Discrimination against older people in Poland exists in both discourse and of practice, in spheres both public and private, and poses a threat to older Poles’ moral personhood. Responses to this marginalization often take the form of programs promoting aktywność (“activity,” “active-ness”) in which older people are encouraged to engage in certain practices (e.g., exercising, learning new skills, cultivating hobbies) that can transform aging into a positive experience. In some ways, these practices align with models of “active aging” popular in European and global policy and public health organizations. Yet ethnographic research reveals that practices of aktywność are actually part of broader patterns of sociality that predate contemporary policy concerns and complicate pre-/post-1989 historiographies. In this talk, I draw upon almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork with older people in Poland to elucidate the practices that, across a diverse range of contexts, sustain moral personhood. Understanding such practices can 1) suggest new directions for inclusive policymaking that views health and illness within the same framework; and 2) shed light on enduring anthropological questions of the creation, maintenance, and unraveling of personhood and kin relations; experiences of historical continuity and rupture; and connections across spatial and temporal scales.

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