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# THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY GRADUATES RETURNING TO RURAL AREAS TO LIVE IN THEIR FAMILY HOME

POWRÓT NA WIEŚ DO DOMU RODZINNEGO: DOŚWIADCZENIA  
ABSOLWENTEK STUDIÓW WYŻSZYCH

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**Abstract:**

The article examines the return of young women with higher education to their familial homes in rural areas in Poland. The present study seeks to analyse the motives for these returns, changes in family relationships and new social roles taken up by returning graduates in their family environment. The present study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilising semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of ten female graduates from Poznań universities. These are graduates who earned master's degrees and then returned to their familial homes in rural areas. The analysis revealed that the decisions to return were complex and could be categorised into three distinct types: choice, necessity and life strategy. The factors prompting their migration away from urban areas primarily encompass a sense of loneliness and exhaustion with the urban lifestyle, as well as the conviction that the local labour market in their home locality offers more convenient employment opportunities. Conversely, the respondents cited reasons such as the pursuit of tranquillity and connection with natural surroundings, along with the proximity of family and life partners, as motivating factors in their decision to repatriate to rural areas. Furthermore, the respondents frequently assumed novel roles within the familial environment, encompassing roles such as 'educators' and supporters of their parents. In certain instances, the return also helped to strengthen family bonds, although it was not uncommon for this to be accompanied by challenges pertaining to worldview. The limitations of the study include the absence of diverse experiences in terms of gender and the lack of the perspective of family members.

**Keywords:**

Return Migration, Migration of Higher Education Graduates, Cultural Capital, Social Relations.

**Abstrakt:**

Artykuł dotyczy zjawiska migracji powrotnych młodych kobiet z wyższym wykształceniem do rodzinnych obszarów wiejskich w Polsce. Analizowane są motywy tych powrotów, przemiany w relacjach rodzinnych oraz nowe role społeczne podejmowane przez powracające absolwentki w środowisku rodzinnym. Badanie miało charakter jakościowy – przeprowadzono częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady pogłębione z 10 absolwentkami uczelni poznańskich, które – po uzyskaniu tytułu zawodowego magistra – powróciły do domu rodzinnego na wsi. Analiza wskazała, że decyzje o powrocie miały złożony charakter i można było je podzielić na trzy typy: wybór, konieczność oraz strategia życiowa. Czynnikiem wypychającym z miasta było przede wszystkim poczucie osamotnienia i zmęczenia miejskim stylem życia, a także przekonanie, że lokalny rynek pracy w pobliżu rodzinnej miejscowości oferuje bardziej dogodne możliwości zatrudnienia. Z kolei do powrotu na wieś skłaniały respondentki takie czynniki, jak: potrzeba spokoju i kontakt z naturą oraz bliskość rodziny i partnera życiowego. Ponadto, respondentki pełniły często nowe role w środowisku rodzinnym, m.in. jako „edukatorki” i osoby wspierające rodziców. Powrót też w niektórych przypadkach sprzyjał pogłębieniu więzi rodzinnych, a czasami wiązał się z wyzwaniem na tle światopoglądowym. Ograniczenia badania obejmują m.in. brak zróżnicowanych doświadczeń pod względem płci oraz brak perspektywy członków rodziny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** migracja powrotna, migracja absolwentów studiów wyższych, kapitał kulturowy, relacje społeczne.

## Introduction

Spatial mobility is a perennial feature of human history (Castells & Miller, 2011). People migrate for various reasons, and the nature and intensity of their movements changes over time (Wójcik-Żołądek, 2014). One basic distinction within migration is between internal and external migration. This article examines internal migration among university graduates who left their familial rural areas to pursue higher education at an academic centre in Poland, subsequently to return after obtaining professional qualifications. Returning to one's parents after leaving the family home is referred to in the literature as the 'boomerang effect' (Mortelmans et al., 2020), and has been analysed from several perspectives in research, including labour market conditions (Albanesi et al., 2022), housing problems (Arundel & Lennartz, 2017), mental health, and economic indicators (Sandberg-Thoma et al., 2015).

The study had two objectives. The first was to identify the factors that push university graduates out of cities and attract them back to their family homes in rural areas. The second objective focused on identifying differences in cultural and educational capital between graduates and their parents, and understanding how these differences relate to their experiences, values and aspirations, as well as the process of adapting to life in rural

areas after completing higher education. Together, these two research objectives form an analytical framework that provides a comprehensive view of return migration among university graduates.

## Theoretical foundations

The analysis of return migration among university graduates is based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and social role theory, as well as the push-pull model.

According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, mechanisms for transmitting values, norms, and social and cultural capital from one generation to the next are of paramount importance. The family plays a particularly important role in this process, as "the culture instilled does not encounter any resistance from any previous habitus or culture" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006, p. 30). The habitus formed during early childhood determines how an individual functions within various social spaces, or 'fields' (Bukowska et al., 2013), where competition for resources and power occurs (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2006). A key element of habitus is cultural capital, which is understood as a set of linguistic competencies, knowledge, and skills acquired in both the family and institutional education. Nevertheless, "the key stage of socialisation, which largely determines

the resources of cultural capital and the predisposition to multiply it, and thus the habitus, takes place in the family” (Zarycki, 2009, p. 14). Therefore, the family is the primary determinant of the level of capital possessed, acting as the ‘donor’ of the primary habitus—the most durable and unchanging form of habitus (Jurczak-Morris, 2017, p. 190).

Erving Goffman (2000) used theatrical terminology to describe social interactions. He used concepts such as performance (the presentation of one’s personality on stage), backstage (an area reserved for certain individuals where they can shed and prepare for their roles), and audience (observers or spectators). People often modify the way they present themselves to an audience depending on the social context. They care about acceptance and maintaining a positive image, which is why they prepare for a role in order to meet others’ expectations (Rączy & Mirek-Rogowska, 2021). One of the key elements of social performance is the facade, which is understood as a set of means that enable the performance of a given role. This consists of two components: ‘decoration’, which are props that emphasise the significance of the situation or the status of the individual; and ‘personal façade’, which are the means of expression associated with the performer (e.g. facial expressions, appearance, manner of speaking, clothing or posture). When returning to their familial rural area after completing their studies, individuals face the challenge of reintegrating into the local social and family structures. From the perspective of social role theory, in such a situation, a social actor may adopt various self-presentation strategies, emphasising both their education and innovative approach while maintaining ties with local traditions and rural values. This process requires flexible adaptation to the norms and expectations of the environment, which can affect how one negotiates one’s identity and position in the community. From a dramatic perspective, social interactions can be viewed as an ongoing process of adapting

to prevailing rules and group roles. In this process, individuals behave like actors on stage, adapting their behaviour to the social context (Ćwiklińska-Surdyk & Surdyk, 2012).

In the context of internal and external migration, the factors that motivate individuals to change their place of residence are of key importance. In 1966, Everett Lee proposed that the decision to migrate is influenced by various factors, including push and pull factors, as well as intervening obstacles and personal considerations. Push factors encompass conditions that force individuals to leave their homes, while pull factors attract people to specific locations (Urbański, 2022).

## Methodology

The study attempted to address the following research question: What push and pull factors influence university graduates’ decisions to return to their family homes in rural areas, and how do differences in cultural and educational capital between them and their parents affect their experiences, values, aspirations, and adaptation to rural life? Data were collected between July and September 2024 through semi-structured, in-depth biographical interviews. A non-probability sample was used, and respondents were selected based on the following criteria:

- (a) they completed full-time studies (Bachelor’s, Engineering, Master’s or Integrated Master’s Degree) in Poznań and obtained a professional qualification in accordance with the education system;
- (b) during their studies, they lived away from their family home (in a dormitory, rented room, flat, or other accommodation), representing migration from rural to urban areas for the duration of their studies;
- (c) after completing their studies, they returned to their family home, which was their main place of residence at the time of the survey—migration

- from the city to a rural area (i.e. to their family home);
- (d) their parents or guardians did not have higher education.

Participants for the study were recruited via social media. Initial selection was based on an on-line form that collected basic data on educational background and migration. Out of 18 applicants, ten women (all graduates) were selected for the study. The interviews were conducted remotely. Each interview lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. The respondents were graduates in a variety of fields of study from universities in Poznań, enabling a wide range of experiences relating to adaptation to city life and resettlement in rural areas to be considered.

## Results

When choosing a university city, the respondents were primarily guided by practical considerations, including geographical proximity to their familial rural area. At the same time, they all emphasised that continuing their education at a higher level was obvious and desirable for them; it was the next natural step in their lives, resulting from their high academic performance and educational ambitions, as well as their desire to leave the rural environment, which they perceived as being unfavourable for educational and personal development. Despite their initial enthusiasm about starting their studies and moving to the city, the respondents experienced loneliness and found it difficult to adapt. Support from their families was important during this period. They maintained regular contact with their loved ones and often visited their family homes. Most of the female graduates (eight)<sup>1</sup> made the decision to return home just before they presented their

master's thesis or immediately after obtaining their professional qualification. One graduate returned home more than a year after completing her medical studies, while another lived in Poznań for several years after completing her thesis before returning to her family home.

An analysis of the respondents' value system revealed that aspects such as family, religion, diligence, respect for work and education, and celebrating holidays and traditions together were particularly important in their family homes. Additionally, three respondents demonstrated significant family involvement in local communities, including organising festivals and harvest festivals, as well as doing volunteer work. In two cases, this involvement was intergenerational. All of the respondents emphasised that their value system, shaped in their family environment, remained unchanged despite their experience of educational migration. However, living in Poznań provided them with the opportunity to develop their passions and interests, participate actively in cultural events, and embrace cultural diversity. Experiencing multiculturalism changed the respondents' perception of 'otherness', particularly in the context of interactions with people of other nationalities.

Analysis of the interviewees' migration histories reveals unique and often highly personal reasons for their decision to return to their familial rural area, including health issues (1), relationship issues (3), and a desire to support their households (3). On the other hand, certain common elements in these decisions can be identified: longing for a peaceful rural lifestyle (7); the possibility of finding employment close to family (4); economic circumstances (3); and the impact of Covid-19 (2). In the next stage, the main factors pushing the respondents out of the city and attracting them back to rural areas were identified using the push-pull model. These factors are summarised in Figure 1.

The factors pushing respondents out of the city include the feeling of loneliness and fatigue

<sup>1</sup> The number of female respondents (n=10) is given in brackets.



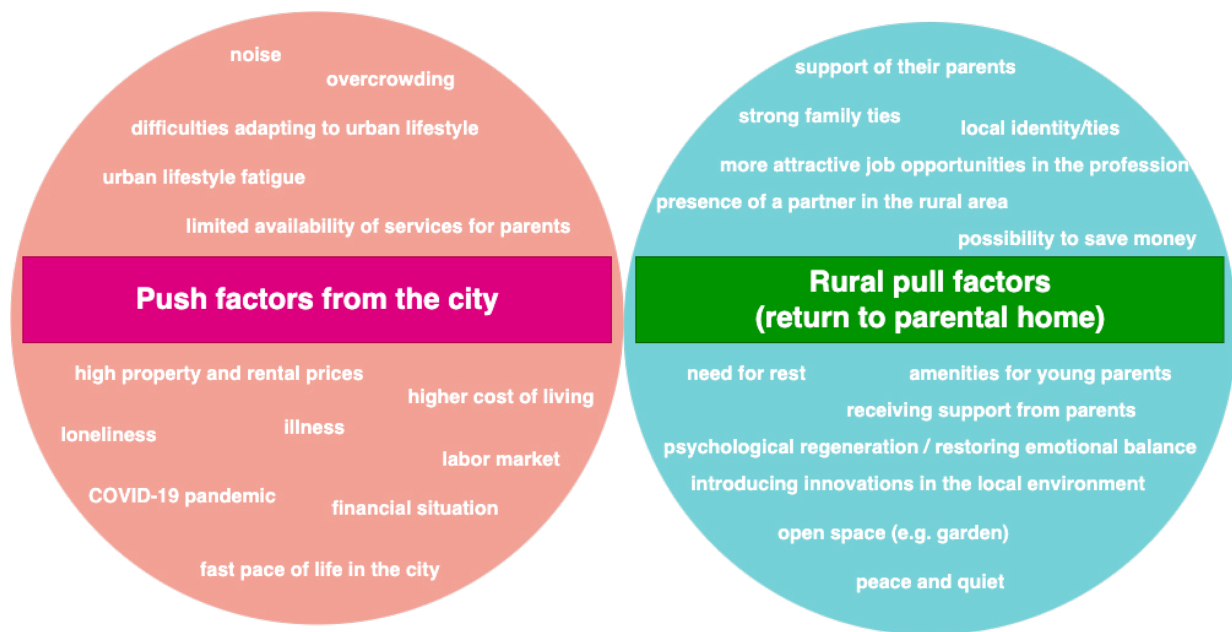


Figure 1. Push and pull factors in return migration of university graduates to rural areas

Source: Own study.

associated with urban life, as well as the belief that the local labour market near their home village offers more convenient and stable employment opportunities. Conversely, respondents were motivated to return to rural areas by factors such as the desire for peace and contact with nature, the prospect of reducing everyday expenses, proximity to family and partners, and the aspiration to drive change and innovation in the local rural community.

The push-pull model was applied to the individual migration experiences of the respondents, resulting in the development of three analytical categories to describe the nature and determinants of the decision to return to rural areas: choice (3), necessity (3), and life strategy (4). Three respondents were assigned to the 'choice' category—they made conscious decisions to return to the rural area, dictated by their own preferences and an analysis of their needs rather than by external necessity or long-term life strategy (e.g. discomfort associated with the intense pace of city life and the need for rest and peace). Three interviewees were classified as having made decisions out

of necessity—external circumstances left them with no real alternative (two respondents cited difficult financial situations and one graduate cited the need to support an ill family member). Four respondents were classified as having a life strategy because their decisions to return to the rural area were the result of analysing various factors, such as economic, professional and family considerations. When planning to return to their hometown, each of them took into account their own needs and long-term life goals. They treated the rural environment as a space that would allow them to improve their quality of life and better adapt their daily functioning to their individual priorities, such as more attractive job offers, facilities for young parents in smaller towns, the need for self-fulfilment, and the implementation of innovative ideas in a rural environment. Analysis of the interviews shows that four interviewees have a clear role in the rural community. Three of them see themselves as individuals who can play a significant role in the development of smaller towns thanks to their higher education, offering specialist knowledge

and professional skills that are often limited or difficult to access in rural areas and small towns. Two graduates had a clear social mission: a desire to effect change in rural areas and to get involved in social activities, such as organising events for children and raising parents' awareness of issues related to child-rearing and tolerance. At the same time, however, the respondents also made critical comments about the lifestyle and social behaviour of their neighbours. They pointed out that rural residents want to know everything about everyone, that there is a limited sense of anonymity in rural communities, that they were offended by their limited vocabulary and poor language skills, and that they noticed differences between parents from the city and those from the countryside. Despite the noticeable limitations associated with living in a rural area, most of the interviewees expressed a preference for settling there (5) or in a small town (1) or on the outskirts of a large city (3) in the future. Only one respondent declared a desire to live permanently in a large city.

All respondents clearly indicated that their parents had reacted positively to their decision to return. In two cases, this approval had been expected due to the daughters' previous active involvement in the local rural community. The interviewees assessed their current relationships with their families as being very good. Three graduates emphasised that returning to their family home had enabled them to develop more equal relationships with their parents, characterised by mutual understanding and greater openness in communication. This included sharing experiences gained while living in the city. At the same time, they reflected that if they had not returned to their family home, they would not have been able to build such relationships with their parents. Two graduates displayed a clear tendency towards greater independence, resulting in a transformation of their previous family relationships. One interviewee began to express her own views more assertively, distancing herself from her previous uncritical acceptance of her parents' opinions. The

other interviewee noted an increase in emotional autonomy, manifested by sharing personal experiences with her family less frequently.

Returning to their family home means that some of the respondents (3) now provide emotional and material support, while others (5) actively support their parents by helping with daily household chores and farm work and organising family life. Additionally, one interviewee supports her parents financially, and another values the assistance she receives with childcare. Meanwhile, experiences relating to migration to the city, higher education and acquired cultural capital have contributed to a redefinition of social roles within the respondents' families. They have become the 'educators' in their families, introducing new perspectives on tolerance and social diversity, as well as alternative leisure activities, replacing previous passive forms of activity. Some have also taken steps to gradually change their parents' conservative views, particularly with regard to worldview, religion and customs. Concurrently, the respondents' authority in the eyes of their parents emerged, particularly in political and economic matters. This authority stems from their parents' recognition of the level of education and cultural capital acquired during their studies and stay in the city. Consequently, some of the interviewees observed changes in their parents' attitudes, manifested by greater openness to different lifestyles and acceptance of diversity and sexual orientation, as well as a more liberal stance on religious and social issues. However, other strategies for functioning within family relationships were also evident among the research sample. Two respondents adopted an attitude of withdrawal, accepting their parents' beliefs and value system in order to avoid confrontation and unnecessary conflict. This strategy enabled them to maintain peace within the family, even when they disagreed. One of the interviewees pointed out that it was her relationships with her loved ones that provided her with emotional support and a safe space in which to express her

opinions, particularly in the context of tensions arising from confrontation with a more conservative, rural environment. By doing so, she avoided open disputes in the local community, choosing her family as a place to release tension and seek understanding instead.

## Conclusions and discussion

The main conclusions from the study are as follows:

- Migration decisions in the *boomerang effect* were complex and multifactorial, combining emotional, family, economic and professional aspects. Three main categories of decision to return to the family home were identified in the sample: choice, necessity, and life strategy.
- Although educational migration was perceived by the respondents as a natural stage of development, it was not associated with limitations or severance of ties with the family environment. On the contrary, family relationships played a key role in adapting to life in the city and the subsequent decision to return.
- The respondents showed a strong attachment to the value system they had learned in their family homes, including the importance of family, religion, work, education, and celebrating traditions together.
- Migration returns did not lead to a break with family values, but rather complemented them with new perspectives and skills acquired during education and the time spent in the city, including greater cultural openness and tolerance, as well as a greater need for self-fulfilment.
- Educational migration and related experiences contributed to transforming the social roles of respondents within their families. Many of them took on the role of 'educators', introducing new worldviews, health concepts and lifestyles into family life.
- Some graduates were seen as authorities by their parents, particularly in socio-political

and economic matters, due to their education and cultural capital.

- Based on the respondents' statements, some families showed greater openness to social and ideological diversity, which was influenced by female migrants' big-city experiences (including greater tolerance towards diversity and more liberal attitudes).
- In many cases, family relationships changed after the return, becoming more open and equal. However, some respondents developed strategies to distance themselves from their parents' dominant beliefs and lifestyle, avoiding confrontation.
- Returning to rural areas was not just symbolic or emotional – some respondents consciously linked it to a social mission, a desire to innovate and practical professional considerations.
- Despite the perceived limitations of rural life, most interviewees expressed a desire to eventually live in the countryside or small towns.

The analysed migrations were short-term (Fedorowicz & Łopatka, 2021), although the respondents did not initially intend to return to the countryside during their early years in the city. This phenomenon "entails not only a change in geographical environment, but also cultural, social and economic change" (Wójcik-Żołądek, 2014, p. 12). The outflow of young, educated people from cities can, on the one hand, weaken local labour markets, change the demographic structure, and affect the service sector and the property market. Conversely, returning graduates can contribute to rural development by transferring knowledge, implementing new solutions in local businesses, and increasing social and civic activity. Their presence also promotes cultural change by introducing new consumption patterns, values, and ways of functioning to local communities. This can lead to the adoption of new trends, as well as tensions arising from differences between city-based habits and traditional rural norms. Nevertheless, internal migration is

generally considered an integral part of social development (González-Leonardo et al., 2023).

Referring to the results of Krzysztof Wasielewski's (2013) research, the respondents were highly motivated to leave their familial rural areas and migrate to cities. This was seen as an opportunity for personal and educational development, as well as a symbolic change in social status. Referring to Ilona Matysiak's (2022) article, in which she identifies three categories of university graduates settling in rural areas—those who remained, those who returned, and newcomers—the returnees constituted the largest group. This justifies the focus of this study on this category of migrants exclusively. At the same time, as in the author's research, it was evident that not all identified factors limiting migration were unequivocally assessed negatively by the respondents. In many cases, these factors formed part of a conscious choice based on the respondents' value system; for example, in the context of supporting their families.

With regard to the factors influencing higher education graduates' decisions to return, the findings of Stephanie Sowl and her co-authors are worth referencing. They highlight a significant relationship between population density and the likelihood of return: the higher the density, the lower the chance of a graduate settling in their hometown. Similar mechanisms were observed in this qualitative study's empirical material: the interviewees emphasised the attractiveness of a less urbanised environment, citing the need for peace and quiet, proximity to nature, and greater opportunities to participate in local community life. Another conclusion concerned the relationship between the educational context in local communities and the propensity to return. According to the authors' findings, graduates from areas with a higher percentage of people with higher education qualifications are less likely to decide to return. The qualitative study also revealed references to the educational social context: some interviewees mentioned feeling different and distinct from the

local community, as well as a lack of specialist knowledge and specialists in their immediate social environment. Therefore, it was emphasised that the local labour market may offer more favourable and stable employment conditions.

When analysing the environmental factors that push people out of the city and attract them to rural areas, a clear consistency emerges between the respondents' statements and the findings of Alicja Dolińska et al. (2023). In both cases, the important role of spatial and natural factors in migration decisions is emphasised. However, these were not the only motives for returning; others included financial issues, proximity to family and partners, and career opportunities.

In contrast to the aforementioned findings, which primarily focus on migration determinants, this article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of family relationships and social role transformations within the household. Considering the family as a community that provides individuals with initial cultural and social capital, the words of Piotr Sztompka (2021, p. 183) are worth noting: "The family [...] is a place to which one always returns in the end." This idea is supported by empirical data: the return of female graduates to their family homes was often not only due to necessity or pragmatic considerations, but also due to the stability of the family value system. This proved to be one of the key resources for adaptation. Furthermore, this return initiated processes of redefining family relationships, strengthening bonds, and reorienting these relationships towards a more partnership-based model.

## Limitations of the study

The study has several significant limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted exclusively of women, meaning that the male perspective was not included in terms of gender diversity. Secondly, the interviews were conducted remotely, limiting the possibility of direct observation and deeper insight into the



interviewees' daily lives—the study was not ethnographic in nature. Thirdly, the absence of input from parents and other family members meant that the analysis failed to consider the perspective of those welcoming back the returnees. Fourthly, the results obtained only represent a fragment of the graduates' reality at a specific moment in time, and do not allow for long-term changes in the dynamics of perceived return migration and family relationships to be captured.

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