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INNOVATIVENESS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF YOUNG RURAL INHABITANTS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION¹

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the professional activity and social engagement of young rural inhabitants with higher education and establish to what extent their activity is innovative. The article is based on qualitative research derived from 74 in-depth interviews with rural inhabitants aged 25-34 with higher education. As the research illustrates, innovativeness is present in the activities of few people. Innovativeness is correlated with originating from a particular village, having family social capital, experiencing city living and specific motivations accompanying the decision to live in rural areas.

Key words

innovativeness, young adults, education, rural inhabitants

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse the professional activity and social engagement of young rural inhabitants with higher education. This article investigates the extent to which they carry out innovative activities, such as those that are unique for a given local environment and differ from the typical economic and social initiatives carried out in rural areas. The article tests the hypothesis that young village inhabitants with higher education can become “pioneers” that introduce innovations into their rural communities.

The issues covered in this article are important in the context of the future of rural Poland and their potential for development. Young generations are of key significance during deep systemic transformation as they have potential to support or even direct change [1: 122]. The extent to which young rural inhabitants wish to be active participants in such processes is an open question. The analyses are also important for the discussion of the significance of endogenous resources in developing rural areas. Using local resources creatively requires rural inhabitants to have certain knowledge and skills. Implementing concepts such as multifunctional or sustainable rural development, including creating non-farming jobs, and developing recreational or residential functions in rural areas requires such knowledge and skills. This is especially relevant if these concepts are to be implemented by local communities themselves in a bottom-up process [2]. In that context, young rural inhabitants holding higher education qualifications are a particularly important group for the future of rural areas in Poland, especially in the direction of development and creative use of local resources by rural communities.

First, a brief review of earlier research on young, well-educated rural inhabitants in Poland is presented, followed by a discussion of the research problem and methodology used to obtain the empirical data. After a concise characterisation of the young, educated rural inhabitants who were interviewed, the paper presents the results and analysis.

Young rural inhabitants with higher education – literature review

The subject of young rural inhabitants in the context of structural changes had previously been raised within Polish sociology both in the interwar period and during the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL). Studies before 1989 indicate an imbalance between students originating from rural areas and those from cities, mainly from the intelligentsia – a tendency existing since pre-war times and increasing in the period of the PRL [3]. The

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research also paints the picture of the countryside as an environment uncondusive to using cultural capital acquired by academic studies [4], or where such possibilities are subjectively perceived as unattractive [5, 6]. In the pre-war period, a university graduate of peasant origin usually became a priest or a village teacher, which meant losing affiliation with the peasant class [5]. During communist Poland, easy access to education for the masses, mostly at the primary, secondary and vocational levels, caused young rural dwellers to develop aspirations associated with city living standards. Most of them were striving to move to the city [6]. Despite the proclaimed educational equality and the introduction of preferential points awarded for peasant origin, the number of rural youths among students of higher education institutions remained substantially low [3]. Higher agricultural schools which were expected to become a powerhouse for educated human resources necessary for the modernised farming, breeding and production sectors were an exception. However, as was the case with other higher education institutions, graduates of agricultural schools from peasant families rarely returned to their villages, perceiving them as places deprived of prospects for upward social mobility [7].

Research carried out after 1989 has studied rural youths (teenagers), thirty-somethings with varied levels of education, young farmers and students of higher education institutions originating from rural areas. It draws attention to the fact that the share of those with higher education among young people (under 34) running family farms is increasing – from 2.1% in 2003 to 8.9% in 2009 [8: 206]. However, it needs to be pointed out that contemporary rural youths are only marginally interested in working in agriculture [8]. Research on contemporary students and graduates of rural origin shows that young rural dwellers tend to choose higher education institutions with easier admissions procedures. They also tend to choose courses leading to specific professional qualifications like teaching. About 30% of graduates originating from rural areas return to their home villages [9]. Graduates of the most prestigious higher education institutions² are the least keen to move back to the countryside. This does not result from unconditional rejection of the village as a place to live, but from a pragmatic belief that the knowledge and skills acquired may be put to a more satisfying use in the city [2].

However, there is not enough research on young rural inhabitants with higher education, especially people who decided to live in the countryside after finishing their studies. Even if we were to assume that there are few graduates of the best Polish higher education institutions among them, they will still constitute the local rural elite in the future. For this reason, it is worth studying them and their professional and social activity. The question about the innovativeness of such activities is important for the development of rural areas in Poland.

Research problem: innovativeness and higher education

Innovativeness means the ability of individuals, communities and whole societies and economies to create broadly defined innovations. It is conditioned by the resources possessed and the ability to participate in the processes of creating, implementing and absorbing innovations [10: 45]. Referring to individuals, Rogers [11: 260-261] highlights a positive relationship between innovativeness and level of education, as well as high educational aspirations and intelligence. These are not the only factors positively correlated with innovativeness, but the relationships mentioned above are some of the strongest. It can therefore be anticipated that young graduates living in rural areas will turn out to be capable of innovative activities.

To verify this hypothesis, an analysis of professional activity and social engagement of young rural inhabitants with higher education was conducted. The analysis was guided by the following research questions: 1) To what extent are the economic and social initiatives innovative? 2) What factors may be conducive for innovative activities of young rural inhabitants with higher education?

As far as economic initiatives are concerned, Schumpeter's [12] classic definition of innovation will be a point of reference extending to technical, technological, marketing and organisational changes. It can refer to introducing a new product, a novel production or sales method or opening a new market, among other things. This paper is concerned with checking whether the young and educated rural inhabitants supply their local communities with new products, services and distribution methods atypical of the rural environment. In the case of social engagement of young rural inhabitants, a theoretical point of reference is constituted by the cultural and social definition of innovation [10]. According to that definition, innovation is an idea that is

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perceived by a given individual or group as novel [11]. It is a vehicle for change in a group, institution, organisation or community, because the previous state of affairs is replaced with a new one [10]. Innovative ideas, projects and initiatives aimed at solving a local problem, improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of a given locality or addressing needs previously unnoticed will be of particular interest to this article.

Research methodology

The empirical data analysed in the text are derived from 75 individual in-depth interviews with young adults (aged 25-34) who graduated with a BA or BSc or an MA or MSc. The research is focused on young adults as this is the age when youthful aspirations are fulfilled, decisions to start a family or establish a stable relationship are taken and choices important for shaping the “life strategy” of an individual (location, profession) are made. It is a time of confronting one’s own expectations and perceptions with the requirements of particular life situations [13: 16-17]. The notion of “rural inhabitant” is not limited to people of rural descent – it potentially extends to people of urban descent who decided to move to the countryside after finishing their studies.

The interviews were carried out in eight purposely chosen rural municipalities located in four historic macro-regions (western and northern areas, former Prussian, Russian and Austrian partitions). This made it possible to account for differences, such as those associated with agricultural structure and traditions of social engagement [14]. The municipalities selected for this research are part of districts characterised by a relatively higher share of inhabitants with higher education within their provinces.³ Secondly, they include “agricultural” municipalities (with more than 60% of the municipality’s area being farming land according to the 2010 National Agricultural Census) and “tourist” municipalities (e.g. located in the vicinity of a nature park, nature-related tourist attractions, cultural or heritage monuments). Thirdly, all of them are located at least 80 km away from a city with a population over 100,000 inhabitants.

Two municipalities located in districts with a relatively high percentage of inhabitants with higher education were selected in each macro-region – an “agricultural” municipality and a “tourist” municipality, i.e. municipalities possessing the resources important for the local labour market and the concepts of multifunctional and sustainable development of rural areas (Table 1).

Table 1. List of rural municipalities selected for the research.

Region	Western and Northern areas		Former Russian partition		Former Prussian partition		Former Galicja (Austrian partition)	
Type of municipality	agricultural	Tourist	agricultural	tourist	agricultural	tourist	agricultural	tourist
Municipality	Pęcław	Walim	Gzy	Mokobody	Krzyków	Wijewo	Moszczenica	Gródek nad Dunajcem
District	głogowski	wałbrzyski	pułtuski	siedlecki	koniński	leszczyński	gorlicki	nowosądecki
Province	Dolnośląskie		mazowieckie		wielkopolskie		małopolskie	

Source: Author’s

Between eight and ten interviews with young adults with higher education were carried out in each municipality. The first interviewees were indicated by “competent local informants” (local authorities, village representatives (*sołtys*), local civil servants, leaders of local social organisations), while others were identified via snowball sampling. The research was carried out between June and September 2016 as part of a research project entitled “The role of cultural capital of young rural inhabitants in the contemporary processes of transformation of rural areas in Poland”. The project was funded by the National Science Centre based on the decision no. DEC-2013/11/D/HS6/04574. The interviews were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA 12

³ When creating the concept of this research, it was assumed that it would be possible to directly compare the share of inhabitants of rural municipalities with higher education against the comparative data for rural areas in a given province. When the research was being carried out, the data from the 2011 National Census concerning the education of Poles was only available at the NUTS-4 level (district or higher) but not at the NUTS-5 level (municipality).

software and subjected to qualitative analysis. The results of the research are not representative for all rural municipalities in Poland, but purposeful selection of municipalities for the research makes it possible to make generalisations limited to certain local contexts.

Interviewees' characteristics

The interviewees comprised 52 women and 23 men. About half of the men and women belonged to each of the categories of over 20 year olds and over 30 year olds. Most interviewees, particularly men, originate from villages where they currently live. Their parents and grandparents often come from these places, too. Therefore, the interviewees are usually well rooted in their respective local communities. Most women interviewed were married with children, a few women had informal relationships and ten women were single. As many as 11 out of 23 men were unmarried and did not have partners.

Most interviewees held an MA or MSc: 32 women and 14 men. It is worth pointing out that men tended to leave higher education with a BA or BSc degree more often than women. My interviewees were often the first ones in their families to obtain higher education. Some of the most popular areas of study included education / special education / physical education with a teaching specialization (16 women and six men), management (six women and two men), and public administration (five women and three men). 14 interviewees (eight women and six men) graduated from technical faculties, such as land management and planning, geodesy, transport, ICT, and production engineering. Only a handful of interviewees studied disciplines directly related to agriculture.

As few as one third of the interviewees (15 women and 11 men) moved to a city for the whole duration of their studies or a significant part thereof. The others graduated from local higher education institutions located relatively close to where they lived and commuted or graduated from extramural programmes of studies. A popular model included obtaining a bachelor degree at a local higher education institution (mostly State Higher Schools of Vocational Education) and then studying for a graduate degree at a larger academic centre. In the latter case, Pedagogical, Life Sciences and Economic Universities were amongst the most popular. In a few isolated cases, some more prestigious institutions were chosen, such as the University of Science and Technology in Cracow, the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poznań University of Technology or the University of Warsaw.

Innovative economic initiatives of young rural inhabitants

Nearly all interviewees work. Most of them are employed in local public institutions (municipal public offices, cultural centres, social welfare centres, schools). A few people are carrying out internships subsidized by district employment offices or are employed on replacement employment contracts. Two men and three women work on their family farms, and in two cases they also run an agritourism business. Nine interviewees (four women and five men) run or co-run their businesses (women jointly with their husbands). Ten interviewees said that they were considering starting their own business in the future and a few others mentioned they had had such business in the past.

Ten women and five men mentioned their own business currently being carried out or ideas for such initiatives. Most of them concerned new services: English language courses for rural children and adults, a small animal veterinary clinic, a motorcycle repair point, a dry cleaner with ironing services, a sexologist therapy practice addressed mainly at people with intellectual disability and LGBT people, an agritourist company and wedding planning. The interviewees pointed out that these services were clearly lacking in the local community and people were bound to be interested in them. Only in the case of wedding planning, one female interviewee had concerns whether the introduction of such services in rural areas was not premature and whether people from the local community would be happy to pay for something which they currently organise themselves. However, it needs to be pointed out that only five people already run the businesses mentioned above: a female interviewee from the Mazowsze region who launched English language courses, a male interviewee from Małopolska who has been successfully running a veterinary clinic for a couple of years, a male interviewee from Małopolska and a male and female interviewee from Lower Silesia who run agritourist businesses in their villages. The remaining interviewees talked about ideas for the future, while two female interviewees revealed ideas which they considered to be dreams rather than real plans (a care home for the elderly, a crèche).

A few people mentioned interesting experiences from their own businesses in the past. A female interviewee from the Krzymów municipality in Wielkopolska ran a snail farm together with her husband as subcontractors of a company that exported snails to France. Another female interviewee from the Wijewo municipality, also in Wielkopolska, opened a second-hand clothes shop called “The Old Wardrobe” in her village. However, her initiative was not met with a friendly reaction: “Generally, people from my village did not visit my shop. I later found out from one lady who is friends with my mum, and me too, to some extent, that she talked to people from the village and they said they were not going to visit my shop because why should they give me an opportunity to make some money, right?” [8.Wijewo_Zaborówiec_K.25]

Innovativeness in interviewees’ ideas for their own businesses is therefore about providing rural dwellers with services widely available in cities but often unavailable in their vicinity. Generally, most interviewees were not considering starting their own business due to bureaucracy associated with it, risk-related concerns or conviction that no service point had a chance for success in their localities.

Innovative social activities of rural inhabitants

19 men and 29 women indicated that they became involved in some activity benefitting their villages, usually incidentally, either by helping organise a harvest festival or some other local events, or by participating in sports competitions or campaigns aimed at improving local infrastructure, (e.g. campaigns of a group of inhabitants to renovate roads, equip the local playground, improve street lighting). 20 interviewees, including 13 women and seven men, declared that they themselves were the initiators of some actions in their local community. Some of those becoming involved in social activity (eight women and 11 men) were members of local organisations: Volunteer Fire Brigades (*Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna*) (men and women), sport clubs and hobby groups (men) and women’s organisations (women). Only a handful of the young adults researched fulfilled some function in the local authority: village representative (*sołtys*) (one woman), member of a village council (*członek/członkini rady sołectkiej*) (one woman and one man), municipal councillors (*radny/radna gminy*) (one man and two women), and district councillor (*radny/radna powiatu*) (one man). A few other people were considering running for village representative or a local election or had already attempted to do so without success.

The activity of 20 people (13 women and seven men) seems to contain innovative elements. This included initiatives introducing new cultural patterns into rural communities, such as those connected with entertainment and recreation or activities aimed at young people. In some cases, it was the interviewees themselves who described their activities as innovative. Other cases concerned involvement in informal common interest groups: winter swimming, runners, and cyclists (men). One female interviewee from the Walim municipality in the Lower Silesia province was involved in the organisation of amateur car races as part of “Racing Walim” group. A few other female interviewees talked about initiating free dance, Zumba or aerobics classes for local inhabitants. Another female interviewee from the Walim municipality, an employee of the municipal office, spontaneously organised a charity event to collect money for a boy with leukaemia: “I organised a kind of marathon with my friend who is a Zumba instructor, a charity marathon. (...) I knew that the money was needed urgently... In three days we organised a collection, at first my friend and I went door to door collecting PLN10, we printed out some donation certificates. And then, on the last day, there was this charity marathon here in the sports hall, a lot of people came and... Well, we managed to collect PLN5,000 in three days.” [10.Walim_Walim_K.31].

Some other interesting examples include organising a sports fan zone for the inhabitants during some major football competitions – in the local “Orlik” sports centre or the community building (male interviewee from the Moszczenica municipality in Małopolska); setting up a local association aimed at organising summer activities for children and intergenerational projects (a female interviewee from Moszczenica); organising a Polish-Ukrainian youth exchange that involved more than just school activities and engaged the whole of the local community (a female teacher from the Gródek nad Dunajcem municipality in Małopolska), and organising a console games competition with prizes (a male interviewee from the Wijewo municipality in Wielkopolska).

An interesting although perhaps not completely innovative phenomenon is the “takeovers” of traditional organisations and models of social engagement characteristic of rural communities by young educated inhabitants. In one of Krzymów municipality villages in the Wielkopolskie province, young people took the reins at the Volunteer Fire Brigade which had been managed by the same older men for years. Under the new board,

the unit's equipment expanded, a Youth Fire Brigade Team was created and firefighting as well as sports competitions were once again organised. Another planned project is to create an outdoor gym with the aid of the village fund.⁴ In the municipality of Pečław in Lower Silesia, a group of young women belong to a "Housewives" organisation based on the previous Rural Women's Organization (*Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich*). Their activities are typical of such an organisation. They include preparing a harvest wreath, organising events and trips for the rural inhabitants, participating in exhibitions of folk art and cooking competitions. In Wielkopolska's municipality of Walim, a group of young inhabitants organised a beach volleyball court as part of community action work using their own resources. In a small village in the Wijewo municipality in Wielkopolska, young rural dwellers feel responsible for organising the harvest festival. Opinions of the interviewees from that village were proof of their authentic sense of responsibility for taking over from the older generation.

However, it needs to be pointed out that about half the interviewees do not become involved in any local community initiatives. Among the reasons for lack of engagement mentioned by interviewees were lack of time (e.g. when having small children), lack of ideas for activities, and unwillingness to put up with unreasonable claims of some inhabitants.

Factors conducive to innovative initiatives

Those carrying out innovative economic initiatives, or were preparing to carry them out in the future, constituted a minority among the interviewees. As far as this group is concerned, higher education is not strongly correlated with innovativeness. Therefore, it is worth identifying other factors that characterise this minority.

The interviewees who talked about innovative economic initiatives tended to originate from the village in which they currently live, have experience of living in a city during studies and "family social capital" [15]. They usually indicated some family members who fulfilled public functions or were actively engaged in the life of the local community (father or mother, siblings, mother or father-in-law, aunts and uncles). Most of them are over 30 or approaching 30 and tend to hold a master degree. The interviewees who discussed innovative economic initiatives also have similar motivations for living in the countryside. Most of them feel closely connected with their home villages and cannot imagine living in a city. Women originating from villages other than those where they currently lived emphasised their husbands' devotion to their home villages. The motivation of these people to live in the countryside also included the wish to live "among their own folks" – surrounded by family, friends and neighbours whom they have known since childhood. Some interviewees said they felt obliged to look after their parents as they got older and continue their life achievements. Interestingly, most interviewees who mentioned innovative economic initiatives were also involved in local organisations and social activity benefitting their villages.

The interviewees whose social engagement bore innovative elements had similar characteristics. They also often lived in their village of origin, had family social capital, had experience living in a city during their studies, and were of similar age. In six cases, they were the same people as those indicating innovative economic initiatives. Motivation to live in the countryside was also similar, including connection with the home village and willingness to work for its benefit and an aversion to an urban environment. However, some of the interviewees tended to emphasise pragmatic motivations, such as better housing conditions and lower costs of living, finding employment in the vicinity, or losing a job in a city. Also, this group included more childless people and people without partners (although less frequently), while the interviewees indicating innovative economic initiatives tended to have their own families.

The significance of the local context requires a separate analysis. Most innovative economic and social initiatives were indicated by the interviewees from the municipalities in Wielkopolska, Małopolska and Lower Silesia. In both municipalities in Mazowsze there were only a few isolated cases. Specific features of villages may also be of importance, including historical traditions of economic and social activity of inhabitants, the

⁴ Since 2009, municipal councils in Poland have had the ability to create a village fund (*fundusz sołecki*), used to provide financial support for their sub-municipal auxiliary units in rural areas located within their territory.

contemporary context of institutions and organisations operating in a village, and the availability of various services.

Conclusion

In the light of the analysis of professional activity and social engagement of young people with higher education living in the countryside, no more than one quarter of them carry out or would like to carry out in the future some innovative economic initiatives or social activities for the benefit of their own villages. Young educated rural inhabitants rarely become “innovators” introducing new models of entrepreneurship and management, novel ideas or cultural patterns in the rural environment. Those who have such potential tend to have family connections with a given village, family social capital (models for social activity and engagement in the local public sphere), and experience of living in the city during their studies. They made a conscious choice to live in the countryside because of a strong bond (or partner’s bond) with the village or with family and neighbours, and they have a wish to act for the benefit of the local community. Other interviewees who also originate from the village in which they currently live but lacked family social capital tend to live in the countryside due to more pragmatic reasons. They are usually focused on their professional or family lives and often do not express the wish to become involved in other activities. A question remains whether the previously mentioned minority – young people who already fulfil or will fulfil the role of local “innovators” – will constitute a sufficient basis for creating a new rural elite capable of taking responsibility for the future development of their communities.

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