

Different dimensions of diligence in the contemporary Polish rural areas

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Abstract:

For farmers, work is not merely making a living but also a valid component of their identity, therefore diligence is a highly-valued trait among farmers. There are, however, many ways to realize this trait. We tried to understand what it meant to be diligent to our interviewees and what it meant to be lazy, and how these interpretations are realized through different duties and varying farming practices. The issues are discussed based on interviews with conventional and organic farmers. We also discuss the issue of diligence of women in farming, as women are often perceived and assessed differently than men.

Key words: diligence, work, values, conventional farming, organic farming, economic anthropology, Poland, agriculture, modernization, countryside.

Introduction

Diligence, understood in the terms of work ethic, is a very important trait in the Polish countryside, as farmers believe that everyone works for their own merit (Jaworska and Pieniążek 1995: 13-14). This feeling results in a drive towards self-sustainability based on hard labor (Bauman 2006: 23). However, for farmers, labor is not only means of making a living but also a vital component of their identity, therefore this trait is so highly valued in farming. Constant drive towards diligence is of moral value among Polish farmers (Emery 2014: 4), however, there are many ways of realizing this value. When conducting the research, we tried to understand what it truly means for our interviewees to “be diligent” versus to “be lazy”. In this article, we will try to present a few different, sometimes mutually exclusive, ways of understanding these terms.

The ethnographic study was conducted in 2016-2017 in Poland, in the Sokoły commune¹ and a few other farming communes of the south-west part of the Podlasie voivodeship. The area of our fieldwork is characterized by the presence of many relatively

¹Commune (*gmina*) is a basic unit of administrative division in Poland.

small and medium family farms. Most farmers uphold the family tradition of the farming and are very committed to their work as the farms are passed down through generations. In such farms, it is usually required for all of the members of the family to work there and it is not very popular to have another job other than farming, but if it happens, the person having another job is usually still obliged to help in the farm.

During five field trips, several days each, we conducted about 70 in-depth interviews, without a questionnaire, with male and female farmers of varying age. The questions we asked steered each conversation, we talked mostly about work on a farm and daily life in the countryside. Each interview was different as each of the interviewees related to things that were of importance to them or testified from their own perspective. Most of the interviews were recorded on an audio recorder or resulted in written field notes. The article is mainly based on the analysis of the interviewee testimonies but is also a result of the set of experiences, impressions, and observation from our fieldwork in Sokoły commune. In the words of Rakowski:

The field cognition is based (...) not only on interviews, conversations or records. It also consists of elements that earlier on. These are the changes that happen in the life of the researcher the during whole research process, introduced by the interactions between actors; the changes inscribed in himself or herself [the ethnographer] as ways of “understanding”, “paying attention”, knowledge of how to cognize, how to move around, what to say, what to listen in for (Rakowski 2011: 135).

The majority of farmers from the commune runs family farms specializing in raising milk cows which this article will refer to as conventional farms. The farms are relatively small and only some of the farmers have more than 20 hectares of land.

Only a few families from the Sokoły commune and the neighboring areas decided to run certified organic farms. The beginnings of this kind of activity can be found in 2004, the time of Poland’s accession to the EU. The most popular type of farming activity among the local organic farmers was the cultivation of the fruit bushes or mixed animal-plant production combined with agro-tourism. In this style of farming it is forbidden to use most plant protection chemicals as well as artificial fertilizers, which non-certified farming has been using extensively since the 1970s. Such farms undergo regular inspections checking whether they meet the standards and regulations of certified organic farming. Because of their style of farming, organic farmers have access to higher EU reimbursements per hectare of land or head of livestock than conventional farmers.

The subject of our research was rooted in economic anthropology. We researched the most important literature in this field such as Richard Wilk and Lisa Cliggett (2011), Stephen Gudeman (1990), James G. Carrier (2005). One of the key aspects of economic anthropology in Poland is related to changes that came with the transformation of the political system and their consequences. This issue has been followed by two researchers Elizabeth Dunn and Frances Pine. Dunn focused on the impact of neoliberal economy on the post-socialist Poland (Dunn 2008), while Frances Pine researched cultural gender issues (Pine 2002, 2007).

Our knowledge on the vital aspects of Polish rural areas in the past and current times stems from the works of Anna Zadrożyńska (1983), Danuta Markowska (1970), Michał Buchowski (1997) and Tomasz Rakowski (2009). One of the most recent anthropological studies of Podlasie rural areas is that of Amanda Krzyworzeka (2014) which presents various aspects of economic activities of farmers. What is more, for us, one of the most important studies related to Polish farming was also a work by Grażyna Jaworska and Witold Pieniążek (1995). It presented the ways of economic thinking among late 20th-century Polish farmers. From the perspective of our study, the issues associated with farmers' attitude towards work, including hiring people on the farms, as well as the farms' self-sufficiency and the economy were the most inspiring parts of their work.

Apart from the Polish publications, theoretical inspiration came also from two works on the reality of contemporary rural areas. Rob Burton and Steven Emery (2014) discuss the ethos of a good farmer in the farming communities of Great Britain. Both researchers saw the importance of esthetic criteria used to assess whether a farmer possesses the features of the farming ethos, such as diligence or competence. The acclaim for the farmers or lack thereof was the result of the appearance of their house, their farm and their fields.

Another major theoretical inspiration was also *Village Voices*, a book by the Danish anthropologist Perle Møhl (1997). The author conducted her research in a small French village, focusing on the local discourse and its role in the community. She observed that everyday life is a form of communication. Human activity and its traces can be interpreted and read, therefore they become signs. What is important is that there is no single denoting content of a sign. The inhabitants of the village reinterpreted the relation between signs and their meanings, based on mutual exchange of individual experience and local knowledge. This means that they could and did renegotiate the meanings of events, sounds, and elements of the rural landscape.

Diligence of conventional farmers

As Anna Zadrożyńska remarks, European societies refer to work as “first and foremost physical effort” (1983: 35). Contemporarily, within the farmer community, this sentiment still echoes (Krzyworzeka 2014: 143). Our interviewees regarded farming mostly as hard physical labor. Mechanization allowed to improve the working conditions on farms, nevertheless many duties are still done manually. Some farmers showed us their work-worn hands and complained about the problems with their backs as the evidence of their labor.

Diligence may be assessed not only by observing work as physical labor but also by looking at the results of the said work as signs which they leave in the farming landscape. When describing neighbor relations in the French village, Perle Møhl introduced the category of a “sign” (Møhl 1997: 135). In this case, weed-free fields or containers full of milk are the examples of such non-discursive social communication that allows other members of the community to identify a good farmer.

Therefore, a good diligent farmer can be recognized mainly for their crops. The adequate quantity, quality, and appearance are signs of a farmer’s diligence in the interpretation of our interviewees.

The most important criterion for evaluating whether a farmer is a good one is the efficiency of their farming, in tons of crops per hectare or liters of milk (Burton 2004: 201; Jaworska, Pieniążek 1995: 28; Krzyworzeka 2008). One of the farmers told us that nowadays it is a shame to bring only 10 liters of milk to the dairy (Note, Interview 8)². This would be a sign of incompetence of the farmer, lack of involvement in the farm, and as a result could suggest the farmer spends time on things other than taking care of their farm.

Good grain or corn of a diligent farmer should be of adequate height and thickness. As Hania³ testified, her family’s corn is better than that of their neighbors as “the neighbors’ corn reached up only to oyour knees, our was three meters high” (Interview 42). Moreover, good crops ought to be free of weeds. Joanna told us her husband was a good farmer, backing this statement up with the fact that “there’s no couch grass in our crops” (Interview 46).

Apart from the quantity of produce, farmers are also assessed based on its quality. “Better” produce had proper efficiency and met adequate parameters required by the dairy (e.g. fat contents, protein contents, number of somatic cells or bacteria). It is worth adding that the

2 Interview transcripts and fieldnotes are stored in the archives of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Warsaw.

3 Names of the interviewees have been changed.

Mlekovita Dairy Cooperative qualifies milk that meets their requirements under a category with a positively-associated name – “ekstra”. Worse “category” may be a proof of the farmer’s lower involvement in work or their weaknesses. It sometimes happens that milk is qualified to a lower class, so farmers earn less money on their produce. In such situations, farmers were more inclined to put the blame on the dairy, placing responsibility on erroneous and unjust control systems, rather than accept their own fault. Among the interviewees, the value of the produce should reflect the workload committed to obtaining it, so the quality of milk coming from a good farmer ought to be of top range (cf. Gudeman 1990: 145; cf. Jaworska and Pieniążek 1995: 28).

“Better”, in terms of quality, is also applied to the appearance of the crops, when measuring their height, thickness, regularity of shape or color. Esthetic appearance and high crop efficiency were also sources of pride for the mother of one of the village’s farmers, who told us that her “son would not sleep but rather think if his crops are growing well. He would work in the field as much as he could so that his work pays off well. He has the most beautiful grain crops in the area, they are really special. When the village mayor visited our village, he complimented my son on his crops” (Note, Interview 51).

Our interviewees assigned special value to produce that was characteristic of intensive farming. The abovementioned esthetic patterns could be rooted in the high value assigned to the economic benefits (Burton 2004: 209). For instance, high thick-stalked grain crops brings more profit than low crops. In this sense, the farmers preferred those components of the rural landscape which were associated with higher material utility (Olędzki 1963).

Yet another sign of farmers’ diligence is the appearance of their farm.⁴ Farmers who are labeled as diligent are those whose yard is neat and tidy, with paved driveway and nice-looking garden free from weeds (cf. Emery 2014: 4). Although income was not considered a direct criterion for farmer assessment (Burton 2004: 203), it was frequently stressed that it is the duty of a good farmer to provide the family with good financial conditions that allow a decent consumption level, therefore the efforts in the field and barn ought to be reflected in an esthetically-looking farm as well as in having modern farm buildings and machines (Bartulovic, Kozorog 2014: 96).

In such a small community, most families have known one another for generations. Therefore, each person cares about their image in the community. Our interviewees knew quite

⁴ R: You need to put in work if you want to have a nicer house, not some sort of old hut, all weed-strewn and looking just like a war has passed through (Note 11).

a lot about the material possessions and endeavors of other farmers in their immediate vicinity. Everyone could tell how many hectares their neighbors sowed, how many cows they held in their barns and what kind of equipment they possessed. Tractors, milking machines, appearance and efficiency of crops of the village's inhabitants were commented upon, sometimes also those of farmers from the whole parish or commune. Calling someone diligent is one of the highest praises, therefore everyone tries to obtain the best image in this respect. What additionally boosts this drive is the competition among farmers, which is based on comparing the abovementioned factors, i.e. time spent working, visual appearance of the farms, and the level of modernization.

Modernization of farms, however, requires increased involvement in work, so the amount spent on labor grows proportionally with the size of the farm. Higher pressure on diligence in farming is therefore also a requirement of capitalist economy and contemporary agrarian policy. The notion of "development" is highly popular in the contemporary countryside, the majority of the farmers we spoke to were modernizing their farms by purchasing new equipment, increasing the size of buildings, land area or head count and thus increasing production. During our fieldwork, we often heard statements like "people who raise ten cows do not earn their bread" (Note, Interview 51). This popular saying is referred to increasing production costs and farming policy that favors large farms. According to our interviewees, without modernizing the methods of production, a farmer would not be able to maintain a farm. One of the research participants, Teresa, put it in the following words: "Just like the world moves on, the farms too need to move on, need to develop. Stagnation equals downfall."

Farmers were afraid of being "left behind" and of the resulting "downfall" that Teresa speaks about. "Development" seemed to our interviewees the only way towards maintaining family farms that are threatened by "falling out". Machines, modern barns, a lot of arable land – according to the local inhabitants, these are not only signs of a farmer's competence and diligence but also the development. Thanks to these traits, farmers can feed, accommodate and milk more cows and therefore increase milk production. Such investments, however, are expensive. Only a few can build a new barn or buy a new tractor without applying for a loan. One needs money to pay off debts which additionally boosts need for a more intensified production. Development also needs to be constant, as larger suppliers are offered better prices of milk and they can also purchase high-protein feed additives, fertilizers or plant protection chemicals at lower prices. Moreover, their chances of receiving extra EU funding increase with

their development. Unease at the fact that merely “a third of the farms will sustain itself” caused our interviewees to compare their efforts at intensifying production with those of other farmers.

Diligence versus laziness

As already stated, in the area in which we conducted our fieldwork, the opinion of the community has impact on the activities of the village inhabitants. Some duties, such as keeping the farm immaculately clean, are performed from fear of being called lazy. We learned that there is a local word *legat* that denotes a lazy person who is not putting enough effort into their work and who has a lot of free time – or simply spends much of their time on activities other than taking care of the farm (see Rakowski 2009: 121).

Such accusations of being lazy are often addressed towards organic farmers. The dominant esthetic criteria and drive towards efficiency allowed conventional farmers to classify organic farmers as “weak” and accuse them of laziness and helplessness. Moreover, often when we asked conventional farmers about organic farming, they compared such farming to a form of a fun activity, ridiculing the work of pro-environment farmers, as such farms were seen as non-profitable. Some interviewees said that one can afford to go organic, provided that one has adequate financial backing, i.e. when such farms are supported from the outside by other family members or when they receive subsidies. It means that a farmer running an organic farm will not earn their profits with their own hands. Some of the conventional farmers said that organic farmers convert to the alternative methods of running a farm because they are lazy.

Conventional farmers, similarly to the organic ones, received payments from European Union per their land area and livestock head count, but such financial support was never treated harshly. Criticism was applied to those who seemed not to take farming seriously, despite receiving EU funding (see Buchowski 1997: 47). A recurring character of a “Marszałkowska⁵ Street farmer” can serve as an example of a farmer who will “sow anything on the plot, but does not care about it, not even enough to reap it” (Note, Interview 72). Such farmer is supposed to come “from the capital” to the countryside only to sow. Their work input and involvement are definitely lower than those of a true farmer. It is worth mentioning that it is only one of the viewpoints, represented by conventional farmers, while organic farmers perceive the issue of diligence in a different way.

⁵ Marszałkowska is one of Warsaw’s main streets, a symbol of a large city for many Poles (note from the translator).

Diligence of organic farmers

Organic farmers are the minority in the commune and its vicinity. We managed to meet and talk to seven families that ran their farms in this manner currently or in the past. They differ in their motivation for abandoning the convention and taking up chemicals-free farming. Some saw ecology as merely good business (high purchasing prices of certified fruit, aronia and currants in particular), others were motivated by their own health.

We wanted to present the beliefs of this vivid group of farmers as a counterweight for the dominant voice of the conventional farmers and show how important components of farming landscape, such as crops, can be interpreted in different ways by different farmers who have the same values (Møhl 1997: 141).

Organic farmers considered themselves to be good and diligent and they tried convince us that their crops are not noticeably lower than those that can be seen in the fields of their traditional counterparts. It may even happen that organic crops grow larger. One of the female farmers told us that a livestock purchase center owner stated that her livestock, fed on her own grown phacelia, reach the same weight as bulls fed on modified soy plants. Similarly, Katarzyna's meadows were not inferior to the traditional ones, grown with the use of chemical fertilizers (Note, Interview 76).

Organic farmers blamed laziness on the conventional farmers who, for their own comfort, used chemical substances rather than devoting more time to work. "There are not that many potato beetles. A few can be seen openly in the field and everyone says they need to spray the field, just like they could not walk around and collect those few bugs", said Krystyna (note from July 10, 2017). Similarly, farmers are more eager to use herbicides than to separate the crops from the weeds (note from July 12, 2017). Other farmers spray their crops to avoid working in the field but by doing so they affect the quality of their produce.

In this context emerges a second parallel way of understanding quality of the produce. Milk, vegetables, and grain, according to this understanding, are assessed based on healthiness, taste, smell, and other factors that organic farmers associate with the presence of "chemistry" – e.g. milking machine washing detergents, antibiotics, GMO-based feeds, fertilizers, etc., or lack thereof. In this sense, spray-free products from gardens are better, just like those that farmers remembered from their childhood years, as well as products of organic farming. Organic farmers were not ashamed of the appearance of their crops saying "do these poppies and cornflowers in the field do anyone any harm?" (Note, July 10, 2017). "I do not spray the fields and I know the crops will be lower, but what harm is in this grass?" (Note, Interview 76).

While for conventional farmers lower efficiency or presence of ladybugs or cornflowers in the fields were proofs of incompetence and questionable diligence of the owner of such crops, organic farmers saw these visual messages as signs of good farming. They realized that spraying the fields was a threat to ladybugs who feed on aphids so they chose to perform the physical labor of separating the weeds from the proper crops. Therefore, they interpreted crop appearance and efficiency in a different manner than other inhabitants of the commune (Emery 2014: 3): judging by the presence of specific pests and weeds in the fields, organic farmers assessed the diligence, forethought, knowledge and innovation of the farm owner.

Organic farmers had their own strategies of farming that helped them fight pests and provided the crops with the necessary minerals. Organic practice, however, requires extensive knowledge of the alternative methods and a lot of experience that no conventional farmers had. While most of our interviewees associated chemistry-free farming with backwardness, organic farmers considered their activity as precursory.

Although organic farmers had completely different beliefs related to ideal farming practice, they highly valued diligence just like conventional farmers, but they interpreted the activities that ought to be the result of such practice in a different way.

The case of female farmers

Diligence of women was often realized through other tasks than those performed by their husbands and sons. While referring to women's diligence, we need to take into account their household duties as well as their involvement in farm work (Pine 2007: 81). In this case, duties can be understood as a set of tasks that are performed for others (i.e. taking care of children, preparing food, taking care of the house, etc.), while farm work is strictly associated with the economic sphere (Wright 1995: 224).

A male farmer can, naturally, cater for the house and it is likely that some of the men actually are involved in household tasks, however, these are not tasks for which a farmer's diligence can be praised. According to the beliefs of the vast majority of the interviewees, there is a division between male and female tasks. This belief assumes that male tasks are linked to the market and making money, while female tasks are those that concern home, children, cooking, cleaning, etc. (cf. Wright 1995: 216; cf. Strathern 1984: 18). Many of our interviewees said that taking care of the financial stability of the family is still in the hands of the man (cf. Markowska 1970: 170). For this reason, a diligent farmer ought to take care of crops and livestock as it brings profit to the family and is considered as "hard labor", while his wife, from definition, should primarily care for the needs of the family members. Even though in reality

women often also worked in the field, operated the machines and performed farm activities that were seen as manly, our interviewees stood firmly in defense of this belief:

Let's be frank, a woman won't drive the tractor and mow grass, and her husband will not cook instead. He will work with the tractor or do other work in the field, sowing corn, reaping corn, [...] this can not be done by the woman while the man sits at home and nurses the babies, changes their diapers... Field work would rather be man's work and the woman, as a consequence, will stay at home. (Bożena, age 50, Interview 75)

Bertith Brandt calls this phenomenon masculinization of farming, associating it with progressing mechanization (2002: 188). Farming as mostly a male activity was described in the Polish context by Frances Pine (2002). She observed that even though Polish highlander women devoted much of their time to work on the farm, the work did not define them professionally, just like it did define their male kin. The presence of this phenomenon in Polish farming is also remarked by Joanna Mroczkowska, who writes that "male labor is slowly becoming similar to commodified labor which has its own financial equivalent, [while] women's labor is becoming something that Frances Pine called *chore*." (2014: 38).

It is worth adding that the borders are not always clear and the divisions are not always repeated. In case of smaller, often organic, farms that we visited, the border between non-commodified work at home and professional work that brings profits from the land was blurred. In such farms, duties of both women and men were associated with earning money while still remaining domestic chores, e.g. when the preserves prepared by the woman were consumed by the family, the agro-tourism guests and sometimes they were also sold in the local store.

According to our female interviewees, there is always something to be done on the farm, especially in the summer (cf. Wilk 1987). At that time of year, apart from cooking, looking after children, cleaning, and field work, women look after the garden, make preserves and manage the appearance of the farm. Many of our female interviewees stressed that they could not simply sit around and do nothing which, following Jarowska and Pieniążek, can be called the compulsion of constant hustle (1995: 15-16).

In the rural areas, it is popular to make vegetable and fruit preserves. We have not met a single housewife who would not prepare preserve jars for the winter. Women reported making 200, 300, and more jars, the record-holder told us she made 1000 preserve jars in a single season. Rural women make preserves mainly for their own families. Great amounts of jams and jars with pickles are handed over to friends, children, and other relatives. In the rural areas, it is mostly women that serve the role of the feeder of the family (Dunn 2008: 133-135). A good housewife needs to have her pantry full at all times and have enough food for everyone.

In this context, the diligence of a woman can be testified by the amount of food she has prepared.

However, when housewife's pantry contained mostly "bought" products, it did not give her the reputation of a diligent housewife. Home-made food is valued higher than that purchased in a store. The interviewees often complained about the quality of store-bought food and for many of them it was the motivation to prepare their own food and cakes. In the countryside, it is very popular to grow your own food and process it by yourself. Almost every farm in the countryside has a small vegetable garden which is grown for the family. In most cases, taking care of the garden is the domain of the housewife. As already mentioned, the appearance of the farm is a signal of the farming family's diligence and this feature is important when it comes to the small vegetable gardens. Presence of weeds could mean that the housewife is lazy and does not care about the surroundings of the house. We have heard numerous testimonies that vegetables grown for the family are not sprayed for weed nor fertilized with synthetic substances. Vegetables grown in those gardens are therefore, according to our participants, have better quality than the ones purchased from stores. The use of herbicides and non-organic fertilizers could mean that the housewife is lazy, as using them makes her work easier at the cost of the family's health, therefore most housewives pull the weeds from their gardens by themselves.

Diligence of housewives can also be assessed by the appearance of their flower gardens. One of our female interviewees criticized those women who buy flower pots with plants on the marketplace rather than growing and caring for the plants themselves. Not only the esthetics of the flower garden was of importance to the interviewees, but also the amount of work put into creating and maintaining the patch because, as they said, it constantly needs to be looked after. For an outside observer, each of the gardens looked similar, however, the village inhabitants could instantly tell which of the plants were bought and which were grown by the housewife.

Summary

We tried to show that in the contemporary Polish rural areas, the notion of diligence can be understood in different ways. Even though organic and conventional farmers held completely different beliefs about good farming practice, according to both sides a good, diligent, farmer, can be recognized mostly by their crops. Adequate quantity, appearance, and good quality are signs of the diligence of a farmer, according to the interviewees. What conventional farmers considered to be a useless field full of weeds, for the organic farmers was a high quality product and a sign of diligence of the responsible farmer. Elements of the farming

landscape were interpreted in different ways by different farmers but their assessment referred to the same quality – diligence. It is worth adding that such a strong stress on diligence in farming these days is also the effect of capitalist economy and contemporary farming policy, especially with the pressure to produce more and more accordingly to high quality standards set by the food processing industry. Even though many of the organic farmers we spoke to opposed such requirements, they still had to work hard using their unconventional farming methods to achieve income that would make it possible for them to exist in contemporary world.

Work in the farm is diversified in accordance to gender, so diligence of women takes on different forms and is assessed differently. When assessing the diligence of women, both the household duties and working on the farm (“helping” the husband) are both taken into account. The image is not, however, homogenous, as the issues of division of duties between genders as well as the importance of duties in the assessment of a social individual depend on the specifics of an individual farm to a high degree.

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