors

9.1. Farming as an Unprofitable Activity

According to many interviewees, nowadays, farming just does not pay off. The hard work it requires does not translate into a satisfactory income. One should either invest in developing a large-scale and highly modernised farm or not go into agriculture at all: “Hard work and low earnings, right? All the equipment is really costly, maybe you could make ends meet, but it would be difficult to live off it” [7.Moszczenica_K.25]. In several localities, such as the Gzy municipality in Mazowieckie or the municipalities examined in Wielkopolska, the low quality of arable land was also mentioned (between fourth and sixth class) as a serious obstacle to developing economically viable agriculture.

In interviews with competent informants, cases of dissolving inherited farms were mentioned. One example from the Moszczenica municipality in Małopolska was a graduate of Cracow University of Technology, aged about 40, who took over a family farm, but used it as a basis for developing a business related to the manufacture and sale of furniture: “He knew that farming would be a risky business, so he smartly used existing farm buildings and converted them into space for his new entrepreneurial activity” [11.Moszczenica_M.48]. The furniture is exported to Austria and, according to the interviewee, the business does really well. In other cases mentioned in the interviews, family farms have been given up by their heirs and such decisions have not been opposed by older family members. Other interviewees, especially from municipalities in south-eastern Poland, indicated that combining farming on an acreage of a few hectares with working outside of agriculture is just not worth the effort any more. In the past, a “peasant-worker” model assumed farming done by a wife combined with a husband’s employment in industry and his secondary involvement in a farm work (Gałaj 1964) contributed to the feminisation of the farming profession (Tryfan 1976). Today, it is difficult to live off just one “external” salary, many jobs in industry have disappeared, and women would be much less willing to farm. These results are in line with the above-mentioned modernisation paradigm highly accepted in Poland and other Western countries.

9.2. Farming as an Obstacle to Social Mobility

The interviews indicate a tendency to associate farming with hard physical work and low social status. A university degree is perceived as making it possible to find a job outside of the agricultural sector and as a vehicle for upward social mobility.

In some cases, parents were pushing the interviewees, especially women, towards a university education as they saw no future for them in the agricultural sector: “So, my parents run a farm, but they do everything they can so that I would not have to work on a farm. [...] The work is very hard and it brings little income, right? [...] it would be very hard to live from farming alone” [7.Moszczzenica_K.25]. This quotation is from an interviewee living in a south-eastern part of Poland, where farms are often small and fragmented. However, such tendencies were also visible in statements of interviewees from areas with a more favourable farm structure. This is illustrated by the example of a female interviewee from Kalinowo, the most agricultural municipality of the localities examined, whose parents prioritised the importance of her school education over socialisation to farm work: “You know, during the summer, when I had summer holidays and there was no school. I used to be more involved on a farm then. Otherwise, much less often, maybe on weekends, when I was at home, then yes” [4.Kalinowo_K.33].

In few other cases, the interviewees explicitly stated that an intense childhood involvement in agriculture resulted in their rejecting it later on, as one becomes more aware of other professional opportunities which are less time-consuming and physically demanding. An example of this is referred to in an interviewee’s husband coming from a farming family: “No, [he is not interested in taking over a family farm], because, since he was a boy, he had to do a lot of things there before he went out to school, milk the cows and so on. He did not have free summer holidays, because he had to work” [5.Kalinowo_K.31]. Such rejection attitudes began to appear in the post-war Poland, when living in a city and an urban lifestyle started to be perceived as alternatives within the reach of rural youth (Mróz 2008).

9.3. Negative Perceptions of Farmers

According to the interviews, mostly with competent informants but also with young university graduates, farmers are often perceived negatively in Polish society.

Their biased images circulate in the media, contributing to dissemination of myths and misunderstandings regarding the nature of today’s farm work, its costs, level of complexity, and the efforts necessary to succeed. In particular, the lack of knowledge of how cost-intensive modern farming is, distorts the farmers’ image as always dissatisfied, complaining and demanding more support despite

the constant inflow of EU funds: “What makes me angry the most is that when someone is not familiar with agriculture, lives in the city and hears that 14 or 16 billion euro in direct subsidies are transferred to the countryside, to farmers, a typical city resident thinks: ‘what do they want, they receive so much money’” [12.Kalinowo_M.67]. In relation to this, another interviewee pointed out that farmers’ work is not appreciated enough by the government, politicians and decision-makers.

Interestingly, negative attitudes and stereotypes regarding farmers are also clearly visible among the interviewees themselves. One interviewee, a successful large-scale farmer himself, pointed out that other farmers from his area are incapable of using EU funds wisely. They spend too much on consumption and improvement of their quality of life instead of investing everything in modernising the farm as he and his wife did: “We spent every penny on farm development and modernisation, while others were more focused on buying a new car or house renovation” [8.Kalinowo_M.27]. In other statements farmers are directly associated with conservatism, the lack of openness and aversion to novelty. Farming communities are perceived as very religious and averse to changes. “Demanding attitudes” were emphasised, especially by the interviewees from the areas where state-owned farms (PGR) used to operate. Their statements repeated well-known themes about “learned helplessness”, laziness and carelessness of their former workers, as well as their descendants.

9.4. Negative Perceptions of Agriculture

When asked about their municipality’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as the area’s most important characteristics, the competent local informants often highlighted agriculture and farming as obstacles to further economic development or one of the key reasons for a municipality’s poor economic condition.

For example, in Mokobody, a rural municipality in Mazowsze with significant tourism potential, agriculture is perceived as interfering with an inflow of tourists. A decreasing number of farms and no free-range stock in the area is perceived as making it possible to provide the comfort and aesthetics expected from a genuine tourist destination:

Lots of tourists from Warsaw come for kayaking. Many people gave up farming and there are not as many animals as there used to be. [...] In the past, each farmer had about five cows. They were wandering everywhere and left their droppings. Now, you can easily go to the river, barefoot, and you won’t get in anything. There are no unpleasant surprises, and the air is different, right? It smells different [13.Mokobody_K.35].

Several interviewees representing local authorities pointed out that the current system of municipal income provision results in a significant economic disadvantage for areas where agriculture predominates, and larger corporate entities are lacking. Such a local economy structure translates into less financial contributions to the local budget as agricultural land tax is much lower than corporate income tax. For areas where the soil is of a particularly poor quality, tax contributions to the municipal budget are even lower.

Moreover, the agricultural sector is rarely seen as important in terms of creating jobs locally. For example, modernised agricultural enterprises operating in place of former state-owned farms employ significantly fewer people than their predecessors. However, the owners or managers of the largest farms in Kalinowo and Świętajno municipalities often complain that local people are reluctant to work for them. As other authors in this volume have indicated, such reluctance can be explained as rooted in the peasant culture's sense of independence and dignity (see Krzyworzeka 2021).

Importantly, none of the interviewees, both competent local informants and university graduates, see agriculture as a strength or a potential basis for local development, even in Kalinowo, where farms are often large, highly modernised and successful. Local development is associated with attracting outside investors, especially industry, through developed infrastructure and a favourable legal framework, or developing tourism. Even the most successful young farmers interviewed were focused primarily on their own farms and did not refer to a broader context of the local economy in the area.

10. Conclusions

According to the results of the study, agricultural higher education institutions and agricultural studies were not among the most preferred options for the interviewees when making their choices about tertiary education. Moreover, selecting them does not translate into a willingness to farm. Agricultural higher education institutions also offer studies in other disciplines, not related to the agricultural sector. Even graduating from agricultural sciences, however, may only in some cases be linked with plans for farming in the future, and in others with planning employment in services supporting farmers or no plans related to farming or agriculture whatsoever. The interviewees rather tended to choose pedagogy, public administration, management or certain technical studies, such as geodesy, which they expected to increase their chances of finding a decent job, preferably in the local public sector (Matysiak 2019).

Only a very small group of interviewees described themselves as farmers by trade. Interestingly, however, more of them were in fact engaged in agriculture in one way or the other, working regularly on farms owned by other family members, helping them from time to time or coming from farming families, even though a farm no longer exists. The few who live from farming claimed that only large-scale highly modernised farms provide sufficient income and are worth the effort. Such claims reflect the modernisation paradigm, assuming a necessary shift from both peasant culture and identity towards entrepreneurial agriculture and agricultural entrepreneurs (Bilewicz 2020). This perspective seems to be shared by most interviewees, not only university graduates but also competent informants, who implied that the disappearance of small-scale peasant family farms is not only inevitable, but also necessary. However, other tendencies were also identified in the study. Examples of young male interviewees involved in farming but not perceiving it in terms of an important source of income are in line with phenomena described in the literature as “lifestyle farming” or “hobby farming”, associated with small-scale and non-commercial agricultural activity, in the latter case also something done in somebody’s spare time. It characterises rural residents (both local and newcomers from towns or cities) who are fond of living in the countryside and are willing to take care of the rural landscape and provide land stewardship (Gennai-Schott et al. 2020). This is also typical among rural young adults in Northern Ireland, who often perceive farming, regardless of its economic viability, as a way of remaining physically and emotionally connected to previous generations of the farming family, as well as their place of origin (Stockdale and Ferguson 2020). A strong rooting in the countryside and farming culture may explain why young people from farming families take over family farms, sometimes against economic calculations. They are aware of the unbroken line of farmers within the family, as well as a requirement that one child from a farming family should take over the farm (Kuehne 2013). Depending on one’s perspective on farming, the most important “pulling” factors would therefore be related to choosing it as one’s profession, a space to pursue one’s passions, and a way of continuing both family and rural traditions.

The most important “pushing” factors identified are related to associating farming with low income and low social prestige on the one hand, and negative social perceptions of farmers in general, as well as the agricultural sector. The low prestige of the farming profession has its roots in ideologies justifying serfdom, and, later, the negative stereotyping of peasants, visible especially in post-war Poland for political reasons but also following the systemic transformation (Bujak 2009). Since the systemic transformation of 1989, the mainstream media discourse presents small-scale farmers as hampering development, and farmers’ protests as

expressions of their “demanding attitudes” (Bilewicz 2020). The agricultural sector, especially in terms of small-scale farms, is depicted as an obstacle to the socio-economic development of rural areas in Poland and also the country as a whole (Bukraba-Rylska 2008).

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Pomiędzy pasją a odrzuceniem – postawy wobec rolnictwa wśród młodych absolwentów studiów wyższych na terenach wiejskich w Polsce

Streszczenie: Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza znaczenia rolnictwa w życiu młodych absolwentów studiów wyższych mieszkających na terenach wiejskich w Polsce. Omawiane są ich wybory edukacyjne oraz zawodowe. Jak wielu/wiele z nich ukończyło wyższe szkoły rolnicze oraz kierunki należące do dyscypliny nauk rolniczych? Czy decyzje te przekładają się na podejmowanie działalności rolniczej po ukończeniu studiów? Z jakich powodów młodzi mieszkańcy wsi z wyższym wykształceniem mogą interesować się działalnością rolniczą? Kolejny cel artykułu zakłada identyfikację głównych czynników potencjalnie „przyciągających” tego typu młodych ludzi do rolnictwa oraz „odpychających” ich od tego sektora. Podstawę empirycznej części tekstu stanowią 92 indywidualne wywiady pogłębiane z młodymi absolwentami studiów wyższych w wieku 25–34 lata oraz 27 wywiadów z kompetentnymi lokalnymi informatorami, przeprowadzone w 10 celowo dobranych gminach wiejskich położonych w różnych częściach Polski. Wyniki pokazują, że rolnictwo jest bardziej obecne w życiu młodych mieszkańców wsi z wyższym wykształceniem niż można by się tego spodziewać z ich wyborów edukacyjnych i zawodowych. Jednocześnie wywiady odzwierciedlają dominację paradygmatu modernizacji, kształtującego w Polsce społeczną percepcję rolników i rolnictwa.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzi ludzie, absolwenci studiów wyższych, wyższe wykształcenie, rolnictwo, obszary wiejskie.

