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The Anti-Feminist Reconstruction of the Midlife Crisis: Popular Psychology, Journalism and Social Science in 1970s USA

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It seems almost impossible to say anything new about the midlife crisis. Some of the countless books and articles on the topic tackle men's midlife crises and women's; offer a personal report, a theologian's view and a Jungian perspective; discuss the midlife crisis in apes and at age twenty, and how to avoid or enjoy it; or refute it as a myth and cliché.[1] Yet for all the apparent variety of this rather repetitive literature, the history of this pivotal concept of psychological culture has never been told.

To be sure, most midlife crisis literature includes a brief origin story. Often presented in introductory remarks or brief asides, these mini-histories are characterised by a consensus that is remarkable given their informality. One professor of psychology writes:

> The midlife crisis started out very innocently with the less hyped-up name of 'midlife transition.' A Yale psychologist named Daniel Levinson published a book . . . called *[The] Seasons of a Man's Life* . . . The midlife crisis got its punchy name with the aid of journalist Gail Sheehy, who published her own book (*Passages*), based heavily on Levinson's own work.[2]

Whether a text is journalistic or academic, approving or dismissive of midlife crisis, this historical précis is typical. Other authors attribute 'midlife crisis' to therapist Roger Gould, psychiatrist George Vaillant or psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques, all otherwise largely unknown (Alexander Mitscherlich, the German psychoanalyst, used to be a candidate, but has fallen off the list). Regardless of who precisely is given priority, there is general agreement, first, that 'midlife crisis' emerged as an idea within psychology, and secondly, that Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (1976) is the definitive 'popularisation'.[3]

The standard historical narrative is misleading and significantly so, because it turns the true publishing chronology upside down. This article will show that, thanks to *Passages*, the idea of midlife crisis was popular before the science of psychology claimed it, and that Sheehy's book, far from a 'popularisation', was actually a journalist's independent publication. It attracted nationwide, indeed international, attention and stayed on best-seller lists for two years. During that time, psychologist Daniel

Levinson and psychiatrists Roger Gould and George Vaillant claimed authority over the concept of midlife crisis in their own books, all published with leading mainstream publishers. Contrary to the received narrative, they did not invent or discover the 'midlife crisis', but reversed its meaning.

Sheehy's 'midlife crisis' was a feminist idea. She described the onset of middle age as the point when men and women abandon traditional gender roles. Drawing on the language of the women's movement and on feminist science, she presented a concept that challenged separate roles and encouraged women's liberation. Levinson, Vaillant and Gould responded with a male-centred definition of midlife crisis that stigmatised criticism of gender hierarchies as man-hating and barred women from changing their lives. The notion of popularisation, I shall argue, did important work in making this the dominant meaning of 'midlife crisis'. The demarcation between 'real' and 'popular' psychology allowed Levinson, Vaillant and Gould to cast their backlash as original. The received tale of the midlife crisis is therefore not simply wrong; it feeds on and continues to nourish a narrative that has played important political roles.

This article reverses histories of 'popularisation' by tracing how an idea moved from popular culture into academia, and demonstrates how it matters to set this trajectory right. Contrary to the assumption that knowledge is created or discovered in libraries, surveys and intellectual traditions and then trickles down to the public, the history of the midlife crisis illustrates how academics, writers and activists swapped ideas back and forth and argued over issues of gender and the life course. Journalists not only 'popularised' and 'disseminated' scientific research, they also drew on it to advance their own arguments, and frequently challenged academic findings and expertise. Moreover, social scientists responded to magazine articles and used or refuted ideas propagated in best-selling books, often weaponising the notion of 'popularisation' to delegitimise critique and assert scientific authority and originality.[4]

The anti-feminist reconstruction of the midlife crisis sheds light on the widespread and influential rhetoric of delegitimising claims for women's social and economic equality as 'narcissistic' pulp psychology. Just as historians are breaking up movement-focused 'wave' chronologies and so amplifying definitions of feminism, I shall suggest that we also should reconsider how backlash was articulated and to what effect.[5] Discrediting liberatory voices as shallow and sensational relied on notions of female intellectual incompetence as much as key tropes of cultural criticism. As a way of sidestepping and silencing feminist critique, this was particularly influential at a time when the women's movement resonated widely and many sympathised with its messages.

Ultimately, the historical story about the feminist origins and chauvinist appropriation of the midlife crisis points to the relations between the 'change of life' and social change. Historians, historical anthropologists and literary scholars have drawn attention to the social, economic and cultural functions of concepts of the life course and their important roles in making and changing social structures.[6] Here, I show that the midlife crisis has historical roots in debates about gender roles and work and family values, and the shape these took in the United States in the 1970s. Thus, 'midlife crisis' turns from an anthropological constant or platitude and fabrication into a historically, culturally and socially specific concept for negotiating changing gender relations and life patterns.

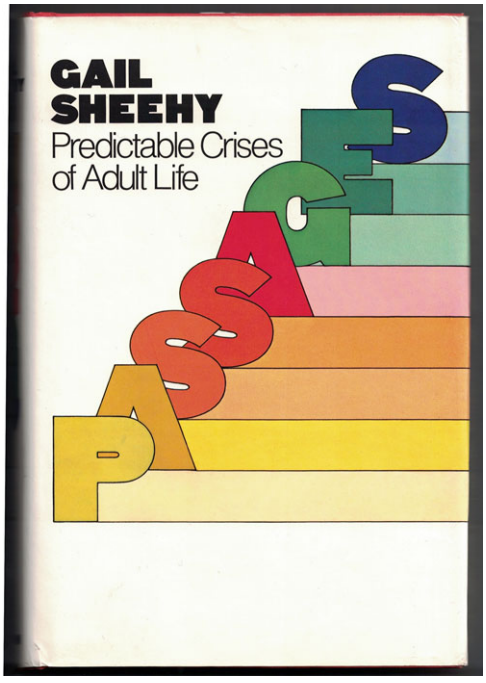

Figure 1: Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (1976), front cover. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Feminist bestseller

The notion of midlife crisis gained traction with Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (1976), a book remembered for its Milton Glaser cover: a rainbow-colored flight of stairs (Figure 1). Sheehy used the term 'midlife crisis' – coined by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in the 1950s, but rarely used – to describe a turn away from traditional family values and the work ethic in the mid-thirties to forties.[7] The transition was experienced by men and women, yet in different ways. Around the age of thirty-five, when, at least in a white, middle-class setting, the last child was sent off to school, women reappraised their lives. They asked: 'What am I giving up for this marriage?' 'Why did I have all these children?' 'Why didn't I finish my education?' 'What good will my degree do me now after years out of circulation?' 'Shall I take a job?' or 'Why didn't anyone tell me I would *have* to go back to work?'[8]

While women negotiated trading the roles of at-home wife and mother for a career, men were disillusioned with the world of work. Around the age of forty, they experienced a period of dissatisfaction. Sometimes their careers stagnated or they even lost their jobs – this was, importantly, right after the oil crisis and the stock market crash of 1973. But Sheehy emphasised that even the men whose dreams had come true were unhappy. A Manhattan professional received award after award and had his work shown in international exhibitions, yet 'Aaron' (probably the designer Milton Glaser himself) felt depressed and inane. He gave up his studio, and took up cooking and baking.[9] Another of Sheehy's interviewees quit a prestigious position in Washington,

DC for a lousy job in real estate which allowed him to live with his family in Maine. He told Sheehy: 'I'll stay home and take care of the kids. I really mean it. I adore children. And to tell you the truth, at this time in my life, I would just love to paint houses and build cabins'.[10]

'Crisis' described the difficulties attached to this mutual shift: marital tensions, his dissatisfaction with the world of work, her problems finding a satisfying job. As it read in Sheehy's distinctive pop journalistic style: 'Put together the mounting strong-mindedness of the midlife wife and the strange stirrings of emotional vulnerability in the midlife husband, and what have we got? A mystery story at the peak of its suspense. A chase of highest excitement after our missing personality parts. And an almost predictable couple crisis'.[11] The idea of midlife crisis wed Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), from whose first paragraph Sheehy borrowed the phrase 'strange stirring', to David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).[12]

Sheehy was a writer and journalist, and contributing editor at *New York* magazine, where she covered marriage and family lifestyles as well as the women's movement, but also race, counterculture and city politics more broadly. She had written for various newspapers and magazines since the early 1960s, most notably the *New York Herald Tribune*, until it folded in the mid-1960s and *New York* was built from its Sunday supplement. Sheehy's book debut *Lovesounds* (1970) was a divorce novel, a programmatic critique of marriage, followed by a series of reportages and essays on the same topic. After a fellowship in 'interracial reporting' at Columbia University, she published *Panthermania*, about the Black Panther trials in New Haven, then an investigative report about prostitution in New York's Time Square, written in the reform-oriented 'muckraking' tradition. *Hustling* (1973) informed municipal politics and won a National Magazine Award for reporting excellence, but also got caught in the New Journalism controversy for its usage of composite characters.[13] Initially planned as a book about couples, contracted with the small New York publishing house E. P. Dutton, Sheehy's latest project was soon renamed 'Growing Up Adult: Ages and Stages of Development in Men and Women', begun on a journalism fellowship in 1973–4.[14] Tying into Sheehy's longstanding interest in sexual politics, *Passages* was a work of social criticism befitting an experienced journalist.

The book was based on life-history interviews Sheehy had conducted with 115 women and men. She also drew on biographies, autobiographies and some novels, and made extensive use of works of social criticism – Alvin Toffler, Philip Slater – as well as research from disciplines that had a long tradition in life-course research, such as psychology and psychoanalysis, sociology and economics as well as medicine and sexology. The new feminist scholarship that multiplied rapidly through the 1970s was central. This field grew from one integrated women's studies programme in 1970 (at San Diego State, with other pioneering programmes in the California state university system following suit) to 150 in 1975 and 300 in 1980.[15] Sheehy consulted published and unpublished studies by psychologist Matina Horner (on women's 'fear of success'), economist Margaret Hennig (on women executives) and sociologist Harriet Zuckerman (on Nobel laureates). She cited Juliet Mitchell's critique of 'penis envy', sociologist Jessie Bernard's assessment of the use and abuse of marriage for men and women and psychiatrist Mary Jane Sherfey's feminist redefinition of embryogenesis.[16]

'Sheehy goes beyond the academicians', the dust jacket of *Passages* said, thus pre-empting criticism of her comprehensive perspective, but also expressing Sheehy's

stance towards academic research, which was often sceptical. She rarely employed the expository, laudatory tone characteristic of science writing.[17] Rather than seeking to make academic work accessible, she drew on it to prove a point of her own. Such usage of scientific results and academic theory was taught at the prestigious Columbia School of Journalism, where Sheehy had been a fellow in 1969–70 in the school's Interracial Reporting Program. This mid-career course was geared towards journalists with several years of experience, and rather than journalistic techniques it sought to communicate methods for deploying scientific research, especially from the behavioural and social sciences. Research, in content and method, was presented as a resource for contextualising and making sense of contemporary issues: 'The journalist will better understand the social significance of what he is reporting if he is able to relate this to larger bodies of knowledge'.[18] Sheehy attended Charles V. Hamilton's political science course on 'Black Politics', another class on urban politics and two anthropology courses by Margaret Mead, later involved in the *Passages* project as a mentor.[19]

The Columbia approach reflected the historical connection between journalism and the social sciences, and tied in well with Sheehy's background.[20] Under the banner of the New Journalism, *New York*, Sheehy's headquarters, celebrated its stories as implementations, even augmentations of Max Weber's theory of social stratification, as 'sociological studies of urban life that academic sociology had never attempted: the culture of Wall Street, the culture of political graft in New York, cop culture, Mob culture, . . . capital-S society and its discontents'.[21] Of her *Passages* interviews, Sheehy emphasised the methodological congruencies between journalistic and academic research, and in the spirit of the countercultural critique of expertise, cut claims to universal knowledge down to size by likening science to folklore such as the ' seven-year itch' and earlier life-cycle theories.[22]

By no means anti-scientific, such confident and critical engagement with social science provided the vantage point from which Sheehy joined the accusations of scientific androcentrism that feminist academics and intellectuals advanced against the human and social sciences and psychology and psychoanalysis in particular. Of life-course studies and theories of human development, Sheehy noted:

> [M]ost of the research was being done by men who were studying other men. Men and women may be isolated for the purpose of a scholar's study, but that is hardly how we live. We live together. How can we possibly expect to understand the development of men until we hear also from the people who bring them into the world, from the women they love and hate and fear and perform for, depend on and are depended on by, destroy and are destroyed by?[23]

A central target of Sheehy's critique was Erik Erikson, the psychoanalyst who had formulated one of the most widely circulating concepts of the human life cycle, the 'Eight Stages of Man', presented in the landmark study *Childhood and Society* (1950).[24] His defence of women's 'biological destiny' was a major target of feminist criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, voiced by Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Naomi Weisstein and others.[25] Written in light of these assessments, *Passages* provided an alternative to the psychoanalyst's model of ego development. Sheehy argued that Erikson's stage theory did not apply to women.[26] Of his definition of middle age as the stage of 'generativity', or parenting in the broader sense, she held that, 'once again the male life cycle is presented as the adult life cycle. Overlooked is that serving others is

what most women have been doing all along'. She proposed to supplement Erikson's model: 'If the struggle for men in midlife comes down to having to defeat stagnation through generativity, I submit that the comparable task for women is to transcend dependency through self-declaration'.[27]

Her critique extended to Erikson's followers. When she introduced the work of his student Daniel Levinson, who formulated a theory of the male life-course based on the 'Eight Ages', Sheehy promptly took a swipe at the psychologist's androcentrism: 'Levinson's outline of men's stages of adult growth . . . brings on a virulent case of reservations. How many men recognize that their wives and girlfriends have a need for development, too?'[28] With regard to a paper by George Vaillant, another psychiatrist working in the Eriksonian tradition, Sheehy suggested that a man's intimacy may be a woman's suffering:

> Dr Vaillant confuses me when he explains how the men who received the highest scores in overall adult adjustment mastered intimacy in their twenties. 'Of the best adapted men', she writes, '93 percent had achieved a stable marriage before 30 and stayed married until 50'. He would seem to define intimacy as staying married. One wonders how many of these wives enjoyed full adult development.[29]

Indignation marked the starting point of *Passages* and drove Sheehy's engagement with theory and research. In her memoirs, she remembered that she enjoyed a 'shrug of insubordination' by dismissing canonical works of social science that she saw as addressing 'only one-third of a much bigger picture', while two further questions needed to be asked, 'What are women doing and feeling as they negotiate that tricky passage [into middle age]? And how is the transition played out in the double-message dialogue of the couple?'[30] To answer, Sheehy combined studies of men with research from women's studies, and compared them, challenging male as much as female gender norms. *Passages* was an exercise in what the historian Joan Scott, writing some years later, described as critical supplementation: new thinking about women not only filled gaps but also critically exceeded the ways in which gender scripts had been conceived. 'Supplementing', in Scott's understanding always also meant 'rewriting'.[31]

Passages was published in a period when economic crisis and changing social norms destabilised the model of the nuclear family with a male breadwinner and at-home wife and mother. In the United States, the 'male-breadwinner model' was prevalent in the white middle class, but more widely relevant as an ideal and the central paradigm for social policies. Its erosion, in the 1960s and 1970s, has been described as a classic example of an overdetermined phenomenon. The middle-aged parents of the baby boom, facing the rising cost of rearing children in late adolescence, struggled with what demographers called the 'life-cycle squeeze': the gap between suburban life-style aspirations and family income.[32] The family wage ideal eroded, divorce rates rocketed, women's access to higher education was improved. Real wages for men stagnated, their education was prolonged and corporations ended the lockstep-career model, uncoupling the link between seniority and income and job security, an effect which early-retirement policies increased.[33] The rise of the two-earner family meant the end of a life pattern of early marriages and stable family lives, what sociologists call the 'de-standardization of the life course'.[34] Life paths transformed for men and women from the middle class. Under these conditions, feminism, with its critique of the male breadwinner family and demands for careers for women and new roles for

men, turned from an oppositional movement into a social and cultural value, and a strong force in reshaping the lives of men and women.[35]

Sheehy declared divorce and midlife career changes normal and 'predictable', and described them as desirable steps towards 'growth' and 'development'. Her definition of midlife crisis made sense of the decline of the male breadwinner model and valorised the emergence of female breadwinners and dual-income families. Critically acclaimed and widely read, *Passages* made the midlife crisis broadly popular. 'Gail Sheehy's book is different. . . . Her research is thorough and imaginative', said the *New York Times Book Review*; for the *Los Angeles Times* the book elicited 'a shock of both identification and profound relief'; and the *Ms.* reviewer reported that she 'barely made it beyond the introduction to *Passages* before I found myself underlining passages – not because I was learning new facts, but because finally somebody was putting universal human fears and uncertainties about change and growing old into a manageable perspective'.[36]

'That's an excellent book', said a young woman standing with her partner in front of a shelf of books at the Harvard 'Coop', and pointed to Sheehy's, then out for close to twelve months.[37] It remained on American best-seller lists for two years, longer than any other book published the same year. On a rough estimate, one in five American book-readers read Sheehy's book. Even more knew it from reviews, excerpts and author interviews, which were printed in the major newspapers and in many academic journals, or from the bookshelves of friends and relatives. The success was double-edged for Sheehy's publisher Dutton, whom it allegedly led to overspend on increasing production.[38] But as a result, *Passages* also circulated internationally. Translated into twenty-eight languages, it reached readers throughout North America and Western Europe, as well as in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific. Commentators spoke of a 'global best-seller'.[39]

In America, *Passages* was also read as social science. Between 1976 and 1978, it was reviewed in numerous academic journals, including *Contemporary Psychology* and *Contemporary Sociology* – the organs of the American Psychological and Sociological Associations respectively – and in various professional periodicals in the fields of marriage and career counselling, social work and adult education.[40] Writers and journalists contributed fundamentally to academic controversies over gendering central theories of the social and human sciences in the 1970s.[41] Their impact built on the established influence of journalistic reportage on American social science and on a tradition of operationalising 'everyday psychology'.[42] Science in public, Ludwik Fleck writes, 'furnishes the major portion of every person's knowledge. Even the most specialized expert owes to it many concepts, many comparisons, and even his general viewpoint . . . [Scientists] build up their specialized sciences around these concepts'.[43]

Sociologist Jessie Bernard's mention of *Passages* in her classic *The Female World* (1981) is indicative of the dialogue between academia and journalism, and of Sheehy's close relation to women's studies in particular: 'Twenty years ago I wrote that the age of thirty-five seemed an important watershed in the lives of women . . . These observations were made without any systematic research to support them. Twenty years later Gail Sheehy, on the basis of long interviews with women, confirmed them'.[44] Bernard's explicit reference was, however, exceptional in its open acknowledgement of non-expert literature. Experts who embraced Sheehy's message rarely gave her credit and often downplayed her impact, praising, for example, her collection of 'mountains of interview data', 'impressive' notes and 'substantial' bibliography, but making sure to add

that, written for a general audience, the book was of 'limited value' for professionals.[45] If sympathisers were sometimes inhibited, then critics of *Passages* exploited Sheehy's position on the margins of academia.

Bad psychology

Adversaries were few, but they had access to influential platforms.[46] Primarily, they discredited *Passages* as bad psychology, an argument that relied on Sheehy's usage of psychology and the social sciences but was also a sign of her feminist politics. The same criticism had just been lodged against other feminist authors, independent of whether they used psychology. In an assault on 'Psychobabble' (1975), writer and self-described neologist Richard Rosen moved seamlessly between R. D. Laing or Fritz Pearls and the recent feminist literature: Erica Jong's classic consciousness-raising novel *Fear of Flying* (1975) and Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* (1973) and *Forbidden Flowers* (1975) – compilations of women's sexual fantasies collected through letters and interviews that intended to refute stereotypical images of female sexuality.[47] (Friday's more famous *My Mother/My Self* was published two years later). Such criticism was based on the established link between femininity and feelings, which implied women's intellectual inferiority.[48] The notion of 'psychobabble' differed from that of 'folk' or 'kitchen' psychology only insofar as it applied specifically to ideas from ego psychology and the human potential movement, such as 'self', 'development' and 'liberation'. Because of the prominence of psychological ideas in *Passages* and because of the book's high profile, criticism of Sheehy acted as an important catalyst for establishing the anti-feminist dismissal of feminist publishing as bad psychology.

Passages had been dismissed before it was even published. In an anonymous *Time* article about the book, 'The Gripes of Academe', John Leo, editor of the magazine's behavioural science section and an ardent anti-feminist, who would soon lash out against Shere Hite's *Report on Male Sexuality* (1981) and later *Thelma & Louise*, reported a plagiarism charge against Sheehy.[49] This had been levelled two years earlier by Roger Gould, an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles, also in private practice, who threatened to sue Sheehy for 'plagiarism and copyright infringement, *inter alia*'.[50] The appendage was important; plagiarism was not an actionable civil offence and American copyright protected verbatim expressions only, not ideas, so that Gould (or his lawyer) reverted to contract law, a common procedure for plagiarism cases.[51] The charges referred to a pre-published *Passages* excerpt in *New York* magazine, 'Why Mid Life Is Crisis Time for Couples' (1974), a detailed case study, which prominently cited Gould.[52] Sheehy had interviewed the psychiatrist several months earlier, and they had exchanged and discussed unpublished texts.[53] Gould accused her of paraphrasing and copying him, and – more legally relevant – of violating a potential 'co-authorship agreement' by publishing the text under her 'exclusive ostensible authorship'.[54] He demanded to be 'fairly compensated' for his 'contribution to the basic concept and content of Ms. Sheehy's book', threatening that else he might go to court.

Such plagiarism cases against writers and journalists were not uncommon (although typically advanced against male authors), and were regularly settled to the claimant's advantage.[55] The 'fair use' defence that allows the appropriation of

copyrighted work in journalism and research in the US became effective only four years later, and the use of unpublished sources remained difficult even then.[56] Sheehy kept Gould from bringing the action to law and publicising it by offering to pay him $10,000 and 10 per cent of the book's royalties, including a $250,000 paperback sale. Within two years after the publication of *Passages*, Gould had already earned more than $75,000 in royalties, and was ironically called 'the first [academic] to make that much from someone else's book'.[57]

As Marilyn Randall has argued, plagiarism arises from the judgment of readers more than from the intentions of authors.[58] In publicising Gould's plagiarism accusation, *Time* magazine corroborated it, speaking of a 'plagiarism suit', not breach of contract. It also updated and extended the charges from the magazine article to the forthcoming book, and from Sheehy's exchange with the psychiatrist to her handling of scientific sources in general. Leo charged Sheehy with having 'unfairly ripped off her professional mentors' and appropriated their research: 'Many of Sheehy's findings were indeed reported earlier by academics; where she does cite experts they tend to be introduced as mere spear carriers in her own pageant'.[59] He elicited an additional complaint about 'unacknowledged borrowing' (a paraphrase for plagiarism) from social psychologist Daniel Levinson: 'She is incomplete, to put it mildly, in acknowledging her use of my published and unpublished material'. Sheehy rejected the charge of plagiarism as 'wholly false'. In a letter to the editor, she pointed out that Leo's judgment was based on advance galleys without the notes and bibliography, explained that 'the original theory came from Erik Erikson', and that she departed from it anyway: 'Most of the current research . . . was being done by men who were studying other men. I focused on the life-stages of women, and once it became clear that the developmental rhythms of the sexes are strikingly unsynchronised, I went on to examine the predictable crises for couples'. *Time* typically published letters to the editor within three weeks; Sheehy's response was printed with an unusual delay of six weeks.[60]

Leo's accusation spread quickly in publishing circles, but few reviewers took it up and some even appeared to refute him.[61] Acclaimed *New York Times* critic Anatole Broyard emphasised Sheehy's autonomy in what seemed to bolster her *Times* letter:

> I think that Miss Sheehy's fundamental idea is more original – at least in the way she applies it – than she does . . . Miss Sheehy does not give herself sufficient credit for adapting this notion with some ingenuity to contemporary life. Erik Homburger Erikson wrote of various stages of human life, too, but while she draws upon his ideas, she adds to them as well. She has a talent for the concrete, partly because she is a good journalist and partly because she has talked with 115 people.[62]

One of the few reviewers to pick up the plagiarism allegation was Christopher Lasch, the historian and social critic known for an adversarial stance toward women's liberation. He turned the plagiarism allegation into the less morally charged but more encompassing notion of pulp psychology. His write-up in the *New York Review of Books*, 'Planned Obsolescence', appeared when *Passages* had been out for close to half a year and reviewed in most American newspapers and many magazines.[63] The last review had been published six weeks prior, in the *New Republic*, where sociologist Robert Hassenger praised Sheehy's critique of gender roles and anticipated that 'this book . . . will scare the pants off a lot of people'.[64] Lasch proved him right. The midlife crisis was an early target of Lasch's criticism of 'narcissism', which he had conceptualised in the *New York Review of Books* a few weeks earlier.[65] It was pre-dated

by a wider journalistic usage of the term and concept, most prominently exemplified by Tom Wolfe's *New York* magazine essay 'The Me Decade'.[66] In the *Passages* review, Lasch did not speak of 'narcissism' (he would, later), but the criticism he lodged against Sheehy was typical of the concept's use to deplore the erosion of family values and blame it on self-absorption as much as feebleness and resignation, and especially on women's liberation.[67] In the 1970s, the idea of narcissism expressed anxieties about declining status at a time of economic crisis, climbing divorce rates and changing sexual politics, and accused the women's movement of furthering these problems.[68]

Lasch's main issue with Sheehy's book was its popularity; he found that too many people endorsed it, and set out to correct them. He first sidelined *Passages* as a self-help manual ('The market for books of psychiatric advice and consolation appears inexhaustible'), then swerved the other way and attacked Sheehy for not being helpful. She endorsed the change in family values and her concept of midlife crisis stipulated the end of the male-breadwinner model. He wrote,

> In effect, she urges people [read: men] to prepare for "mid-life crisis" so that they can be phased out without making a fuss. Under existing arrangements, this may be the best we can expect, but it should not be disguised as "renewal" . . . This is a recipe not for growth but for planned obsolescence.[69]

Later, reviewing Lasch's *The Minimal Self* (1984), an updated diatribe against 'narcissism', Sheehy repaid the professor in kind: 'Reading this essay gives one a case not of future shock but of past shock . . . Has Mr Lasch been out of the bunker lately?'[70] Sheehy might dismiss Lasch's criticism as a rearguard action, but it was repeatedly invoked – often unacknowledged – in subsequent *Passages* reviews in academic journals and international newspapers and magazines. The *Western Sociological Review* copied some lines verbatim: 'This appears to be a recipe for planned obsolescence rather than meaningful growth'.[71] Across the Atlantic, the French *Le Monde* proceeded similarly, with Americanist and literary scholar Pierre Dommergues interpreting the midlife crisis as a symptom of American decline, under the headline 'La vie comme une course d'obstacles', Lasch's 'life as an obstacle course'.[72] Sections from the *Passages* review were also reprinted in his ubiquitous *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), which classified the midlife crisis as a 'narcissistic disorder'.[73] Lasch was not amused to see the paperback edition of his book promoted as one of the 'greatest books on society's changing values', next to Sheehy's *Passages*, Friday's *My Mother/My Self* and Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*.[74]

Lasch failed to change the minds of millions of readers about what they saw as an eye-opening, and indeed authoritative book. In Library of Congress surveys in the 1980s and 1990s, readers voted *Passages* among the ten books that influenced their lives most – next to *The Feminine Mystique* and the Bible.[75] But casting *Passages* as pulp psychology made it more difficult for likeminded scientists, writers and journalists openly to affiliate themselves with Sheehy, lest they damage their own respectability. Similarly, the emphasis on her social scientific, psychological approach over her politics hindered activists from siding with her. In the wake of Sheehy's success, the anti-feminist rhetoric of discrediting feminist publishing as bad psychology spread. Turning his earlier article into a book, *Psychobabble* (1977), Richard Rosen expatiated upon his criticism of women's liberation, drawing, in part, on the notion of narcissism.[76] Now, he explicitly denominated the women's movement a main source

of poor psychology: 'The fact that women are reclaiming the emotional, professional and sexual prerogatives so long denied them has been . . . the inspiration for volumes of psychobabble'.[77] Rosen bolstered this claim by including lesser known titles which connected feminism and psychology, such as journalist and psychologist Adelaide Bry's *The Sexually Aggressive Woman* (1975), a 'nonfiction version of [Erica Jong's] *Fear of Flying*', which he sidelined as sensationalist: 'Promiscuity always makes good copy'.[78] Rosen demanded: 'no more books by unhappy housewives crying "I've just got to be me!"'[79] The equation of feminism with bad psychology was standard practice before it dominated the headlines about Shere Hite's *Report on Male Sexuality* in 1981. Among its critics were John Leo of *Time* magazine and Roger Gould (for the *New York Times*), who held that, 'Whatever else it may be, the *Hite Report on Male Sexuality* is not a scientific document'.[80]

A salient effect of delegitimising *Passages* as bad psychology was on books published after it, and therewith, on the meaning of midlife crisis. Far from being anti-psychological, criticism of pulp therapy often called for a different public psychology: 'Arguing against psychobabble is . . . an argument for a language that has better access to the paradoxes of emotional life and therefore a language that is more revealing, more powerful, more therapeutic'.[81] With regards to gender politics, however, this 'deeper, psychodynamic critique' was primarily understood to stabilise gender hierarchies.[82] If feminism was bad psychology, then anti-feminism had what it took to be serious psychology. The implications of dismissing Sheehy's midlife crisis as bad psychology allowed the concept to be overturned. In the two years following *Passages*, three experts – psychologist Daniel Levinson and psychiatrists George Vaillant and Roger Gould – successfully claimed authority over the midlife crisis, and turned it into an anti-feminist concept by distinguishing their own books of popular psychology from *Passages* as better science.

Psychology and the crisis of masculinity

Sheehy called 1978 the 'Year of the Man', and she should know, scholar and writer Jordan Pecile mused, 'because she makes her living by keeping her finger on the pulse of social movements'.[83] With a view to the newly released *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, by psychologist Daniel Levinson, Pecile continued: 'What I think she means is that after the many molehills of books which have risen out of the burrowing activities of the feminists and which examined women's roles, life cycles, attitudes, desires and frustrations, there comes now the male *backlash*'. It pre-dated the more visible attacks on the women's movement that became current in the 1980s, but, in similar fashion, relied on psychology and was a mass media phenomenon.[84] The backlash came in the form of three books published with mainstream presses: Levinson's *Seasons*, which received most attention, plus Roger Gould's *Transformations* (both 1978) and George Vaillant's *Adaptation* (1977). Based on similar anti-feminist tenets, the three titles received attention because they were classified as more authoritative takes on the midlife crisis.

Published first, George Vaillant's *Adaptation to Life*, put out as a trade edition with respected Boston publishers Little, Brown and Company, wore its politics on its sleeve, in the form of a cover image of the Vitruvian Man, an incarnation of scientific androcentrism. The book was based on a longitudinal study of ninety-four Harvard

graduates, a sample from the 'Grant Study of Social Adjustments', established in the late 1930s as an investigation into physiological masculinity (and named after its initial donor, dime-store magnate William T. Grant).[85] Originally envisioned as a five-year project, the researchers kept milking money from various donors throughout the following years and decades, and data from the men, through waves of questionnaires and, occasionally, personal interviews up to 1972, when Vaillant became the principal investigator, and beyond.[86] In 2003, psychiatrist Robert Waldinger succeeded Vaillant as director of the Grant Study, which is now administered at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Adaptation was largely an elaboration of the psychoanalytical theory of 'defense mechanisms' – sublimation, projection, repression, and others – that Anna Freud had developed in the 1930s. An essay on this topic won Vaillant the Boston Psychoanalytical Society's annual award.[87] Taking a stable marriage as a main indicator of mental health, Vaillant uncoupled this conventional Freudian wisdom from sexual satisfaction; he held that 'enjoyable affairs' stabilised marriages.[88] Sheehy had mocked an earlier article by Vaillant, and now came his retort. Ancillary to the overall issue of defence mechanisms was a chapter on middle age, 'The Adult Life Cycle', which drew on Erik Erikson's 'Eight Stages of Man' and Carl G. Jung as well as on a paper by Levinson. Sidestepping Sheehy's criticism, Vaillant reverted to the trope of media sensationalism to dismiss *Passages*. He suggested that, in the name of good copy, Sheehy 'made all too much of the midlife crisis . . . The high drama in Gail Sheehy's bestselling *Passages* was rarely observed in the lives of the Grant Study men'.[89] The allegation was easily turned against Vaillant himself. With regards to the psychiatrist's descriptions of midlife crisis, sociologist Alice Rossi remarked: 'While Vaillant rejects the high drama of the more popularised writings on the mid-life crisis, his case examples and summary statements project exactly this view'.[90] Several months later, when Levinson's *Seasons* was published, Vaillant's hierarchical distinction of science and the media was overlaid with a chronological one: 'original' versus 'popularization'.[91]

Daniel Levinson secured a book deal with leading publisher Alfred Knopf in 1974, soon after Sheehy had reported about his project on the career plateau, 'A Psychosocial Study of the Male Mid-Life Decade', which had concluded the previous year.[92] She endorsed Levinson's social psychological perspective and life-history method, but was critical of his focus on male development. The 'Male Mid-Life' project had developed from Levinson's earlier work. Trained as a psychologist, he had studied with Erik Erikson (Betty Friedan was a fellow student), and done his doctoral thesis as part of the Berkeley Public Opinion Study Group (1944–47), best known for *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).[93] In line with the legacy of authoritarianism research in American social science more broadly, criticism of conformity remained an important starting point for Levinson, whose focus soon shifted to organisational psychology – first at Harvard and, from 1966 onwards, at Yale.[94] Drawing on Erikson and borrowing from Jung, Levinson shared with Vaillant a psychodynamic point of view that was not unusual in organisational psychology, and his 'Mid-Life' project addressed issues of career development and stagnation that were central to the field.[95]

Seasons was introduced, however, as the original *Passages*. In the *New York* article, Sheehy had highlighted the importance of Levinson's research for her book project, and in *Passages*, she included a 'primary professional debt' to him in the acknowledgements.[96] Such affiliation elevated Sheehy's credibility, but also masked

her criticism of Levinson and overemphasised his importance. She had interviewed the psychologist and cited two papers by him, one of them unpublished, possibly even unfinished (it was referenced as a manuscript 'in progress').[97] When Levinson's book was published, Sheehy's references underpinned the psychologist's authority on the midlife crisis and bolstered a priority claim, put forward on the dust jacket of *Seasons*: 'Levinson's findings . . . have already . . . received public attention as the foundation of Gail Sheehy's *Passages*'.[98] Although Levinson was familiar with Sheehy's work and – despite declaring to prefer the term 'midlife transition' – spoke of 'midlife crisis' frequently, he dodged mention of *Passages* in his book. This supported the priority claim. (Why would he have bothered to refer to a popularisation of his own work?)

Roger Gould proceeded similarly. Four years after charging Sheehy with plagiarism, he redeemed his claim to the midlife crisis by publishing his own book, *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1978), a title conspicuously modelled on Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*.[99] Some reviewers had already suspected Levinson of 'literary cloning', 'the technique of reproducing a credible likeness of a successful book', 'suitably disguised', and 'turned out in time to catch the market for the original'.[100] This applied at least as much to Gould, but like Levinson, he got away with it by claiming priority. Gould used the introduction to evoke the plagiarism charges against Sheehy and extend them to his book. Like Levinson, he predated the beginnings of *Transformations*: to a personal crisis 'ten years ago', and more specifically to a 1972 paper, 'The Phases of Adult Life', which tested the age classification of patients for group therapy at the UCLA psychiatric outpatient department.[101] Pointing out that Sheehy had started *Passages* later (in 1973), Gould highlighted her interest in his work, asserting that 'she asked me to join her in writing a book on the subject'.[102] By his own account, Gould turned Sheehy down because he did not want to write a 'superficial' book. Reviewers pointed out that *Transformations* bore 'little resemblance' to Gould's earlier paper; it seemed more closely tied to his experience in private practice in Santa Monica, California.[103] A marriage advice book, which introduced the 'Seven-Step Inner Dialogue' as a method for mastering marital problems, it built on the same psychodynamic tenets as the two earlier books. While Levinson and Vaillant spoke about and to men primarily, Gould included women more explicitly and conveyed to a female audience the new idea of a midlife crisis that applied to men only.

The three experts described the midlife crisis as the moment of breaking out of the conformity of social norms, thus interlacing the received notion of male middle age and the criticism of soul-crushed men in '"grey flannel" straitjackets' that underlay much of postwar social science in the United States.[104] Theirs was a criticism of organisational America as much as of the nuclear family, putting forward their own idea of an 'open marriage'. Where Sheehy posited that the end of the male breadwinner role required a redefinition of masculinity, the three professionals held that, to the contrary, traditional notions of masculinity should be reinforced.

Of his Harvard subjects, Vaillant said: 'From age twenty-five to thirty-five they tended to work hard, to consolidate their careers, and to devote themselves to the nuclear family . . . Rather than question whether they had married the right woman, rather than dream of other careers, they changed their baby's diapers . . . [They] became lost in conformity'.[105] Criticism of other-directedness could go two ways, and imply either renewed appreciation of fatherhood or escape into a playboy lifestyle.[106] Tom Rath, the

protagonist of Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955), recovered his integrity by confessing to his wife a previous case of infidelity, and identifying with his role as a father.[107] Sheehy's definition of the male midlife crisis worked along similar lines, with disillusioned careerists moving into baking and carpentry, and valorising togetherness. In contrast, Levinson, Vaillant and Gould described male middle age as a reawakening of sexual drive and a breakaway from monogamy, ideally with considerably younger women.[108] Drawing on the Freudian idea that puberty is preceded by a latency stage, Vaillant depicted the forties as a phase in which men are 'less inhibited' than in the 'serious, practical, asexual' thirties: 'men in their forties . . . are confronted by instinctual reawakening . . . [T]heir marriages are sometimes in disarray and their groping towards love seems adolescent'.[109] One of the Grant Study men built a 'shamelessly exhibitionistic house', another engaged in a 'series of discreet but enjoyable affairs', a third was 'finally able' to let his inner 'Brazilian jungle emerge into his conscious life' in the form of an 'exciting love affair'.[110]

This understanding of midlife crisis was anti-feminist in two respects: first, it denounced feminist critique as 'man-hating'; secondly, it banned women from changing their lives. The trope of a 'second adolescence' and the notion of development more generally normalised the escapades of married men and fathers as steps towards greater integrity. This lent itself to the widespread anti-feminist move of delegitimising criticism of systemic gender hierarchies as anti-male and reducing feminism to a self-help movement for women, a programme of personal transformation.[111] 'The man himself and those who care about him should recognize that he is in a normal developmental period', Levinson urged. 'The pathology is not in the desire to improve one's life but in the obstacles to pursuing this aim'.[112] The psychologist drew on the Jungian concept of psychic polarities to emphasise the psychodynamic relevance of relationships with younger women: 'we have to look at the extramarital relationship from a developmental perspective. It reflects a man's struggle with the Young/Old polarity: he is asserting his youthful vitality at a time when he fears that the Young in him is being crushed'.[113] Gould's *Transformations* was a book-length attempt to keep his female audience from challenging their husbands, or any men, and turning inwards:

> So much unnecessary misery occurs when a woman's aggression is directed at the men in her life, for everybody suffers and nobody benefits . . . In short, the husband may be a raving male chauvinist. However, even if this is so, every woman's *first* project must be her own mind, her own attitudes about herself, her own emotional constraints.[114]

Women's problems were with themselves. Even this minimal programme of self-therapy, however, was curtailed, as the three experts limited personal development to men, therein following a tradition of defining development in terms of men that dated back beyond Erikson to Jean Piaget and Sigmund Freud. Levinson and Vaillant studied men only – interviews with the wives were conducted in order to obtain an 'additional perspective on the husband'.[115] Vaillant chose not to compare the Grant Study to the plethora of similar studies conducted at women's colleges, and Levinson limited his study to men, holding that women should be studied separately.[116] Gould, who considered men and women, reserved the midlife crisis for men; women were told how to cope.[117] Unlike other developmental theories, the psychodynamic concept of midlife crisis did not assume that Man was the measure of all people, but exempted women from transformation at middle age. This implied a criticism of women's changing

roles, both as a fact and an agenda: women's changes hindered men from releasing their full potential. Drawing on the contemporary debate about a 'new male impotence' induced by fear of self-confident women rather than hormonal change, Levinson held that a woman's 'growing assertiveness and freedom' resulted in her partner's 'severe decline'. He problematised the moment when a wife 'takes the initiative in reappraising the marriage'; redefining the marital contract was a male privilege:

> Being more free of familial responsibilities in her late thirties or forties, she seeks to expand her own horizons and start new enterprises outside the home. She becomes the voice of development and change . . . [T]he husband may then become the voice of the status quo. Moreover, a man who feels that his own youthfulness is in jeopardy may be more threatened than pleased.[118]

Levinson, Vaillant and Gould levelled the received double standard of middle age against women's liberation.

Read for what they had to say about 'the *Passages* subject matter', or the midlife crisis, they received an amount of attention out of all proportion to their degree of popularity until then; it spoke to the continued interest in the midlife crisis.[119] When Vaillant's *Adaptations* and Levinson's *Seasons* were published, Sheehy's *Passages* was still a top bestseller. It was still in bookstores when Gould's *Transformations* came out. The three psychodynamic books were reviewed not only in academic journals, among them the organs of the American Psychological and Sociological Associations, but also in newspapers and weeklies such as *the New York Times* and *The Nation*. Levinson's *Seasons* was reviewed more often than Vaillant's and Gould's books, receiving at least twenty-nine reviews, compared with twenty and eight for *Adaptation* and *Transformations*, respectively – although this was still below Sheehy's *Passages* which had been reviewed at least forty-nine times.

Most reviewers picked up on the immediate connection to *Passages*, but few emphasised their opposing gender politics. Predominantly, *Seasons*, *Adaptation* and *Transformations* were read as better takes on the midlife crisis. They had three advantages over Sheehy. Their status as experts vis-à-vis a journalist – whose book had been sidelined as bad psychology – undergirded the claim that their definition of middle age was authoritative. Additionally, they reiterated the received double standard of middle age, so that their account of midlife crisis appeared familiar to many. Finally, many reviewers of *Seasons*, *Adaptation* and *Transformation* had heard of *Passages*, but not read it.

This was especially true for the general press, with little difference between reviews by journalists and by academics. While Levinson's, Vaillant's and Gould's books were often reviewed together, there was little overlap with reviewers of *Passages*. Sheehy's book had been reviewed by literary critics and journalists with a marriage and lifestyle beat, while reviews of *Seasons*, *Transformations* and *Adaptation* were primarily by psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists or science writers. Reviewers in newspapers and magazines thus reiterated Vaillant's, Levinson's and Gould's assertion that their books were better, even earlier, books on midlife crisis. A reviewer of Vaillant's *Adaptation* picked up on the psychiatrist's dismissal of Sheehy, comparing the two books as opera and pop music: '[*Adaptation*] is to *Passages* what [the operatic soprano] Beverly Sills is to [the popular singer] Linda Ronstadt'.[120] Similarly, many reviewers introduced Levinson's *Seasons* as the original book on midlife crisis, 'the very study that provided the basic research and the results for Sheehy's [. . .]

Passages'.[121] One reviewer – he attributed his expertise to his own age – went as far as advising against reading Sheehy: 'If you never climbed aboard the bandwagon for *Passages*, . . . don't now. Because now comes *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, by Daniel Levinson and . . . it is by far the better book. Better, because it is solid and sure and wise. And most of all, credible'.[122]

Few reviewers were blind to the complications of casting *Passages* as a popularisation of *Seasons*, but many were quick to rectify them by drawing on the notion of bad psychology. For example, they justified Levinson's androcentric approach as more 'cautious' or exact.[123] Reviewers also borrowed from the language of plagiarism to rectify the seemingly twisted order of publication:

> If I were Daniel Levinson, I might have sued Gail Sheehy', one reviewer explained: 'Sheehy's book attracted so much attention . . . that the element of surprise [*Seasons*] might otherwise have given us is lost. . . . There are other irritations with *Passages* – notably the author's tendency to present herself as discoverer rather than popularizer.[124]

The new books were, however, not uncontroversial. Although many academic reviewers reiterated the popularisation narrative, the anti-feminist midlife crisis was more easily contested in academic journals. Some that reviewed Levinson, Vaillant or Gould had also reviewed Sheehy, among them *Contemporary Psychology*, *Contemporary Sociology* and the *Adult Education Quarterly*. Assessed as a scientist manqué, Sheehy had a notoriously difficult standing in academic journals, but in academic contexts, reviewers were as sceptical about the three later trade books. It was difficult to distinguish between Levinson's *Seasons* and Sheehy's *Passages* as science and popularisation, *Psychiatry* reviewer Henry Maas pointed out: 'Sheehy . . . includes women and couples as well as men in her book, and her footnote sources and bibliography are very good, in the best scholarly tradition . . . Levinson's text plays down its academically respectable origins, gives an inadequate account of its methodology . . . and provides no bibliography, as such, at all'.[125] This basic scepticism constituted an important basis for challenging the anti-feminist midlife crisis.

When Gould's subsequent *Transformations* appeared, it was met with little enthusiasm in both academic reviews and the general press. Even reviewers who backed up his charges against Sheehy cast *Transformations* as a lesser version of both Levinson's and Valliant's titles – 'neither like the thoughtful, wise and scholarly . . . Levinson work nor the very approachable, sprightly *Passages*'; and *Time* magazine ridiculed the book's self-help format.[126] The success of the backlash was not certain, its outcome ambiguous.

Levinson, Vaillant and Gould obliterated Sheehy's feminist definition of midlife crisis, which had applied to men and women equally. But although it became the main reference point, the androcentric concept of midlife crisis was not generally accepted. It was contested soon and broadly, by psychologists and sociologists – Carol Gilligan, Lillian Rubin, Alice Rossi. Often using arguments similar to those voiced by Sheehy, their research was taken up widely in the media and shed considerable doubt on the masculinist concept of midlife crisis, which it turned into a 'myth' and 'cliché'. The public debate about the androcentric midlife crisis gave visibility and currency to the feminist criticism of the double standard of aging. *Passages* may have failed in

codifying the midlife crisis, but it was instrumental in directing public and academic attention to feminist studies of human development.

Conclusion

The history of how psychologists claimed the midlife crisis complicates accounts of popularisation. The midlife crisis gained traction with journalist Gail Sheehy's *Passages*, as a feminist idea which described the transformation of gender roles at the onset of middle age. Drawing on a wide array of social scientific studies, Sheehy attempted to 'go beyond the academicians' by critically supplementing androcentric theories of development with new research from women's studies. *Passages* was widely read and endorsed, not least among social scientists. But critics exploited Sheehy's position on the fringes of academia to delegitimise the midlife crisis as bad psychology, which became a common reproach against feminist publishing. Intersecting with gender stereotypes about female intellectual inadequacy, such subcutaneous anti-feminism was less visible than the more overt backlash against the women's movement, yet all the more efficacious. It disqualified Sheehy's research and politics alike, thus making it difficult for sympathetic experts and activists alike to publicly align themselves with her.

Moreover, equating feminist voices with poor thinking implied that respectable science maintained, rather than undermined, gender roles. Thus, when psychologist Daniel Levinson and psychiatrists Roger Gould and George Vaillant authored their own books on middle age, they drew on the demarcation between good and bad psychology to dodge and dump Sheehy's criticism of their work and its psychodynamic tenets, while asserting their own scientific respectability. The notion of popularisation was used as a political tool to dismiss criticism as copying and cast counter-attack as original. The three experts advanced a male-centred idea of midlife crisis as a breakaway from marital and corporate bonds, which justified male chauvinism, and, by exempting women from transformation at middle age, barred them from changing their lives. Although that became the dominant meaning of midlife crisis, this was not a simple tale of conquest.

Sheehy's concept resonated among millions of readers, although many had limited public authority and for those who did, it was difficult to publicly identify with her. Its broad appeal derived in part from the fact that actors could use the idea of a transformation in middle age towards different ends.[127] The anti-feminist bouleversement of the midlife crisis thus attested to Sheehy's popularity. Moreover, while the masculinist psychologists wielded expert authority and received broad media coverage, their concept of middle age remained controversial. The backlash redefined the midlife crisis and reduced *Passages* to bad psychology. Yet the androcentric midlife crisis was essentially contested, and the broad debate about the midlife crisis that ensued made criticism of the double standard of aging socially acceptable. Ultimately, the history of the midlife crisis shows that concepts of psychological development constituted an important instrument for negotiating and questioning gender roles and family values.

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