

BOOK REVIEW

## Susanne Schmidt, *Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché*

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*Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché* provides a decades-spanning story that re-evaluates the history of an idea firmly lodged in popular discourse. Today, the midlife crisis conjures up images of a masculine drive for freedom from the drudgery of everyday life, frequently manifested through lavish expenditures on indulgences and fripperies that have been withheld for the sake of family and career. Although the midlife crisis is often viewed with irreverence, Schultz shows that it was a serious talking point within the human sciences from the 1960s through to the 1990s. During this time, the male midlife crisis was lionized in the works of authors like John Updike as part of a journey to break through the inauthenticity of suburban life. The feminist midlife crisis, articulated most notably by Betty Freidan, received less attention, and Schmidt's *Midlife Crisis* is largely a book about why that is the case. It is a complex story that argues for the origins of the concept in the work of feminist writers, principally Gail Sheehy, who described it as a point reached by both male and female professionals as they approach their forties. Sheehy's midlife crisis, articulated in her 1974 book *Passages*, marks the beginning of a person's deep and unsettling questioning of social norms uncritically followed in previous stages in life: according to Sheehy, these included the then well-established gender roles that left women responsible for the home, and men their careers. This forgotten version of the midlife crisis does not entail the breakdown of the family due to one person's abandonment, but instead can provide new and fruitful reconfigurations within relationships, allowing them to be re-established on different terms during middle age. These can go beyond the bounds of conventional gender roles: Schmidt provides the example of Milton Glaser – designer of the I♥NY logo and the *Passages* cover – and Shirley Girton as a couple who successfully switched roles in response to a midlife crisis. *Passages* articulated many of the themes of unsettlement and existential despair that still accompany the midlife crisis, albeit her notion provided a new beginning, a 'second adulthood', which is characterized by a kind of authenticity when making subsequent life choices and understanding one's own role in life.

Sheehy's midlife crisis provoked a backlash from the male-dominated human sciences, principally articulated in the work of the psychologists Erik Erikson and Daniel Levinson. Both conceived of the midlife crisis as a wholly masculine affair and described it as a part of a quasi-natural development of the male psyche. Sheehy's formulation of the midlife crisis, which contained some emancipatory potential from cultural and social norms, becomes lost as psychologists reframed it as a part of the natural development of malehood. In describing his Eight Ages of Man, Erikson held that the male must break free

from the constraints of work and family to flourish and reach full self-actualization. In their attacks on Erikson's framing of the midlife crisis, the psychologists Carol Gilligan, Grace Baruch and Rosalind Barnett viewed the midlife crisis as a childish act of selfishness and regression. Sheehy's midlife crisis, including its potentials, came to be lost in the academic crossfire.

In looking to Sheehy's *Passages* to understand the origins of the midlife crisis, Schmidt's work provides further illumination of the complex interplays between 'popular' and 'specialist' science that were discussed by Roger Cooter and Stephen Pumfrey in their seminal paper published three decades ago. Schmidt shows how Sheehy's background in journalism, along with *Passages* being considered by many as a self-help book, shaped the view that she was a mere popularizer of the term. The widely accepted origin story instead looks to the work of the Canadian psychologist Elliott Jacques, who included the term in an obscure paper on creativity delivered as part of a perfunctory membership ritual to the British Psychological Society. As well as becoming firmly established in the historiography, this origin story shaped the history of the term; *Passages* was viewed as having been a derivative of an idea emerging from a specialist in Jacques, and further developed in the work of Roger Gould, Erikson and Levinson. *Midlife Crisis* holds that these prejudices are largely to blame for the unfortunate eclipse of Sheehy's work.

The way Schmidt relates this important case study to wider issues surrounding the communication of scientific knowledge is of particular interest. Schmidt questions the view established by a predominantly masculine profession and more recently adopted by the mainstream that the true origins of the midlife crisis can be found in scientific literature. Schmidt proves through careful analysis how the original articulation of the term in Jacques's paper lacks the nuance and sophistication that Sheehy would later provide, and is offered on flimsy empirical evidence compared to the research presented in *Passages*.

There are definite heroes and villains in Schmidt's account, which not only makes for exciting reading but also gives the analysis a sharp precision that is refreshing and forthright. The level of detail on the development of midlife crisis through its circulation and reception is truly impressive, making it almost certain that this will be the go-to text on the history of the midlife crisis for years to come. It will be of particular interest to those working in interdisciplinary contexts, be it in teaching or research: indeed, this reviewer has recommended it as a reading for science communication students because of the engaging way it illuminates theoretical issues through a familiar example. Whilst the case may be prima facie of interest to historians of the human sciences in the US context, there is enough in here to interest transnational historians of scientific ideas. The broader questions it raises about what kind of existence we should regard the midlife crisis as possessing may prove to make Schmidt's work of interest to the general reader interested in the history of concepts that structure the human sciences.