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Educational farms in Poland from the perspective of visual sociology

Abstract

This article explores the use of visual materials (photographs) as tools for social understanding and methods for collecting and interpreting visual data in the sociology of rural areas. The photographs presented were taken during a nearly two-year research project titled 'Educational Farm – An Innovative Form of Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas', aimed at diagnosing the resources of Polish rural areas that could serve as a sustainable foundation for the development of educational farms in collaboration with educational institutions (preschools, primary and secondary schools). The photographic documentation not only reveals the specifics of education on farms but also provides a basis for discussing the future of the Polish education system, particularly in the context of educational trends such as adventure pedagogy and alternative learning methods beyond traditional school settings (outdoor learning, outdoor education).

Keywords: visual sociology, educational farms, outdoor learning, outdoor education

Introduction

The illustrated scientific study *Glimpses of the Countryside: One Hundred Years of Polish Countryside* observes that 'a dispassionate, scientific descrip-

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tion of the changes that have taken place in the countryside over the last century can be precise, more or less exhaustive, but it appeals less to the imagination than images. These, although more expressive, cannot show all aspects of the transformations nor explain them' (Rosner, Śpiewak and Kozdroń 2018: 5). Inspired by the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, I decided to use visual materials to illustrate one of the innovative forms of diversifying income sources for farming families, which aligns with the concept of social agriculture – namely, the growing trend of educational farms in Poland. The methodological foundation is thus the methods of visual sociology, the general characteristics of which I outline in this introduction.

Douglas Harper states, 'visual sociology is an invitation to open our eyes to reality beyond a computer screen filled with numbers' (Harper 2023: 3). This is not a critique of sociological research based on statistics but rather an invitation to practise sociology differently, using cameras and photography, especially since photography has been 'democratised' through the easy, inexpensive and widespread access to visual tools in mobile phones. However, observation is a challenging process per se and depends on many variables, such as social position[1] or limitations stemming from the quality of the tools available and the skills in using them. Just as the best pots will not cook a delicious meal on their own, a high-quality camera cannot automatically produce good shots, too. A seasoned cook is needed in the first case, and in the second, an experienced photographer. Yet, without overcomplicating matters, quite often good intentions, a bit of luck and intuition – which, as Krzysztof Konecki notes, 'often brings new and valuable inspiration to empirical research' (Konecki 2019) – are sufficient. After all, visual sociology is not only about how we see but also about what we see (Harper 2023). The most intriguing feature of visual sociology is that it does not aspire to document or interpret situations involving momentous issues such as war, migration, climate change and many other social problems. Rather, it fits neatly into studies of the sociology of everyday life (Konecki and Kacperczyk 2020), particularly when sociological research can contribute to current social, health or educational policy. One such area is the educational farms that have been developing over

[1] Deciding factors during observation may also be age, gender, ethnic background, economic status, religion, worldview, etc., all of which can subjectively increase or decrease the distance between the researcher and the group.

the past decade, which not only address the issue of diversifying income for farming families in tune with multifunctional agriculture but also respond to the societal demand for education beyond traditional school rooms, especially in a natural environment, which farm-based education offers.

Firstly, by introducing photography into the field of sociology, we use it additionally for studying interactions, analysing emotions or gathering information during interviews (Bang et al. 2016; Dempsey and Tucker 1994; Serafinelli 2017). Secondly, in the social sciences, text is usually the dominant mode of presenting scientific arguments. Therefore, sociologists using visual methods face the challenge of maintaining a balance between text and, for example, photography. In this study, I adopt an approach aligned with the principles of dialogic reportage (Marcysiak 2021), which, as André Rouillé notes, requires time, mutual trust and deep dialogue. Only then does the subject become an actor, partner and agent, and the photographs authentic (Rouillé 2007: 211). Dialogic reportage is thus an expression of a life situation, and photography is a reproduction of not merely what is visible but also of what is hidden. From my observations and experience of working with a photographer during research, it becomes clear that photography always leaves some room for interpretation and, in this sense, is not an objective data source. However, its use significantly enriches social understanding and the context of situations, even if it is simply an illustration accompanying a monograph or scientific text. The very choice of black-and-white photography and the care given to its artistic form affect reception, perception and impression, which are subjective. In other words, photographs in the research on the functioning of educational farms broaden the spectrum of perceiving reality and strengthen the positive message about their role, or the even greater role they could play, in the education system. Therefore, photographs in this project can be used to interpret the reliability of educational programmes and their practical applicability to education outside the walls of traditional institutions.

Visual Research in Sociology

Erving Goffman (1976) played a key role in developing early visual images focused on studying rituals, social interactions in public spaces and gender

roles. Undoubtedly, Goffman's work became a significant milestone in analysing visual media, particularly advertising. However, the academic community, especially sociologists, was still not convinced about recognising visual materials as sources of empirical data similar to words and numbers, a cause championed by Howard Becker (Becker 1974). Since then, the approach to visual materials in social research has changed significantly due to the initial mystery behind a photo or painting created by an artist having gradually lost its aura, largely due to the mass production of visual materials (Zuev and Bratchford 2020: 7). Nevertheless, Dennis Zuev and Gary Bratchford argue that today, sociologists, particularly those undecided, should be encouraged to experiment with visual data in field research, complementing traditional methods of empirical data collection. They highlight many benefits arising from collaborative fieldwork, for example, between sociologists and representatives of other fields such as cultural studies, geography, urban planning, or the arts. According to Zuev and Bratchford, both sides can consider their previous work from a unique perspective, enriching sociology with photography and photography with a sociological context (Zuev and Bratchford 2020: 7).

Howard Becker advocated this in his essay 'Photography and Sociology', suggesting that sociologists should learn to see photographically, while photographers must learn to see sociologically (Becker 1974: 6). Zuev and Bratchford also argue that visual sociology is concerned with more than just an image-based world (Zuev and Bratchford 2020: 13), especially considering the widespread use of photography with the transition from analogue to digital formats and its presentation on the Internet and social media. In Poland alone, the number of social media users exceeds 27 million, representing 66.3% of the total population[2]. According to Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers, approximately 500 million photos are uploaded to the Internet daily[3] (this refers to all Internet users worldwide). Visual sociologists have considered this, seeing online photographs as, on the one hand, a valuable source of data on everyday social practices revealed in family, tourist or street photog-

[2] https://www.znajdzreklame.pl/blog/kampanie-internetowe/digital-2023-najnowszy-raport-dotyczacy-internetu-w-polsce/ [14.11.2023]

[3] https://gadzetomania.pl/internet-kocha-obrazki-wiecie-ile-zdjec-codziennie-wrzucamy-do-sieci,6704137262683777a [14.11.2023]

raphy, and, on the other, as an overwhelming abundance (Larsen and Sandbye 2014).

Despite the great technological leap that has caused this surfeit of visual materials, the goal of visual sociology has not fundamentally changed. It still aims to provide a scientific and credible insight into society through artistic and documentary visualisations, as exemplified by Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange. Their photographs remain etched in the collective memory of the nation, stirring consciences and often inspiring real social change. However, notably, their work was interventionist. For example, Hine's involvement in social issues led John G. Morris to write of him as 'a documentary photographer who almost single-handedly led to the reform of labor laws and the establishment of new rules for child labor' (Morris 2007: 60).

Sociological photography can also be successfully applied to observe the dynamics of social phenomena such as unemployment, societal impoverishment or homelessness. A work considered a sociological classic in this area is Douglas Harper's *Good Company*, which describes the American hobo culture. In the book's subsequent editions, Harper revealed the emergence of a new generation of homeless men, whose exclusion was influenced initially by the industrial crisis and later by the wars in which they had participated, such as in Vietnam or the Middle East. As he writes in the third edition, 'some of this new group of homeless men drove trucks, drawing patterns from the remnants of the old railroad hobo culture. Other homeless men lived in old cars or cheap apartments, but they were no longer the hobos I had met fifteen years earlier' (Harper 2016: 1).

Comparing the biographies of the hobos from his first freight train trip in the 1970s to the lives of the next generation of homeless people made him realise how much had changed since then, particularly in the context of the meaning attributed to hoboing. Harper's book captivates readers not only due to the artistic charm of its black-and-white photography but also because of the conversations with the hobos, who, the longer they are known, resemble romantic heroes more than societal outcasts. Yet, many of them carry the ubiquitous smell of sweat embedded in their worn clothes, mixed with the scent of cheap whiskey or wine, for which they earned money primarily by doing seasonal work in apple orchards. Consequently, *Good Company* became the first in-depth visual ethnography by a sociologist who shared the story of not only the hobos but also his own.

However, what is most valuable for a visual sociologist is the reflection on their engagement in fieldwork, where the researcher must learn how to distinguish between someone performing a role for a bottle of alcohol and someone who is authentically themselves; whom to trust when boarding a freight train and whom to avoid, and most importantly, how to describe such a specific group without stripping people, already stigmatised as 'vagrants', of their dignity. Such experience cannot be gained through traditional (quantitative) sociological data collection methods. As Harper notes, before his research, 'sociologists did not perceive homelessness in this way because hobos were elusive, and the typical sociological research method – surveys – did not allow for an insider's perspective' (Harper 2016: 2). One thing seems certain, however: the question of whether it is easier to describe a problem or to photograph it still agitates us.

A particular focus in my field research practice, which involves qualitative methods, is the visual sociological essay, still considered an 'unconventional scientific product' (Pauwels 2015: 11). While the reduction of printing costs due to digital technology today promotes visual publications, the visual essay is still regarded by many journals as 'too innovative a way of generating and disseminating knowledge'. In Poland, there is already a substantial body of scientific literature in which researchers refer to visual data, but despite interesting findings, the narrative is still predominantly based on the classical form of presenting research results – written words. Meanwhile, 30 years ago, John Grady and Luc Pauwels considered the visual essay a promising direction for scientific research (Grady 1991; Pauwels 1993). Further, it is particularly valuable that photography, by its nature, remains open to interpretation from various (often contradictory) perspectives (Parkin 2014: 12), and the use of visual materials can generate a synergy between distinct yet interconnected forms of expression: words, images and scientific narrative (Pauwels 2015: 139). As Pauwels observes, visual (social) sciences are concerned with not only analysing and creating visual data but also visualising and expressing insights in an innovative, more experimental and experience-based way (e.g. including art-based approaches). This article aims, therefore, to combine participant observation and photographic art in the analysis of the functioning of educational farms in Poland.

Educational Farms from the Perspective of Visual Sociology

The photographs presented in this study were taken during the implementation of a research project aimed at diagnosing the resources of the Polish countryside that could become a sustainable foundation for the development of educational farms in cooperation with educational institutions (preschools, primary and secondary schools). The research was conducted as part of the project 'Educational Farm – An Innovative Form of Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas', co-financed by the European Union under Scheme II of the Technical Assistance 'National Rural Network' of the Rural Development Programme for 2014–2020. The project's goal was to transfer specialised knowledge on conducting education for school and preschool groups in rural tourism facilities based on the agricultural resources of the Polish countryside to individuals currently engaged in or intending to run tourism activities in rural areas, those interested in educational activities in the form of an educational farm, as well as individuals involved in initiatives for rural development. The research was conducted in the five voivodeships – Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Lubusz, Opole, West Pomeranian and Lower Silesian – in four stages, using both quantitative and qualitative methods and tools (in-depth direct and telephone interviews, questionnaire surveys, as well as participant observation supplemented by a sociological photographic report and informal interviews at five selected educational farms, one from each voivodeship).

Since the research results have been published as a monograph (Marcysiak et al. 2023), which marked the culmination of the research, I will limit myself to reflections from the qualitative field research, of which sociological photography and the method of dialogical reportage (Marcysiak 2021) were integral parts. As André Rouillé wrote, 'the photographer and the people they photograph are jointly involved in realising this project, where taking the photo is only a brief moment and not necessarily the culmination of the entire process' (Rouillé 2007: 210). Dialogical reportage is practised by many photographers who, as Rouillé observes, 'have given up chasing sensationalism' (Rouillé 2007: 209). It was assumed that educational farms could serve educational functions more comprehensively than merely as 'educational trips' to a farm. The research was conducted at five educational farms, one each located in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Lubusz, Opole, West Pomeranian, and Lower Silesian voivodeships. The resulting collection of empirical data is

undoubtedly a valuable source of information for educational institutions, local governments and farm operators engaged in educational activities, as well as an interesting sociological phenomenon.

Much of what we learn is based on observation – what we see and feel. However, the sociological perspective delves much deeper than just the area of acquired knowledge; it also extends to the development of social skills and competencies, which significantly influence the recognition of the social world of meanings, individual identity and future social roles. Writing about the significance of childhood objects (toys), Waldemar Dymarczyk argues that 'the intensity and permanent nature of contact with "first objects" are a guarantee of retaining memories for many years or even a lifetime' (Dymarczyk 2021: 90). However, many of these objects are simply lost during moves or cleaning out 'useless junk', or are simply forgotten and abandoned (Dymarczyk 2021: 89). Thus, memories are equally important in shaping an individual's self, which are shaped by play, as one of the founders of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead, wrote. Toys may be lost, but other senses, such as taste, smell, sight and touch, also influence the imagination, reinforce personal experiences and become embedded in the memory of significant biographical episodes. According to sociological theory, play evolves into games, during which individuals learn to recognise the roles of 'others' and respond to typical situations (associated with the game). They also learn that they should not only respond to the behaviour of other participants but also that they can influence others' behaviour. As Dymarczyk describes, game participants learn that 'there are certain general rules in the world – values and norms, which do not stem from someone's arbitrary decision, but are the result of some common agreements' (Dymarczyk 2021: 92).

For many participants, activities at the educational farms provided their first experiences in areas such as relationships with people with intellectual disabilities, free interaction with farm animals (rarely seen in urban environments), assuming roles traditionally assigned by gender, and for older students, coping with the pressure of completing a task not determined by the hands of a clock, but by weather conditions, the responsibility for the welfare of animals, or preparing meals for other group members. The observed behaviour of students participating in activities at the educational farms revealed the complexity of the educational process itself at the farm, which, for many participants, transcended the dichotomies of rural/urban, permitted/

forbidden, responsible/irresponsible, independent/dependent and even able-bodied/disabled. Such a broad approach to education at farms captures the full spectrum of the multidimensional and complex phenomena that influence identity construction and the recognition of social roles and norms.

Visualisations of Daily Activities at Educational Farms

The operation of educational farms fits into the idea of social agriculture and involves activities that employ agricultural resources to promote or generate social services in rural areas, including care services (Marcysiak and Kamiński 2021) or educational services (Marcysiak et al. 2023). In Poland, 322 educational farms are part of the National Network of Educational Farms[4]. Anyone who runs an agricultural or agritourism farm can join the network, provided they meet a few formal criteria. In the Polish context, an educational farm is a rural enterprise run by residents of rural areas, where at least two of the following educational goals are pursued:

- education in plant production,
- education in animal production,
- education in the processing of agricultural products,
- education in ecological and consumer awareness, and
- education in the heritage of rural material culture, traditional trades, handicrafts and folk art[5].

The farm should also have farm animals or agricultural crops available for presentation to groups of children and youth participating in school programmes or offered as a tourist attraction for families with children and individual adult travellers (Kmita-Dziasek 2014). Additionally, the farm must have at least one covered space devoted to the conduct of educational activities. If the farm meets these criteria, it can begin educational activities. While many European countries have long-established models of cooperation between farmers and educational institutions, in Poland this remains a matter of individual agreements and is not subject to detailed regulations. If, in the future, education at farms were to be included in the national curriculum,

[4] https://zagrodaedukacyjna.pl/ [20.05.2023]

[5] https://zagrodaedukacyjna.pl/ [01.04.2023]

and the activities were co-financed by state institutions, certain regulations would have to be adopted. Before (and if at all) that happens, it is worth examining how the current collaboration between educational institutions and farms operates, the solutions in place, what is changing, and the prospects for the development of educational farms. To this end, five farms were selected, where the entire day's activities were photographed, and five narrative interviews were conducted with farm owners and group supervisors. However, I will focus exclusively on the visual material, attempting to recreate the most important situations.

As a report on educational farms in Poland observes, 'at the farm, students not only discover the origin of food but also experience the true rural working and living environment, broadening their perception of social reality with an ecological and economic context, thus enhancing their competencies as conscious food consumers' (Marcysiak et al. 2023). This thesis could already be verified at the first farm, where a group of primary school students had the opportunity not only to observe but also to participate in the process of milk production and its use in making butter and bread. First, the students went to the field, where they could manually milk a cow and taste the fresh milk on the spot (Photos 1, 2). They then churned butter themselves, which they later enjoyed with bread, also baked on the farm (Photos 3, 4).

Photo 1: Milking a Cow

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

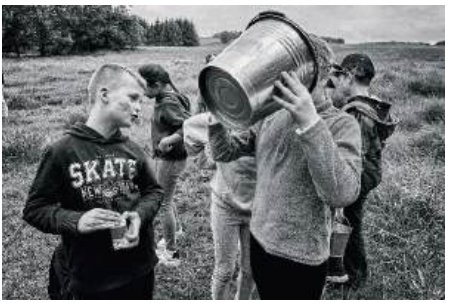

Photo 2: Tasting Fresh Milk

Photo 3: Churning Butter

Photo 4: Bread with Butter

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Although the lesson also served as a form of play, its rules were clearly defined and enforced by the hosts. The first rule was that participants were guests in someone's home, not at a playground. For example, when entering the house, they were required to wipe their shoes or take them off and put on different footwear. The second rule established guidelines for interacting with farm animals, ensuring that the animals were not frightened and that participants remained mindful of both their own safety and the animals' well-being. The group quickly adapted their behaviour to the situation. The initial excitement of interacting directly with chickens, rabbits, or even goats soon subsided, and the children took on the role of caretakers, feeding the animals, holding them gently, or carefully letting them roam around the pen (Photos 5–8).

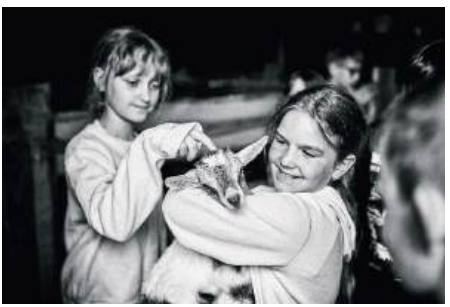

Photo 5: In the goat pen

Photo 6: A grown chick

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Photo 7: In the rabbit pen

Photo 8: Feeding the goats

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

In a sense, a more serious lesson is imparted to students during the week-long agricultural internships at the Juchowo Farm, a large-scale, biodynamic farm run by the Stanisław Karłowski Foundation, whose mission is to revitalise and heal the social organism based on biodynamic agriculture, following the principle 'healthy soil – healthy plants – healthy animals – healthy people'. Besides environmental protection, landscape development and scientific research, one of the farm's key areas of focus is education. The farm specialises in the breeding and raising of dairy and meat cattle, including Holstein-Friesian, Swiss Brown and Polish Red breeds. The herd numbers 700 heads, including 360 dairy cows, and the farm spans 1,900 hectares, of which 1,400 hectares are arable land, 5 hectares are dedicated to vegetable gardens, 3 hectares to herb gardens, 340 hectares to peat meadows, and 140 hectares represent forests, woodlands and wasteland.

The internships at this farm for even primary school students have several dimensions. First, the group is divided into four smaller teams, each assigned separate tasks and roles. One team spends the day cleaning and caretaking in the calf barn. Their tasks include cleaning the barn (Photo 9) and delivering fresh milk for the calves using what they call the 'taxi' (Photo 10). The students perform all tasks independently, though under the supervision of an assigned mentor.

Photo 9: Cleaning tasks in the calf barn

Photo 10: The 'taxi' delivering milk for the calves

Photo 11: Cleaning tasks in the milking hall

Photo 12: Cleaning tasks in the milking hall

Photo 13: Weeding the garlic crop

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Photo 14: Kitchen assistances

The second group's tasks are in the milking hall, where they clean up after each group of cows, from which milk is mechanically extracted. A total of 32 cows are brought into the milking hall at a time, and the entire process takes several hours, as the dairy herd consists of 320 cows. At the end of the daily milking cycle, the hall must be thoroughly cleaned, including all equipment (Photos 11, 12). The third group, meanwhile, works in the field, learning tasks such as weeding garlic and tending greenhouse crops (Photo 13). The fourth and final group performs cleaning duties in the dining hall, social rooms and accommodations and assists in the kitchen by preparing meals for not only themselves but also other farm workers (Photo 14). Behind this lesson lies an important message, demonstrating how modern agriculture can be reconciled with environmental protection and the welfare of farm animals, even in a large herd. Some farmers believe there is a widespread negative perception of the environmental impacts of large-scale farming and mass livestock breeding. There are no published studies that have proven this thesis, but this opinion is often expressed by farmers during meetings organised as part of training programmes, for example, in Agricultural Advisory Centres. Additionally, this view frequently appears in descriptions of the concept of educational farms, which have been in operation for much longer in Western Europe. This image can be changed through direct experience of working on such a farm and reflecting on modern food production and the specifics of biodynamic farming. Students not only interact with each other and the farm animals but also assume roles and share tasks, which strengthens their relationships and teaches effective teamwork based on responsibility and collaboration.

The next educational farm focuses on outdoor games that develop sensory abilities. These activities are not just chemistry lessons but a form of therapy too, in which no farm animals are involved. Instead, it is only the students, their supervisors and the facilitators employed at the farm. These activities fit perfectly into the idea of adventure pedagogy and alternative methods of education beyond the school walls (outdoor learning, outdoor education). The group solves puzzles, navigates obstacle courses, discovers the properties of mixed substances during chemistry experiments, and designs and builds wooden toys. All activities are based on the necessity of collaboration within the group and independently solving the challenges presented to them (Photos 15, 16).

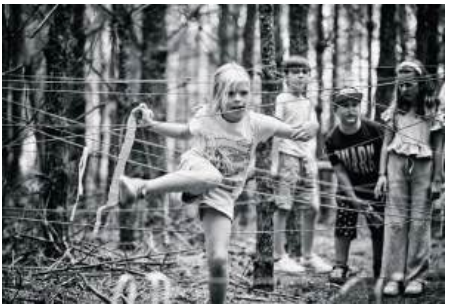

Photo 15: Outdoor game on the sensory trail

Photo 16: Chemistry experiment

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Each farm also provides a designated play area, usually a playground with a jungle gym, a volleyball or soccer field, or a park with toy cars, bouncing balls and other equipment. Play is an integral part of education, as it allows children to release the tension resulting from having to focus during lessons. It also plays a significant role in a child's development, enhancing cognitive processes and enabling the acquisition of social skills through group play, essential for everyday functioning (Photos 17–20).

Photo 17: Jungle gym in the educational farm

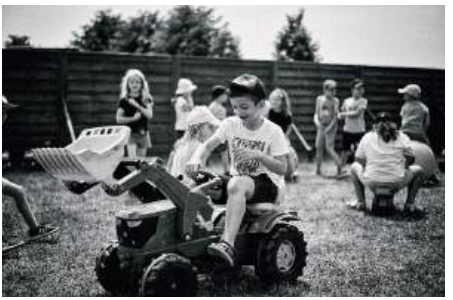

Photo 18: Mini tractor

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Photo 19: Playing on bouncing balls

Photo 20: Go-karts

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Playtime for the children also provides their supervisors an opportunity to rest for a moment. Although they do not have to personally participate in the organised activities for the students, supervisors still oversee them throughout the trip. For educators, activities at the educational farm offer an additional opportunity to observe the social behaviours of their students outside the school environment, in a setting different from the classroom, and also to foster good, or even better, relationships with their pupils (Photos 21, 22).

Photo 21: Flour fight

Photo 22: We are all winners

Photographer: Dariusz Bareya 2023

Summary

If we subscribe to Cohen's view that 'people are, in a way, passive in their relationships with culture: they receive it, pass it on, express it, but do not create it' (Cohen 2023: 66), then indubitably, education at the farm is a unique opportunity to 'play' and 'engage' in assigning (discovering) new meanings to concepts such as freedom, authenticity, individuality, tolerance and cooperation, which are the foundation of civil society. The educational farm is not entirely free from imposing meanings, but uniquely, it provides children and young people with the tools to assign meanings, especially in situations where, for example, they are forced to find a common language through action. Observing and analysing these interactions also brings another cognitive context, namely insight into the discourse about the vitality of the countryside in its social, economic and cultural facets, at a time when there is talk of the 'exhaustion of the idea of rural renewal' and the decline of the countryside in its traditional form (Hałasiewicz 2023), as well as the crisis of the countryside and its vulnerability to globalisation processes (Błąd 2023).

Soon, these problems are expected to be addressed by new development directions such as 'smart villages' or 'rural resilience' (Zajda 2023; Błąd 2023), which aim to fortify and prepare rural areas for both the necessities of modernisation and the unpredictable. The promise of such changes is enough of a stimulus for visual sociologists to focus on these processes with their full arsenal of visual tools, among which (and this is my opinion) photography remains an effective tool. From the beginning, sociological photography has maintained the same power to document what the world looks like at a specific place and time. As Howard Becker observes, systematic data collection involves 'leveling the playing field for each case, including atypical ones' (Becker 2018: 118). For me, combining sociology with photography is not just a mental exercise but, above all, a tool that enables the full utilisation of the potential of social research in fieldwork, as exemplified by the above collection of photographs from research on educational farms in Poland (see also Marcysiak 2024).

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