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Understanding *Aktywność* in Ethnographic Contexts: Aging, Memory, and Personhood in Poland

ABSTRACT: The increasing popularity of programs promoting *aktywność* (activity) in old age in contemporary Poland is part of regional and global attempts to encourage health and economic productivity in old age. In order to understand this interest in *aktywność* in old age, such practices must be seen within broader sociocultural and political-economic contexts. This drive for *aktywność* cannot be fully explained without understanding its status as an unquestioned moral good in opposition to illness, disability, and frailty in old age. Seeking commonalities across such seemingly opposite experiences can reduce marginalization in old age. Side-stepping binary constructions of health and illness in old age creates a more holistic perspective that demonstrates how older Poles in a range of contexts create moral lives.

KEYWORDS: Aging, ethnography, morality, Poland

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PLACING AKTYWNOŚĆ IN BROADER CONTEXTS

As European populations age, medical institutions (e.g., long-term care facilities, hospices) and disciplines (e.g., gerontology, geriatrics) that specialize in caring for the old are becoming more common. In postsocialist Eastern Europe, such institutions and disciplines often look to Western Europe and the US for (medicalized) models of successful aging. Medical professionals and community leaders claim a westward gaze is necessary both because their society lacks expertise to care for an aging population, and because older people themselves do not know how to age properly. In contemporary Poland, the proliferation of Universities of the Third Age and other programs promoting *aktywność* (activity) in old age are perhaps the most visible signs of such a movement. Indeed, the European Union designated 2012 as the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. However, these practices have a deeper history that can be overlooked by such talk of newness; for instance, Universities of the Third Age have existed in Poland since the 1970s, and some current programming bears resemblance to that of earlier decades. In order to understand this contemporary growth of interest in *aktywność* in old age, this article argues that such practices must be seen within the broader sociocultural and political-economic context of aging in Poland¹. More specifically, I argue that this drive for *aktywność* cannot be fully understood without understanding its opposition to illness and debility. In other words, *aktywność* emerges as an unquestioned moral good that is implicitly opposed to experiences of illness, disability, and frailty in old age. In this article, I show that it is worth seeking commonalities across these seemingly opposite experiences of old age in order to reduce marginalization of those who are ill—and those who may become ill. By side-stepping these binary constructions of health and illness in old age I aim to create a more holistic perspective that demonstrates how older Poles in a range of contexts create good lives for themselves.

This article draws on my doctoral research (*reference removed for anonymity*), which explores how practices of relatedness shape the moral personhood of older

Poles, and how these practices are inextricable from places and memories. Personal and popular links between older people (especially older women) and broader political formations can diminish older Poles' status as moral persons through association with the socialist past, yet can also provide possibilities for inclusion through alignment with the European Union and the mythological national past. Based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in medical and educational institutions in Wrocław and Poznań, my research shows that sociocultural marginalization varies and is largely based on health. As social policies increasingly individualize the responsibility for health, illness and debility seem the greatest threat to a good old age—and self-care and education the strongest antidotes. Programs promoting *aktywność* in old age, based on older Poles' responsibility to take care of themselves, are linked to gerontological understandings of old age and are imagined as connections to an idealized West. Yet these practices' deeper historical roots, which reach into the pre-socialist past, challenge still-present East/West, socialist/capitalist binaries.

Through an ethnographic perspective that views social relations as paramount, this article and the broader project of which it is a part show that analytic attention to intimate practices of care and relatedness can reveal ways that moral personhood can be sustained in contexts in which it is under threat. This focus on practices of relatedness (Carsten, 2000, 2004, 2007) suggests a way around binary tropes of independence and dependence in old age, which are not sufficient to explain older Poles' experiences of aging. This processual attention to practices of sociality shows how people with dementia, who are so commonly treated as exceptional within studies of aging, sustain personhood and relatedness through practices of memory—exactly that which they are thought to lack—that are similar to those of older people in other contexts. Through practices of relatedness and memory, older Poles across institutional contexts transform moral personhood in ways that defy binary categorizations. Because moral personhood is always scalar, at stake in such practices is the continuity of not only persons but of collectivities.

Before describing the outline of this article, I will first give a brief overview of the research conducted. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for 18 months from September 2008 through April 2010 in five key sites. (Shorter fieldwork periods occurred during 2006 and 2012). These institutions can be categorized by their type (medical and educational) and their location (in the cities of Wrocław and Poznań, two cities in western Poland). The medical institutions included a rehabilitation center run by nuns (*Zakład Opiekuńczo-Leczniczy o profilu rehabilitacyjnym*), a social welfare home for people with chronic physical illnesses (*Dom Pomocy Społecznej dla Osób Przewlekle Somatycznie Chorych*), and a day center for people with Alzheimer's disease (*Środowiskowy Dom Samopomocy dla ludzi z chorobą Alzheimera*). The rehab center and the social welfare home are in Wrocław, and the Alzheimer's center is in Poznań. In each city, the educational institutions were the Universities of the Third Age (*Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku*), continuing-education institutions specifically for retirees. I interviewed around 100 Poles (mostly over the age of 60) and conducted participant-observation at these institutions, as well as interviews with commu-

nity leaders. The entire body of data that I collected includes interviews and field notes, photographs (e.g., institutional and domestic interiors, institutional and public events, photo displays), documents (e.g., archive of journals and publications from the University of the Third Age in Wrocław, memoirs, institutional publicity materials, newspaper clippings), and objects (e.g., gifts, examples of arts-and-crafts projects).²

In this article, I will give an overview of my research as a way to present ethnographic contexts of both *aktywność* and illness and debility. Next, I will provide ethnographic data from medical and educational institutions in both Wrocław and Poznań. Finally, I will close by suggesting that educational programs promoting *aktywność* should be understood as part of a range of experiences in old age. When health and *aktywność* are not possible, how do older Poles live moral lives? I argue that ethnographic consideration of old age across institutional contexts shows similarities in practices of relatedness and memory among older Poles.

BREAKING DOWN BINARY CATEGORIES THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to show the contours of the discursive framework within which conversations on aging in Poland take place (Zierkiewicz & Łysak, 2005), I analyzed portrayals of aging in two newspapers that represent opposite ends of the dominant ideological spectrum in Poland. Data comes from a two-week long series of articles entitled “Poland Is No Country for Old People” that appeared in Poland’s newspaper of record, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in 2008, and from *Nasz Dziennik*, a conservative Catholic daily newspaper. As portrayed in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland is an inhospitable place for one to grow old—unless one engages in *aktywność* that keeps one healthy, fit, and happy. As portrayed in *Nasz Dziennik*, growing old in Poland is as a largely positive experience, in which even experiences of suffering and pain are part of a meaningful religious life cycle. *Aktywność* is largely absent from *Nasz Dziennik*. Key differences in ideals of moral personhood and the nation differentiate these discursive worlds. That is, the differences between portrayals of older people in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Nasz Dziennik* can largely be explained by understandings of older persons as self-improving, self-actualizing individuals, or as persons embedded within a set of familial relations. A moral life is achieved by either working on one’s self or living within traditional family forms. I see this discursive construction of moral personhood as representative of distinctions within Polish society more broadly.

Next, I investigated the concept of *aktywność*, an ideal of old age towards which many Poles strive—and towards which they are encouraged to strive by local and (trans)national organizations. Through an ethnographic and historical consideration of the Universities of the Third Age in Wrocław and Poznań, I analyzed the ideologies and intellectual histories of the institutions themselves and the experiences of people who attend these institutions. Institutional leaders and participants alike seek to transform moral personhood through *aktywność*. Such transformations from stigmatized, isolated older adults to engaged, embedded, and productive citizens come about through bodily, social, and mental practices. Institutional leaders and participants

themselves associate these practices with Poland's membership in the EU and transition from socialism to capitalism; in other words, *aktywność* become part of a national political-economic shift in which the socialist past is seen as fundamentally backwards and the capitalist present is seen as morally desirable, thus recapitulating tropes of the idealized West located in Western Europe or North America and the backwards East of Eastern Europe (cf. Chirot, 1989). Yet the first University of the Third Age was founded in Poland in 1975, only three years after the first-ever University of the Third Age in France, suggesting both a deeper historical connection with Western Europe than such talk of newness indicates, and a continuity rather than a sharp break with the socialist past. I will show that these new forms of moral personhood are formed through scalar practices that make particular connections with other places and times.

However, because discourses and practices of *aktywność* can exclude those who cannot travel to attend these programs, I ask, what possibilities for moral personhood exist for those who live in institutional care. Structural perspectives show that people in these institutions are those who have not benefited from postsocialist changes in Poland, yet this does not mean that their experiences are dominated by social suffering (cf. Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1997). In order to counter theoretical perspectives focusing on pain and suffering to the exclusion of hope and joy (Livingston, 2012; Mattingly, 2010), I will show how some older people sustain moral personhood despite sociocultural and political-economic conditions that would prevent them from doing so. By combining experiential with structural perspectives, and focusing on relationships rather than individuals, I provide a grounded ethnographic account of aging in institutional care that aims to overcome binary frames of independence and dependence, and illness and health.

As a way of demonstrating the commonalities between institutional worlds imagined to be so different, I analyzed how older Poles connect their own lives to the history of the Polish nation as a way that older Poles seek to restore moral personhood in old age. Narrative links between individual and national scales that incorporate key historical and geographic references can create moral personhood, relatedness, and generational continuity. These story-telling practices are common across Eastern Europe and are related to regional histories of displacement and radical social change (e.g., Ballinger, 2003; Brown, 2004; Paxson, 2005; Pine, 2007; Skultans, 1998; Tucker, 2011; Uehling, 2004). Through these embodied stories, which are always social and involve relations of power (Ochs & Capps, 1996), I argue that older Poles are attempting to place themselves within a spatiotemporally coherent and meaningful set of social relations, including relatives (past, present, and future), roommates, caregivers, and fellow citizens. This analysis is relevant to understanding old age in comparative contexts, in which continuity is often threatened by the possibility of rupture and the loss of memory.

In order to show the commonalities that extend to experiences of Alzheimer's and dementia, I will show how the persistence of embodied social and cognitive memory among people in an Alzheimer's center in Poznań defies expectations about the destructive effects of the disease on personhood. Although anthropological and

clinical research treat dementia as distinct among experiences of old age, my research shows that at this day center, there were many similarities to other field sites on the level of moral personhood, relatedness, and even memory. By taking a processual approach that focuses on interactions among people at the center, I argue that memory is fostered through the use of collective national frameworks in ways that are fundamentally about sociality. This processual approach allows for a more fully social understanding of personhood in dementia to emerge, and suggests a more holistic understanding of dementia that does not treat it as distinct from all other experiences of old age. I situate this ethnography within literature on memory and houses (Bachelard, 1958/1994; Bahloul, 1996, 1999; Casey, 1987) as a way of thinking through the relations between persons, places, and memories.

Finally, I draw connections across field sites on both ethnographic and analytic levels. At the ethnographic level, I highlight similarities in practices through which older Poles constitute themselves as moral persons within a set of relations across scales. Key practices are telling stories, singing, gardening, eating, and remembering. In these practices I see the seeds of an analytic approach that can have practical application for those who are living in situations outside their ideals of moral personhood. At the analytic level, I highlight several binary categories across fields of study that I see my research contributing to overcoming. Moral personhood among people with Alzheimer's disease is not necessarily best understood in terms of the pre- and post-Alzheimer's self, nor is personhood in old age best understood in terms of independent and dependent personhood. So too are histories of Europe perhaps not best understood by chronologies divided into before and after 1989, and experiences of life in eastern Europe perhaps not best understood through frameworks of socialism and capitalism. In understanding kinship and memory, more holistic perspectives are needed that include life and death, and past, present, and future. It is this fundamentally integrative perspective at both the ethnographic and analytic levels that I see as the key contribution of an anthropology focused on social relations.

In the next section, I provide brief ethnographic vignettes from both medical and educational institutions in order to show their similarities in practices of relatedness.

TRANSFORMING PERSONHOOD AT A REHABILITATION CENTER AND THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

On a gray day in November 2008, I walked through the hallway on the third floor of a rehabilitation center run by Catholic nuns in Wrocław, looking for pani Czesia, a woman with whom I had talked the previous day.³ She had asked me to return, so I was on my way back to her room, when I saw pani Joanna and another older woman sitting in their wheelchairs by the large window that looked out onto the gardens. I had spoken with pani Joanna once before, so I stopped and greeted her. We exchanged pleasantries for a bit—or rather, I expected that we would exchange pleasantries, but we ended up talking—or rather, she did—for about an hour. I asked her how she was feeling. “Better and better,” she said.⁴ I was glad for her, since the first time we had

talked; she dissolved into tears talking about the stroke that had brought her to the rehabilitation center. That day she showed me how her right arm was getting better, how she could raise it higher and wiggle her fingers more than previously. Throughout our conversation, she rubbed her right arm (the side affected by stroke) with the left side. Unlike the rest of the patients at the center, who were dressed for the chilly fall weather in sweaters, pani Joanna was wearing an oversized bright yellow t-shirt with a cartoon bumblebee on it. A speech bubble leading from the bee's mouth read, "Wanna be my bumblebee?"

Pani Joanna then asked me how I was doing. I answered that I was doing well, that my research was going well thanks to the kindness of people at the center. It was a pleasure to hear people's stories. Pani Joanna commented that yes, there were a lot of older people at the center who remember well, and that it is important to talk about the past, to remember. At this point the other woman at the window joined the conversation, so I introduced myself as an American doctoral student in Poland to do research on aging and memory in Wrocław and Poznań. This other woman agreed that this is an important topic. Together, the two women talked for half an hour on differing topics: the lack of patriotism in younger generations, the emigration of younger people, and the good qualities of Poles. Pani Joanna talked about a late friend who had lived in the United States, but who missed Poland terribly the entire time she was there. "That's what our nation is like – people miss it."⁵ She described how Poles were often fighting in other people's wars, but that no one came to help the Poles. Even though Poles have fought around the world for independence, no one helps them. Poland is a "nation chosen by God."⁶ The other woman agreed, saying that Poland was chosen by God to suffer. "Young people now are sick, it's terrible. There aren't many people left" who know what true patriotism, she said. "I feel bad for my children and grandchildren."⁷ They are leaving Poland, but for what? Poland has everything but money. At least they are starting to return. The two women then remarked that at heart, Poles are good people, with good traits: "Poles are hard-working and hospitable. These are really good national qualities."⁸ With this agreement, the women fell silent. Then the second woman asked me if I would wheel her back to her room down the hallway, which I did. From the laminated piece of paper attached to the wall above her bed, I learned that her name was Genowefa, that she was 80 years old, and that she was diabetic.

I then went back out into the hallway, intent on writing up this conversation in my notebook. I sat in a chair on the other side of the hallway from the window and smiled at pani Joanna across the hallway, saying that I was writing notes about what she and pani Genowefa had just discussed. She wheeled herself over to me and kept talking, as if instructing me, with a tone of seriousness and earnestness about what she was saying. After about 15 minutes, the *obiad* (midday meal) cart was wheeled into her room; I pointed this out, but she kept talking, undistracted by the cart, other people walking through the hallway, or the staff member pushing the cart telling her that her food had arrived. After another 10 minutes, pani Joanna ended the conversation, saying that she would go eat after all. Her *obiad* was surely cold by then.

Pani Joanna told me about her family's background: her mother was from Lwów and her father's family was from Przemysł and then moved to Lwów. She spoke of how beautiful Lwów was and how excellent the air was.⁹ She spoke of violence by Ukrainians towards Poles, saying that her father had to be careful on the streets; if he was heard speaking Polish, he would be attacked. They moved to Wrocław in 1958, after the "boom" in post-war development. It was because Poles are "very hard-working," she repeated, that Wrocław and Warsaw came to be as beautiful as they are today. "My god – Wrocław, Warsaw – everything was in ruins."¹⁰ She spoke of the generosity of Poles throughout history, of Poles who have always fought on behalf of others, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan—but that no one comes to Poland's aid. She mentioned her son who lived in Ireland, and that Poles were sent to Siberia where they starved and had to forage in the forest for food: mushrooms, fruits, berries. Pani Joanna emphasized that she knows how things really were because she is old enough to remember, in contrast to her grandchildren, who say, "Grandma, tell us story!"¹¹ They do not know about her experiences, which, for pani Joanna, is a "tragedy." Pani Joanna encouraged me to read books about post-war Poland, about Poland's aid to other nations, and about deportations to Siberia. They have lists of people's names, she said, which will demonstrate that she speaks the truth. "History wasn't true in school," she said. "Now it is documented."¹²

This conversation took me by surprise—although I had heard such repetitions of the standard Polish national narrative before, I had never heard it in such a context. During the previous six weeks that I had been doing fieldwork at this rehabilitation center, other older Poles had told me stories that intertwined personal and national histories—and indeed they would for the duration of the 18 months I spent conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Poland—but until that point, I had only heard these stories during somewhat more formal interview-like settings when I had specifically asked people to tell me about their lives. This day, I had not explicitly asked any questions, turned on a voice recorder, or invoked any of the conventions that I understood to establish the framework of "official research." The mere fact of my presence and stated interest in memory and old age brought forth these stories from pani Joanna and pani Genowefa. Even after the conversation could have ended, after I brought pani Genowefa back to her room and was sitting quietly in the hallway, pani Joanna was the one who kept the story going for so long that her meal became cold.

Moreover, I was struck by the many connections across time and space that pani Joanna was making: post-World-War-II Wrocław, which until 1945 had been the German city of Breslau; pre- and post-war Lwów, a city that was part of the Polish state after World War I but became Soviet Lviv after World War II; the Polish capital of Warsaw, which, even more than Wrocław, was devastated during World War II; Siberia, a place to where Poles had been deported in the 19th and 20th centuries by the Russian tsar and then by the Soviets; Ireland; Iraq; Afghanistan; and Poland itself, as long-suffering, sacred, and fundamentally good. During this conversation, these faraway places and times were all made as present as the garden outside the window.

I also found it remarkable that pani Joanna framed herself as someone who remembers these times and places. When we met in 2008, she was 62 years old; she was born in 1946, meaning that she had not lived through World War II itself. She was, in fact, one of the younger people at the rehab center, and younger than I would expect for someone who framed herself as remembering the old days, as a keeper of memory. In fact, I was struck by the similarity of her story to those of women in their late nineties with whom I had spoken. In these stories about the past, 30 years difference in age seemed almost irrelevant.

The final, and seemingly most transparent, aspect of pani Joanna's story was the degree to which it recapitulated the romantic, messianic national myth of Poland as the Christ of nations. This story, in simplified form, is that Poland has suffered oppression by foreign powers for centuries and has valiantly resisted this oppression. For centuries Poles have fought for their own—and for others'—freedom. These struggles would be in vain, since Poland has often lost such struggles, except that to be Polish is to be Catholic, such that Poles have been defending Catholicism as well as Poland in these fights. Poland is a nation chosen by God to suffer, and in that suffering finds redemption: Poland, the Christ of nations. This messianic myth can take gendered dimensions in the figure of *Matka-Polka*, or Mother-Pole, who both protects the nation through nurturing its members, and also bears its suffering. The *Matka-Polka's* suffering *is* the suffering of the Polish nation.

Like many national myths, this story contains elements of truth. The territory of contemporary Poland has indeed been ruled by many powers over the centuries; most importantly for this mythic formulation, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned into three by the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian empires in the late 18th century. The last partition was in 1795; an independent Polish state did not exist until after World War I in 1918. Poles did indeed fight foreign rule. During the partition period, there were many uprisings (*powstania*) against the foreign rulers, and some Polish insurrectionists did indeed fight in revolutionary movements abroad. Revolutionary movements also characterized Polish political life in the first half of the 20th century, in both World Wars I and II. The control of post-war Poland by the Soviet Union marked another loss of Polish independence, but labor strikes, most notable in the 1970s and 1980s, fought against Soviet control. Poland's link with Catholicism dates to the acceptance of Latin Christianity by Mieszko I in 966, and Poland and Catholicism have been closely linked by political connections for centuries. (This is a drastically shortened description of centuries of history. For an English-language overview of Polish history, see Lukowski & Zawadzki, 2006. For an English-language history of partitioned Poland, see Wandycz, 1974/1993. For a critical and comprehensive history of the relationship between Poland and the Catholic church, see Porter-Szücs, 2011).

Like all nationalist myths, however, this is a highly selective reading of history (Hobsbawm, 1983; Renan, 1892/1996). This understanding of Polish nationalism is a historical construct that draws primarily on 19th century Polish Romantic nationalist ideals, and its creation has more to do with late-19th and early-20th century Polish

politics than with how people actually understood themselves during the 19th century (Porter, 2000). Erased from this history are centuries of linguistically, ethnically, and religiously diverse populations living in the territory of contemporary Poland. Moreover, in contemporary Polish politics, this narrative is espoused by far-right political parties and religious leaders as part of isolationist and conservative ideologies.

I found it remarkable to hear pani Joanna recite this story, relatively unprompted, and in a way that was deeply connected to her life at the rehab center. Why did she begin telling this story when I mentioned age and memory? Why did pani Genowefa join the conversation at the mention of remembering, and not at a different moment? Why did pani Joanna wheel her chair towards me to keep talking? An easy answer to these questions would be to say that pani Joanna and pani Genowefa are lonely old women who like to complain, whether about themselves or about Poland, or that they are followers of political and religious groups that repeat this narrative ad infinitum. And perhaps both these explanations are true. But these answers also feel partial, as neither explains the particularity of *this* story in *this* moment between *this* set of individuals. I seek to articulate an answer to these questions that does not immediately construct these women as stereotypical old voices or as passive receptacles for nationalist messages. Rather, I aim to answer these questions more ethnographically by more fully taking into account the experiences, structures, histories, and social relations within which these women—and other older Poles—live.

For indeed, I felt that pani Joanna was telling a story about life, and how to live it. In pani Joanna's connection between these differently scaled histories, I see her trying to articulate what is right and what is wrong, how one should live, and what older people's role in society should be. In this story, then, I see pani Joanna describing the contours of her moral personhood as an older Pole. Trying to understand what constitutes these ideals and experiences of moral personhood among older Poles, in a variety of contexts, is a central goal of this research. Throughout the broader research project I attend to the spatiotemporal aspects of personhood—or rather, which social relations, times, and places are incorporated into moral personhood. My analysis focuses on the ethnographic processes of exchange, memory, and learning that I saw as constitutive of this moral personhood.

This concern for place, time, and sociality comes from the centrality of these themes to both my ethnographic data and to my theoretical training, grounded in anthropological literature on kinship studies, medical anthropology, and postsocialist studies. I aim for this focus on social relations in place and time to mediate tension between structural and phenomenological perspectives, incorporate central perspectives from both, while also working to maintain a historical perspective. I will now give a contrasting example to show the differing contexts in which moral personhood comes to matter in contemporary Poland.

Roughly a year after the previous conversation with pani Joanna, late on a Tuesday afternoon in November, I found myself on a tram in Poznań on the way to the University of Technology (*Politechnika Poznańska*). I was going to attend the weekly lecture of the University of the Third Age to introduce myself in the hope of finding

people to interview. This was a part of the city that I did not know well, so I was unsure which stop was mine. As we went over the Saint Roch bridge, I prepared to exit the tram. As I moved towards the door, I noticed many older people doing the same—I was then sure I was in the right place. I followed the group of mostly older women across the street and up the stairs of a large building, outside of which a group of young students were smoking and chatting. The people from the tram joined a large group of older people filling the hallway outside a ground-floor classroom, which was still full of young students. As the lecture ended, the younger students began leaving the classroom and the older people began to enter, everyone jostling to move forward in the direction they wanted. The hectic movement settled down as people took their seats in the lecture hall, but the noise remained as people chatted with the people around them. The room felt smaller than it was, as almost all seats were full; there were perhaps 100 people.

After a staff member from the University of the Third Age asked the crowd to quiet down, described my project, and invited people to talk with me after the lecture to sign up for interview times. I then took my seat in the audience and prepared to listen to the day's lecture, entitled "The rebuilding of the Bishop Jordan bridge" ("*Odbudowa mostu biskupa Jordana*"), given by an emeritus professor of engineering at the *politechnika*. For an hour, the professor described the history of this pedestrian bridge over the Cybina River, a tributary of the Warta River, which is the main river in Poznań and the third-largest in the country. (The Warta itself is a branch of the Oder [*Odra*], which runs through Wrocław.) The bridge connects the oldest district of Poznań, Ostrów Tumski, where the cathedral lies, with the eastern district of the city. The cathedral is one of the oldest churches in Poland, dating to the time of Mieszko I in the 10th century. Some sort of bridge had been in this location since the Middle Ages; since the 19th century, the bridge has been built, destroyed, and rebuilt several times, in conjunction with the wars that occurred during these years.

As the professor described these successive destructions and reconstructions of these bridges, showing pictures of old maps, design plans, and more recent construction images, people in the audience listened attentively, if not quietly. As I noticed during many such group gatherings at the University of the Third Age in Wrocław, older Polish people do not sit and listen quietly together, instead keeping a sort of running commentary with their friends or whomever happened to be sitting next to them. This proved true at this lecture, as the woman next to me leaned over to share information she found pertinent, saying out loud the name of a bishop whose name the professor did not remember, commenting on the beauty of maps of Poznań from the 18th century and the relative ugliness of the contemporary Neoclassical cathedral compared to its 14th- and 15th-century Gothic style, and, upon learning that I had also lived in Wrocław, the dirtiness of that city compared to Poznań.

This lecture was of a similar type to those I heard at the University of the Third Age in Wrocław: many retirees crowded into a lecture hall to listen to a distinguished professor give a lecture on a topic of general interest, or at least presumed general interest. The topics could be relatively academic, with seemingly little connection to issues of

aging per se, or they could be explicitly about aging, such as one lecture on adaptive strategies for problems in late life from a psychological perspective. Regardless of the topic of these lectures, they were always well-attended, always full of older people engaging with people around them, clamoring to be heard. All the events I attended were held in some university space—the University of Technology in Poznań, the Institute of Pedagogy in Wrocław, the grand University Hall of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań—to which everyone I knew arrived by tram or bus. No one was in a wheelchair, although some did use canes. People would attend with friends or alone, but they always interacted with people there; after lectures in Wrocław, some people would go downstairs to the student cafeteria and have cups of coffee and a few cookies, talking with their friends about the lecture or other topics. Other activities at the University of the Third Age, such as English or computer classes, were similarly busy and social. I learned that people saw attending these lectures as part of learning how to age well, as an attempt both to “accept” (“*akceptować*”) old age but also to develop oneself. Women in particular told me they enjoyed time to do something for themselves (*dla siebie*) after lifetimes of working and caring for others.

In many ways, these University of the Third Age gatherings were a stark contrast to the intense quiet of some moments at the rehab center or social welfare home, the seeming opposite of pani Joanna and pani Genowefa, in wheelchairs, sitting quietly by the window overlooking the garden. Yet in all these cases, I see older people connecting with others through the telling of stories, be they stories about past and present suffering, that day’s tour of the local brewery, or future travel plans, and the learning of skills, be they skills to operate a wheelchair, walk, learn English or use a computer. Through remembering, imagining, learning, and being with others, older people across these sites were forming new connections and new senses of their own personhood. Central to all these practices were the incorporation of other times, places, and relations, which all combine to produce a personhood in old age that is deeply moral.

CONCLUSION

Despite the polarized discursive context of aging in Poland where modern, progressive, and *aktywny* older adults are juxtaposed against supposedly suffering and abandoned elders in institutional care, my ethnographic research shows that processes of relatedness provide other possibilities for experiencing and understanding moral personhood in old age. For despite living in a context outside their own ideals and those of Polish society more broadly, some people in institutional care do transform personhood through creating new social relations. Moreover, people engage in such processes of relatedness at both educational and medical institutions, suggesting a possibility for overcoming the polarized, moralized, and politicized discursive context surrounding aging in Poland. That is, this research shows that growing old is not best understood in terms of divisive frameworks that separate healthy, *aktywny* older adults from ill, suffering older adults, but rather through the everyday practices through which older people come to form meaningful relationships. Despite the

increasing popularity of programs promoting *aktywność* in old age, and the genuine inclusion, empowerment, affirmation, and transformation that participants can experience through such programs, the focus on health and self-care can have the inadvertent effect of marginalizing those with disabilities and illness. Given the frequency of illness and debility within the older population in Poland, and the inclusive intentions of such programs, this limitation is important to understand.

This ethnographic focus has analytical implications as well, suggestion that a focus on everyday practice can be a way to avoid binary categories of in/dependence, East/West, and socialism/capitalism. And while the ideal *aktywny* (active) older person fits neatly into the contemporary neoliberal world order, ethnographic research shows that practices of *aktywność* have deeper roots, revealing the continuing relevance of (pre-)socialist histories.

I aim for this holistic perspective to create a discussion centered on relatedness, suffering, and hope among older people in Poland. In keeping social relations central to both ethnography and theory, this research aims to contribute a new voice to the medicalized and individualized perspectives that currently dominate conversations on, and experiences of, aging in Poland.

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1. Throughout this text, I refer to “aktywność” in the Polish language in order to more accurately represent local usage. This usage follows standard anthropological practice of referring to key ethnographic concepts in the local language in order to prevent errors that can occur in direct translations. That is, I do not want to assume that “aktywność,” as it is used in the contexts that I encountered it during fieldwork, encapsulates exactly the same meanings as “activity” in contemporary American or other English-language contexts.
 2. This research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and several units at the University of Michigan.

**AKTYWNOŚĆ I JEJ ETNOGRAFICZNE KONTEKSTY:
STARZENIE SIĘ, PAMIĘĆ I PODMIOTOWOŚĆ W POLSCE**

ABSTRAKT: Rosnąca popularność i szerzenie się programów promujących *aktywną* starość w Polsce stanowi część lokalnych i globalnych działań na rzecz utrzymania zdrowia i produktywności ekonomicznej starszych osób. Aby bliżej zrozumieć zainteresowanie *aktywnością* w wieku starszym należy rozpatrywać te praktyki w szerszym społeczno-kulturowym i polityczno-ekonomicznym kontekście. Wzmoczonego dążenia do *aktywności* nie sposób dogłębnie pojąć nie biorąc pod uwagę, że aktywność stała się niekwestionowanym dobrem moralnym stanowiącym przeciwieństwo choroby, niepełnosprawności i zniedołężnienia. Wskazując, że te pozornie przeciwne doświadczenia łączy faktycznie wiele podobieństw, można przeciwdziałać marginalizacji starszych osób, zaś odrzucając binarne konstrukcje zdrowia i choroby w wieku starszym można zastosować bardziej holistyczną perspektywę umożliwiającą zrozumienie, jak starsi ludzie w Polsce w różnorodnych kontekstach kreują sobie moralne życie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: etnografia, moralność, Polska, starzenie się



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3. "Pani" is the respectful term of address for women in Polish; "pan" is the equivalent for men. During my fieldwork, most people referred to me as "pani [first name omitted for the sake of anonymity]" and I referred to most people the same way. This mode of address is less formal than "pani [last name omitted for the sake of anonymity]" but more formal than "[first name omitted for the sake of anonymity]" (without "pani"). Occasionally, people would refer to me by "[first name omitted for the sake of anonymity]" without "pani," but did not invite me to do the same. As the younger person in every conversation, I did not feel comfortable using the informal register without being specifically invited to do so. Rarely, I was invited by older people to refer to them in the informal register. I have kept this style in the writing of this article in order to more accurately reflect the conversational dynamics of my fieldwork. All names are pseudonyms unless otherwise noted.
 4. "Coraz lepiej."
 5. "Taki jest nasz naród, że ludzie za nim tęsknią."
 6. "Naród wybrany przez Boga."
 7. "Teraz, młodzi ludzie chorują, to straszne. Teraz, nie zostało dużo ludzi ... Mi szkoda dzieci i wnuków."
 8. "Polacy są pracowici i gościnni. To bardzo dobre cechy narodowe."
 9. "Wspaniałe powietrze."
 10. "Boże. Same ruiny. Wrocław, Warszawa."
 11. "Babciu, opowiedz nam bajkę!"
 12. "Historia nie była prawdą w szkole. Teraz jest udokumentowana."