

Constructing Centenarianism in Neenah Ellis' *If I Live to be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians*

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Abstract. This paper investigates how centenarianism as a new age category in its connection to successful aging is established in the guidebook on aging and the interview collection titled *If I Live to be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians* by Neenah Ellis. While guidebooks sell the image of successful aging as individual achievement and thus reinforce a neoliberal understanding of successful aging, Ellis' narratives renegotiate the concept. She collects stories of centenarians which define the success in aging through personal encounters, purpose, and meaning rather than an active body. Thereby, they question normative assumptions of old age as a binary of progress and decline (cf. Gullette). With a focus on the way a new age category of centenarianism is established through narrative and storytelling, the paper traces how Ellis' narratives grapple with the construction of centenarianism at the intersection of the biological, social, and cultural, asking which factors determine how age is established as a multi-faceted construct.

Keywords: Centenarians, successful aging, positive aging, life writing, age as construct

Introduction

As life expectancy continuously rises in Western societies, the number of individuals who reach the age of 100 increases respectively. At the same time, their number is scarce enough for their occurrence to be considered somewhat of a phenomenon. Accordingly, we live at a moment in time where we can witness the establishment of a new age category: centenarianism. While a life span of 100 years has historically been imagined as ideal and for instance been depicted in popular medieval and early modern images of the stairs of life (Cole 2006, 5-6), only in recent years this ideal is actually frequently achieved. This new category is not only studied by biomedical researchers in order to seek out the

secrets to extraordinary longevity, it is also the subject of numerous narratives, grappling with the idea of living to and at 100. Besides fictional accounts, there are countless newspaper articles, guidebooks, and (auto)biographies¹ all dedicated to capturing the centenarian experience. Within these narratives, centenarians are often regarded as “paragons of positive aging” (Robine and Vaupel 1997, x). If centenarians are considered paragons of positive aging, the discourse surrounding them is likely to add to a successful aging paradigm. The concept of successful aging was introduced by John Rowe and Robert Kahn in their study of the same title. They differentiate between successful aging and “usual aging”, which they define as being “on the borderline of disease” (Rowe and Kahn 1998, 53). This successful aging paradigm has been widely criticized by for its focus on the aging body and its neoliberal implications. Debbie Rudman, for instance elaborates that

Western nations have raised concerns regarding how such discourses [on successful aging] have intersected with neoliberal rationality such that responsibilities for the management of bodily, financial and social risks of aging have increasingly been shifted from states and other institutions to individuals. (Rudman 2015, 11)

The discourse surrounding successful aging thus focuses on functionality, imagining those who cease to function as a ‘proper’ member of society as a failure. The responsibility for success, within this imaginary, lies with the individual. ‘Usual aging’ in turn, means a loss of function in a very practical sense of the aging body.

At the same time Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that “we are aged by culture” in her monograph of the same title (2004). According to Gullette, age is given meaning through cultural implications and interactions rather than a mere process of biology. It is this cultural construction that, according to Kathleen Woodward, leads to an “ideology of American youth culture, where youth is valued at virtually all costs over age and where age is largely deemed a matter for comedy or sentimental compassion” (Woodward 2006, 164). Valuing youth

1 I use the notation ‘(auto)biography’ because most centenarian narratives are forms of collaborative life writing, including a co-author or ghost writer interviewing a centenarian and writing down their life’s story (cf. Velten 2022, 51).

over old age, accordingly, becomes learned behavior through an individual's socialization within a given social and cultural framework. Successful aging thus can be considered to be both a cultural imaginary of a promoted ideal, as well as a call to action to meet this ideal. This complexity of successful aging as a cultural imaginary has not yet been frequently discussed. While the concept is criticized, the mechanisms of its production are often overlooked. Centenarian narratives may serve as an entry point to understand how successful aging is communicated through narratives as both an imaginary and a call to action as well as how the cultural is influenced by the biological and social aspects of aging.² How do the biological (the undeniable fact that the human body changes through time), the social (the role an individual takes up or is expected to take up in a given society), and the cultural (the images, ideologies, and ideas about the aging process an individual is confronted with) interact in order to determine what age means to an individual and to a society?

In order to address this question in general and the concept of successful aging in particular, looking at centenarians is fruitful for three reasons. First, as the category of centenarianism is currently in the process of being defined, a discussion of centenarians promises insights into the mechanisms of the way age categories are constructed. That is, looking at the way centenarians are described and imagined through narratives sheds light on the question of how the biological, social, and cultural interact in the formation of centenarianism. Second, centenarians are regarded as role models and, therefore, escape the predominant ideologies of the United States that favors youth over anything. Centenarians show that there is a way to age that makes aging acceptable, even valued. Centenarian narratives thus have the chance to offer perspectives that break with what Gullette calls a binary between "progress" and "decline" (Gullette 2004, 7). Third, success is inherent to centenarian narratives, as the individuals who live to 100 are considered successful by the number of years they have lived already. As the concept is particularly visible within these narratives, it suggests itself to read them according to the mechanisms behind it.

This paper sets out to trace the way successful aging is reassessed alongside centenarianism through narratives. Therefore, I will first briefly look at centenarianism and how it is framed in aging guidebooks, identifying common themes

2 This idea is based on the line of argument in the grant proposal for the DFG Collaborative Research Center 1482 "Studies in Human Categorization" at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany.

and structures within them. I will then look at a collection of interviews with centenarians conducted by journalist Neenah Ellis, published as the book *If I Live to be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians*. I will read one example from the collection against the category of centenarianism as it is promoted by guidebooks and identify how various narratives discuss aging as either successful or not. Ultimately, I will discuss throughout this paper how looking at successful aging and centenarianism redefines and broadens the term, while not completely escaping the criticism attached to it.

Centenarianism and the Guidebook Industry

Gullette claims that the human life-course is divided into “life-course imaginaries” (Gullette 2003, 103). Accordingly, any life stage is imagined in a certain way, providing images of how to act or not to act at a given moment in life. As these imaginaries are culturally constructed, they are influenced by cultural products we encounter. This chapter will serve as an introduction into the way centenarianism is imagined through media representations and how successful aging is negotiated within these representations. I will briefly touch on a highly successful genre of centenarian narratives to provide an overview of construction of centenarianism: guidebooks on how to live to 100.

The abundance of guidebooks to healthy living that are connected to centenarians goes back to a successful aging paradigm. Because centenarians are ‘paragons of positive aging,’ they are presumed to be healthy and active into extraordinary old age. In other words, presuming that, as Silke van Dyk elaborates, old age is divided into an “independent and capable Third Age and a deep old Fourth Age that is characterized by sickness, frailty and dependency” (van Dyk 2016, 109), centenarians have managed to live a life that prevented them from entering the forth age of disease and decline. They are, accordingly, extraordinarily successful at aging well. This idea is taken up by the guidebook industry, connecting advise on healthy living directly to centenarians. Titles such as *Healthy at 100: How You Can – At Any Age – Dramatically Increase Your Life Span and Your Health Span* (Robbins, 2007) or *Celebrate 100: Centenarian Secrets to Success in Business and Life* (Franklin and Adler, 2013) suggest that living to the age of 100 is a special achievement and claim that this achievement is due to hard work rather than chance. The focal points of the guidebooks, according to the titles vary. While *Healthy at 100* promises aid in achieving a ‘successful’

biological aging process, *Celebrate 100* approaches life in general and professionalism in particular. The model centenarian, in terms of these guidebooks is thus not only physically healthy but financially successful. In other words, centenarians are physically and financially able to fend for themselves and are not in need of a healthcare, or a social system supporting them. If everyone lives like a centenarian, in turn, we can all make it to extraordinary old age without physical signs of aging and without any financial troubles. *Healthy at 100* clearly speaks to the biological aspects of aging that seem to be avoided at any rate. Only healthy aging, according to these guidebooks – and according to Rowe and Kahn – is successful aging.

Celebrate 100, however, suggests that in addition to biological aspects of aging, social factors also determine what is considered to be ‘successful’. The book explicitly mentions economic success in life and thereby broadens the definition of ‘success’ as something that can only be achieved with financial independence. This then implicitly speaks to a fear of financial decline and poverty in old age in two ways. On the one hand, financially independent centenarians give peace of mind to middle agers: if there is no poverty in old age, there is no need to financially support the elderly, which counters a fear of a silver tsunami (Chivers 2021, 3). On the other hand, promising financial stability into old age may counter fear of aging itself: poverty often means social isolation (Samuel, et al. 2017). The imaginary of poverty as connected to old age may thus spark a fear of being poor and therefore isolated in later life. The guidebooks at hand counter these imaginaries by presenting centenarians as financially stable, indicating that learning from their example, nobody has to be poor in old age. The successful aging paradigm thus works on fears of the cultural imaginary of decline in old age, thereby implicitly reinforcing it. At the same time, it presents an alternative imaginary to the decline forces. This alternative is only achievable, according to the suggestion of the genre, if one follows the advice given by centenarians.

Guidebooks on centenarianism and aging thus present centenarians as role models in aging in a biological and a social sense.³ By focusing on health and finance, they address fears of isolation and immobility, often connected to old age. Consequently, they play on the fears and stereotypes of old age to present centenarianism as an exceptional form of aging. This representation, while aiming

3 While this paper only touches upon two examples of guidebooks, similar mechanisms are visible in an abundance of publicans on centenarians and living to 100.

at taking away the fear of aging, can also be regarded as highly problematic: by establishing centenarians as role models, they indicate that everybody can achieve what they did, in turn imagining everyone who does not as a failure.

Centenarianism and Life Narrative: Successful Aging in *If I Live to be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians*

While guidebooks feature a large number of centenarians and add to a cultural imaginary of centenarianism as physically and socially active, they do not necessarily touch upon the everyday life as a centenarian, nor do they feature the complexities of individuals and their personal struggles. This lack of individual, personal stories is filled by an increasing number of life narratives about and by centenarians. These life narratives come in different media forms, ranging from documentaries, book chapters, interviews, or full length (auto)biographies. Looking at the genre of centenarian life narratives seems fruitful because, as Alfred Hornung points out, life writing “may mediate between individual positions and choices taken in life, in the sense of the critical concept of relational selves” (Hornung 2010, xii). If narratives of life can function as a mediator between different positions, I argue that they can also function as a mediator between different life stages, and become a platform for the negotiation of the construction of age at the intersection of the biological, social, and cultural. In this paper, I would like to look at a series of interviews conducted by radio host Neenah Ellis, which had originally been intended for radio broadcast and then published as a collection of stories with the title *If I Live to be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians*. For this book, Neenah Ellis interviews 15 centenarians, initially to get a first-hand account of the historical events of the 20th century. However, she quickly realizes that there is more to centenarians than their past, that they in fact have a present and a future which in itself seems to be a revelation when it comes to narratives about old age. Ellis uses recorded interviews as a basis for narrating someone’s life (Ellis 2004, 7-9). The title of the collection suggests that, although providing a more nuanced depiction of the individual, the book exists in the tradition of guidebooks on successful aging. Ellis promises her readers unspecified lessons of some sort. Interestingly, however, her title does not indicate a guide on how to live to 100; instead, it appears as if she inquires about living well at 100. The title then puts a slightly different emphasis on the questions of successful aging. Instead of simply asking how to get there, Ellis

wants to know how to make life meaningful and worth living once we have arrived. This approach already reveals an image of aging that is torn between the extremes of successful aging and decline because it indicates that rendering a life worth living may be more difficult at extraordinary old age. At the same time, she puts centenarians on a pedestal, imaging them as role models who should be able to give advice. Discussing this particular book suggests itself because in contrast to many other narratives by and about centenarians it does not mainly focus on how to achieve centenarianism but on how individuals live at 100. Moreover, it serves as a valid entry point to the discussion of centenarian narratives, because it presents a variety of stories, while adhering to the characteristics of the genre in its overall framework.

In her book publication, Ellis does not solely publish the interview transcripts from her radio show but narrates her encounters with different centenarians. This narration allows for the chance to learn how the interaction with the extraordinarily old person alters the perspectives about old age in a middle-aged person. On the other hand, this poses a problem for narrative structure: what the audience gets to read is not simply a centenarian's story but a middle-aged person's interpretation of this story. At the same time, "[t]he possible loss of narrative authority may be compensated by the fact that the life story of a centenarian would otherwise not have been written in the first place" (Banerjee and Velten 2020, 2). Consequently, the reader has to rely on the accuracy of Neenah Ellis' recollections and interview transcripts and remain aware that it is her perspective that influences the story and the setting. That is, we have to be aware of what may have been omitted from the transcripts or interpreted through Ellis' own perspective. The centenarians thus become what Thomas Couser calls a "vulnerable subject" in his book of the same title (2003), a person whose life is written about by others and who do not have the chance to approve the text that is written about them. As many of the centenarians presented had passed away before the book was published, they were unable to approve the message provided. This is a problem that is prevalent throughout many narratives of centenarianism. Most stories have been co-written or co-produced, which makes it necessary to entangle the various voices that contributed to them and also to trust that the co-authors are aware of their ethical obligations to their subjects and their audiences (cf. Velten 2022; Banerjee and Velten 2020). Moreover, middle aged co-authors come with their own assumptions about aging, which they may not be able to separate from

the person they are writing about. Despite the pitfalls there are with these kinds of collaborative forms of life narrative, they can help us understand what it means to age to individuals and their surroundings and thus make the inner negotiation of an age identity available to a public audience.

Neenah Ellis mediates between several centenarians and their stories within her narrative. At the same time, she mediates her own perceptions and learned ageisms through the people she encounters. It has to be mentioned that her own somewhat ageist assumptions about successful aging are traceable throughout the entire book. By reflecting on new revelations and her own thought process, however, it appears that, at times, she is aware of her own stereotypes, while in other instances appearing to be rather oblivious on the matter. The centenarians presented have very different approaches to life and value a diverse number of abilities or structures above others. That is, while some ponder their physical abilities, others are happy about a full life with friends and family. And then there are those who do not feel that they are successful at aging at all. Anna Wilmot (103), for instance, takes out her boat every morning, despite her worsening arthritis. She lives alone but is content with her situation, as she has friends close by and enjoys reading in the quiet (Ellis 2004, 59-62). Abraham Goldstein (101) is a working university professor who enjoys interacting with students and colleagues (Ellis 2004, 65). Roy Larken Stamper (103), on the other hand, is looking for a companion and feels lonely, despite his son and grandson living in close proximity (Ellis 2004, 161). Marion Cowen (101) is physically unable to get up from his bed and is dependent on numerous care takers, a situation that appears to evoke a feeling of shame in him—according to Ellis' interpretation (Ellis 2004, 205). All these encounters lead Ellis to confront her own assumptions and fears with regard to aging, as she is looking for meaning in later life for herself and her audience (Ellis 2004, 47). At the same time, the diversity of the encounters presented show that centenarianism is a very diverse category with individual experiences when it comes to different aspects of aging and that defining success is always up to the individual. In what follows, I will discuss one narrative within the book closer with regard to its portrayal of the social, cultural, and biological aspects of aging and their implications about success: the example of Ruth Ellis.⁴

4 Coincidentally, the centenarian Ruth Ellis and the author of the book share the same last name. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to both either by their full or their first names.

Ruth Ellis is not only a centenarian but also known to be the oldest African American lesbian activist in the early 2000s. Her story is presented in three parts throughout the book. No other centenarian is allowed as much room to tell their story. In Ruth's case, the biological, social, and cultural aspects are narrated alongside each other, varying in importance for the overall perception of centenarianism in particular and age in general. This goes along the lines of Stefan Hirschauer's argument that categories of human differentiation mutually influence each other. He elaborates that "some differentiations get in each other's way, others meet without consequences, some reinforce each other, others neutralize each other" (Hirschauer 2014, 185, my translation).⁵ In Ruth's case, I argue, it becomes visible how different aspects of age mutually influence and reinforce each other, depending on the situation the centenarian finds herself in. This in turn also indicates that the understanding of successful aging varies in different situations.

The biological aspects of Ruth's aging process become apparent through the narrative almost immediately: The initial description of her physicality does not focus on the declining body, rather, it emphasizes on her moving well "with good coordination." Moreover "[h]er hearing is excellent and her eyesight is, too" (Ellis 2004, 117). With regard to these external features of the aging body, her narrative thus reinforces a successful aging paradigm in a biological sense. In terms of her outward appearance Neenah describes Ruth as "maybe five feet tall, thin, neat, and handsome" (Ellis 2004, 116). What is most striking is that Ruth is described as handsome, which is not expected from especially female elderly (Sontag 1972, 31). By making her handsome in the imagination of her readers, Neenah already attributes a certain youth to Ruth. Bearing in mind that an outward image is the first impression of a person, it has a tremendous power of how an individual is perceived by others. In a café, for instance, Ruth tells the waitress how old she is, to which she replies "No! You can't be! Well, honey, you look just great" (Ellis 2004, 142). Her extraordinary old age, thus, does not appear to be visible. The statement of the waitress also reinforces the notion that looking old and looking great do not go together in public imaginary. The younger a person looks, the more successful they are thus considered at aging. This then shows how successful

5 The original German text reads as such: "[m]anche Differenzierungen kommen sich in die Quere, andere begegnen sich folgenlos, manche verstärken sich gegenseitig, andere neutralisieren sich" (185).

aging is often defined by superficial measures that are assigned to an individual from the outside. In this instance, Ruth has no defining power over the waitress's assumption of her success at aging. The waitress, in turn, identifies Ruth's aging as successful by merely one parameter, not knowing what her life actually looks like. Outward appearance thus does not imply anything about the meaningful life; yet, as the first impression, it is often given a great power of determination.

This first impression is somewhat contested once Neenah spends more time with Ruth. Sometimes, especially at night, when Ruth is safe in her own apartment, signs of her medical issues become visible:

I can hear Ruth groaning in pain and I'm struck by the unlikeliness of the moment. I am sleeping in the living room of a hundred year old person I met this morning. She seemed so lively during the day, but tonight I'm worried she might die. (Ellis 2004, 125)

Because Ruth was 'lively' during the day, Neenah did not register that she is travelling with an extremely old person. It is only through the display of pain that she remembers that Ruth is old and that, according to cultural images of old age, death is in close proximity. Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow elaborate that old age is often imagined as "'a waiting room' in which people bide their time until they die" (Hartung and Kunow 2011, 18). This idea of the waiting room, clearly connected to a doctor's office and associated to illness, presents itself to Neenah at night at home when Ruth is in her private sphere. It is intensified through the description of medication Ruth takes:

On the kitchen counter I notice Ruth's medications: Vioxx for her arthritis, a potassium supplement, a big box of Geritol, which is just vitamins with lots of iron, and a blood-pressure medicine. (Ellis 2004, 125)

This focus on medication evokes the notion of old age as a disease. The centenarian presented, in other words, did not live to 100 healthily and, going strictly by Rowe and Kahn's definition, has not aged successfully.

This contrast between the depiction of Ruth's age in a public and a private sphere indicates that the centenarian feels the need to act according to the successful aging imaginary largely presented in the genre of guidebooks: in order

to be a role model, she needs to act a certain way and has to restrict the reality of her aging body to her home. She keeps going even though she knows that the speed at which she moves is not good for her. Accordingly, her condition has “gotten worse in the past year, she says, since she turned one hundred and started doing all this travelling” (Ellis 2004, 126). As decline is largely linked to the body, it might well be that Ruth feels the pressure to keep moving faster than she usually would to convey the image of progress to the outside world. In terms of the construct of age, the example of Ruth Ellis thus shows how significant the body seems to be for the determination of what is old.

Consequently, the depiction of Ruth’s biological aging is rather arbitrary: although she has medical issues, she is described as mobile and independent, thus simultaneously reinforcing and disrupting a successful aging paradigm. Interestingly, her biological age is performed differently depending on the situation she finds herself in, indicating a need to perform in a way that adheres to the cultural imaginary of successful aging in public. The way Neenah describes her at night, however, evokes imaginaries of decline and the interconnectedness of old age and death. The way Neenah narrativizes her experience clearly shows that she has been aged by a culture that reinforces this connection, making it seem a natural association for her.

While the biology of aging influences Ruth differently in different settings, the social aspects intermingle with the biological ones, forming an even more complex image of age as a construct. In terms of social aging James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium explain that “an individual’s life course is made up of the roles he or she may occupy over time” (Holstein and Gubrium 2007, 339). These roles may include student, professor, plumber, teacher, mother, grandmother, retiree etc. and define a persons’ status in society. The role we occupy, in other words, influences the perception of our social age since most of these roles are socially bound to a certain age group and in turn connected to certain behavioral catalogues. However, Ruth’s life story turns the expected roles on their head. She states that “‘I didn’t have any friends. I went to school by myself’” (Ellis 2004, 126) and continues with

‘I didn’t get a very good education. If I was to go back to school, I’d have to start from the beginning. That’s why I like to be around these young people so much. Maybe I can learn something from them’. (Ellis 2004, 127)

These statements show that Ruth did not act in a way a student or an adolescent person is expected to act. She did not learn a lot and she did not mingle with her peers and surround herself with fun and laughter of the young. Although she occupied the social role of a student, she did not adhere to the expected social features assigned to this role. Rather, she felt lonely as a student and only in old age she feels accepted and part of a community. When speaking about the loneliness in her younger years, she states that she “‘wasn’t really aware of [her] life until [she] was eighty’” and describes being a senior citizen as “‘the happiest time of her life so far’” (Ellis 2004, 139). She thus starts to take up the role as a happy person with a lot of friends when, according to the cultural imaginary of life course roles, isolation and decline are supposed to be at its core.

Further, Ruth takes up the role as an activist and thereby openly criticizes the society she lives in. She travels the country to talk to university students about her triple oppression of being a woman, black, and homosexual, which becomes more severe as soon as ageism is added to the mix. In that sense, Ruth speaks out for four activist causes at once. Again, she works against the cultural image of the stereotypical ‘activist’ who is thought to be a lot younger. Her ongoing fight for the rights of women, African Americans, the LGBTQ* community, and the elderly is what makes her appear so lively in Neenah’s eyes. She states that when talking to student Ruth “looks ageless to me, almost young” (Ellis 2004, 122). Ruth’s behavior thus influences the way other people see her in terms of her age. Neenah depicts her younger than she is because she engages in activities that would be expected from a younger person.

Even though she is described as being in a wheelchair while giving a lecture, the notion of being young is not overwritten. When asked to get Ruth’s wheelchair, Neenah writes that, “I find it hard to believe she’ll need it” (Ellis 2004, 117).⁶ In Ruth’s public life, her actions trump her body and she thus manages to fight cultural images of old age as a mere waiting room for death and redefines it as a space that can be used to achieve something. Her social role as activist counters the biological aspects of her age, because her actions are stereotypically expected from much younger people.

6 This scene also calls for an analysis of aging in terms of disability. The wheelchair only becomes a signifier for the aged body because in cultural imaginary old age and disability are inextricably linked (cf. Chivers 2011). A detailed reading of Ruth Ellis narrative in terms of the nexus between disability studies and aging would unfortunately go beyond the scope of this paper.

Neenah's interpretation of Ruth as 'ageless' or 'almost young' again points to the deeply rooted understandings of aging and certain roles an individual takes up throughout life. Because Neenah expects political activism to exist only outside of the life stage of old age, she regards Ruth as ageless or young while engaging in activist activities. The social role Ruth plays takes center stage, and it is because she engages in activism that, at this very moment, she is considered a successful ager. Interestingly, this success is connected with her being regarded as ageless. Aging successfully is hence depicted as not aging at all in public imaginary. This notion of success counters earlier images of her presumably dying at night by shifting the focus away from her body. She is imagined as a strong woman who stands up for herself and others through her occupation and social role. This then shows her working towards a better future, an aspect that according to Ricca Edmondson is crucial to generate meaning in later life (Edmondson 2015, 112). In that sense, Neenah Ellis does not solely define success through physical or social parameters but also through meaning.

The last factor in terms of the construction of age depicted in the Ruth Ellis segment of *If I Live to be 100* is chronological age itself. Ruth claims that people "just want to know [her] 'cause [she is] a hundred'" (Ellis 2004, 143). She claims that she has been travelling to give talks a lot since her 100th birthday. Conversely, she only has been invited to do so since she has reached that threshold. The special occasion of reaching a three-digit life span thus makes Ruth and all other centenarians special. This then suggests that successful aging, in terms of centenarians, is very much tied to the number 100. This is why even centenarians like Marion Cowen are considered to have aged successfully, despite them not adhering to a successful aging imaginary. The imaginary of centenarianism itself becomes stronger than the imaginary of successful aging. On the one hand, this offers an entry point to renegotiate the successful aging paradigm and turn towards meaning and individuality. On the other hand, the cultural imaginary of centenarianism may only be possible because merely those centenarians who are able to tell their story are represented. That is, dementia is completely left out of the picture. Marlene Goldman argues that dementia in general and Alzheimer's in particular have become the gothic narrative of aging, establishing a horror story of old age (Goldman 2017, 4). The absence of narratives of dementia thus reinforces the positive imaginary of centenarians, as it allows for a cultural imaginary of extraordinary old age without the fear of memory loss. Consequently, centenarianism and successful aging are inextricably linked in public imaginary, sparking the expectation of success as soon as the age of 100 occurs.

The last of three chapters about Ruth in the book deals with her death. According to her friends, "[o]nce she got out of the hospital, Ruth had quit eating, eager to 'make her transition,' as she called it" (Ellis 2004, 211). Shortly after her release from the hospital, Ruth dies at her home. Death is treated as the natural conclusion of the narrative and does not sound like a bad ending. On the contrary, it is portrayed as though Ruth died when she wanted to – on her own terms. The narrative here works to deconstruct the taboo topic of death as a threat looming around each corner in old age and rather depicting it as a part of life. Taking the negative connotations away from death hence also works against the negative connotations of old age as a threshold to it. Ruth Ellis' late years are everything but a waiting room for death. Rather, this last segment shows that she has not only been successful at living but also at dying.

Conclusion

Reading the successful aging paradigm alongside centenarianism has shown how the paradigm works on fears of the cultural imaginary of decline in old age. Guidebooks, as well as Neenah Ellis' collection of interviews both present centenarianism in connection to successful aging and therefore imagine extraordinary old age away from negative images. Both types of narrative can be accused of reinforcing a successful aging paradigm but add to it by contrasting the social and biological and present their own cultural imaginary of centenarianism. That is only possible, however, because centenarians are marked as successful simply measured by the number of years they have lived.

While the guidebook industry's emphasis on successful aging can be simply accused of reinforcing neoliberal aspects of individual responsibility and thereby implicitly sparking fear of decline in old age, Neenah Ellis personal stories give a more nuanced impression of centenarianism and its connection to successful aging. Through the discussion of the interplay of different aspects of age, it becomes possible to regard old age as a multifaceted stage in life that is neither merely the road toward death, nor a success story but a spectrum of possibilities and meanings. Crucially, Ellis' narrative shows how the imagery of an age category highly depends on the setting and the perspective of the onlooker. The way age is presented is thus rather fluid and individual. While she still portrays centenarians as 'successful' at aging, due to the sheer number of years they have lived, she challenges Rowe and Kahn's idea of successful aging as the absence

of physical impairment and disease. On the other hand, Ellis' narrative largely consists of her interpretation of the centenarians' lives. Ultimately, what the reader is presented with is not the centenarians' takes on what entails success in life in general and successful aging in particular but rather Ellis' imaginary. This imaginary in turn is largely influenced by her own expectations and internalized cultural imaginaries of what old age is.

Nonetheless, the narratives discussed in this paper show that representations of centenarians can expand the notion of what is successful in aging. It is not simply the body, but also social factors and the number of years lived that work together to determine success. The longer a person has lived, the more physical impairment or social isolation seems to be 'allowed' for there still to be success in the cultural imaginary. This is mostly achieved through the aspect of meaning in later life. Seeing life models of people who lead happy and meaningful lives despite their bodies and everyday encounters being influenced by the aging process may thus also lead to deconstruct fears of aging and break with the imagined binaries of aging as mere progress and decline.

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