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THE FEMINIST ORIGINS OF THE MIDLIFE CRISIS*

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ABSTRACT. *This article tells the history of the midlife crisis, for the first time. Today, the idea of midlife crisis conjures up images of male indulgence and irresponsibility, but it was first successfully promoted as a feminist concept that applied to men and women equally and described the dissolution of gender roles at the onset of middle age. Although the term was coined by the psychologist Elliott Jaques in the 1950s, it only came into general use two decades later with journalist Gail Sheehy's bestselling Passages (1976), as a concept that relied on older understandings of middle age as a welcome 'release' from motherhood and domesticity. The feminist origins of the midlife crisis suggest, first, that journalistic publishing can be more significant for the history of an idea than specialists' theories, even if those precede it. Secondly and more importantly, it sheds new light on Susan Sontag's classic analysis of the 'double standard of aging' by making visible how women used the notion of midlife change to undermine gender hierarchies.*

One might not have expected the history of the midlife crisis to begin with a shocking scene from a notorious massacre, still less that a woman would tell the tale.

I was talking to a young boy in Northern Ireland where I was on assignment for a magazine when a bullet blew his face off. British armored cars began to plow into the crowd. Paratroopers jackknifed out of the tanks with high-velocity rifles. They sprayed us with steel. The boy without a face fell on top of me...A moment later, a bullet passed a few feet in front of my nose.¹

On Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, British soldiers killed and wounded civilians protesting against internment. Gail Sheehy, a journalist for *New York*

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¹ Gail Sheehy, *Passages: predictable crises of adult life* (New York, NY, 1976), pp. 3–4.

magazine, was in Derry to report on the role of women in the IRA and the movement for Irish Home Rule.² Four years later, Sheehy became known to a large international audience as the author of *Passages: predictable crises of adult life* (1976), the bestseller with which, I shall argue, the ‘midlife crisis’ entered popular culture and the social sciences in the United States and abroad. The book opens with a description of Sheehy’s own nervous breakdown after Bloody Sunday. She attributed her condition in part to the specific trauma of Northern Ireland and in part to a general ‘midlife crisis’, or the imperative to reassess and change one’s life when approaching the age of forty. Sheehy decided, she tells us, ‘to find out everything I could about this thing called *midlife crisis*’.³

A favourite gendered cliché, the idea of midlife crisis conjures up the image of an affluent, middle-aged man speeding off in a red Porsche with a woman half his age, but it was first successfully promoted as a concept about women and politics. This article tells the history of the midlife crisis, for the first time. I will show that although the term was coined by the Canadian psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in the 1950s, it only came into general use two decades later with the publication of *Passages*, as a concept that relied on older understandings of middle age as a welcome ‘release’ from motherhood and domesticity.

By pointing to the feminist origins of the midlife crisis, I make two points: first, that journalistic publishing can be more significant for the history of an idea than specialists’ theories, even if those precede it. Secondly and more importantly, I revisit Susan Sontag’s classic analysis of the ‘double standard of aging’. According to Sontag, aging – a process which she located in middle not old age – ‘denounces women with special severity. Society is much more permissive about aging in men, as it is more tolerant of the sexual infidelities of husbands. Men are “allowed” to age, without penalty, in several ways that women are not.’⁴ Sontag’s analysis of aging – unlike her influential work on illness – has not seemed to need criticism; her critique has crystallized into a commonplace, attesting to the persistence of the double standard.⁵ A substantial body of historical scholarship now documents the disadvantages that aging brings women, and how the double standard of middle age discriminates against them.⁶ Here, I expand and complicate research on age and gender

² ‘The fighting women of Ireland’, *New York*, 13 Mar. 1972.

³ Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 12.

⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘The double standard of aging’, *Saturday Review*, 23 Sept. 1972, p. 31.

⁵ On Sontag’s understanding of illness, see Allan Brandt, ‘Emerging themes in the history of medicine’, *Milbank Quarterly*, 69 (1991), esp. pp. 203–4; Barbara Clow, ‘Who’s afraid of Susan Sontag?’, *Social History of Medicine*, 14 (2001), pp. 293–312.

⁶ The literature is extensive; classic studies include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, ‘Puberty to menopause: the cycle of femininity in nineteenth-century America’, in *Disorderly conduct: visions of gender in Victorian America* (New York, NY, 1985); Susan Bell, ‘The medicalization of menopause’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 24 (1987), pp. 535–42; Margaret Lock, *Encounters with aging: mythologies of menopause in Japan and North America* (Berkeley, CA, 1990); and, more recently, Judith A. Houck, *Hot and bothered: women, medicine, and menopause in modern*

by making visible how women used the notion of midlife change to undermine gender hierarchies.⁷

These two points – about genre and gender – are closely related: the focus on the writings of medical and psychiatric experts is a key reason for the omission of empowering concepts in historical writing on gender and middle age. Clinical language centres on women's bodies and motherhood and foregrounds the pathological aspects of middle age.⁸ Journalistic, political, and sociological frameworks, by contrast, give more room to social and professional aspects of aging and thus to descriptions of midlife as a period of new beginnings, success, and increased public influence for women. Such positive notions of aging undermined traditional gender roles and challenged male privileges. By introducing evidence of ambiguity, I suggest that conflicting constructions of middle age competed, some stabilizing and others subverting gender hierarchies. Though influential, the double standard was neither the sole nor a universal feature of concepts of aging.

I

Passages starts with a description of Sheehy's own 'midlife crisis', expressed in a nervous breakdown that stretched over six months and ten pages. This was tied to her observation of two political events, Bloody Sunday and the Democratic National Convention of 10–13 July 1972, at which activists established the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), the first at a national convention. Sheehy did not refer again to that experience in *Passages*, which sought to establish the midlife crisis as a universal phenomenon. As a literary device, autobiographical references were supposed to make the author relatable, but the danger Sheehy described would have been foreign to most of her readers. And while her depiction as a war correspondent and political commentator may have established her credibility and standing as a writer, the detailed rendering of her nervous breakdown potentially produced the opposite effect: 'They'll think you're crazy', her copy editor warned.⁹

Above all, there was a certain uneasiness to the analogy between the dead of Northern Ireland and the midlife crisis of a jet-setting journalist. It recalls descriptions, by Ernest Hemingway and others, of war as a rite of passage of

America (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *The estrogen elixir: a history of hormone replacement theory in America* (Baltimore, MD, 2007).

⁷ Anthropologists have advanced similar arguments; see Yewoubdar Beyene, *From menarche to menopause: reproductive lives of peasant women in two cultures* (Albany, NY, 1989); Marcha Flint, 'Menarche and menopause of Rajput women' (Ph.D. dissertation: City University of New York, 1975).

⁸ Medical frameworks pathologized men, too: Christina Benninghaus, 'Beyond constructivism?: gender, medicine and the early history of sperm analysis, Germany 1870–1900', *Gender & History*, 24 (2012), pp. 647–76.

⁹ Gail Sheehy, *Daring: my passages* (New York, NY, 2014), p. 217.

male personality development – only that Sheehy spoke of women.¹⁰ And this was the point. By situating the midlife crisis in the context of Bloody Sunday and the NWPC, Sheehy introduced it as a matter of women gaining consciousness and fighting for their rights – be it with arms, like in the IRA, or by the long march through the institutions begun at the Democratic convention. ‘The personal is political.’¹¹

When *Passages* came out, Gail Sheehy had been a journalist for over a decade and a half.¹² Born Gail Henion in 1937, the daughter of a salesman and a home-maker, she grew up in Westchester County, New York. After graduating from the University of Vermont, she worked as a travelling representative for J. C. Penney, a large department store. She married in 1960, taking her husband’s last name, Sheehy, and lived in Rochester, New York, before moving to New York City in 1963, where their daughter was born the following year. The couple divorced in 1968. The same year, Sheehy became a contributing editor at the newly founded *New York* magazine.¹³ She had written before – for a local newspaper in Rochester, then briefly for the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* and for a while at Helen Gurley Brown’s *Cosmopolitan* as well as for *Holiday*, *McCall’s*, and other magazines; but first and foremost for the *New York Herald Tribune*. A feature writer under the illustrious ‘Trib’ fashion editor Eugenia Sheppard, Sheehy took pride in her contempt for ‘fak[ing] passion in print for the latest collection of Junior League tea dresses’, and in blighting the style pages with articles about topics Sheppard considered ‘unsightly at best and radical at worst’ (but agreed to include): anti-war protests, abortion, women doctors administering medical care to beaten up civil rights activists in Selma, and Harlem women on rent strike.¹⁴

Newspapers’ ‘women’s pages’, while often (and correctly) criticized as a ‘soft news ghetto’ that institutionalized the restrictions placed on women, were also central for feminism in the press. They raised important women’s issues early and discussed them at greater length and in more detail than other parts of

¹⁰ On war and masculinity, see the classic George L. Mosse, *The image of man: the creation of modern masculinity* (New York, NY, 1996), esp. pp. 110–13.

¹¹ The phrase was coined by Carol Hanisch, ‘The personal is political’, *Notes from the second year: women’s liberation* (1970), pp. 76–8. It circulated widely through Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is powerful: an anthology of writings from the women’s movement* (New York, NY, 1970).

¹² Sheehy’s biography and career are reconstructed on the basis of Gail Sheehy, ‘Cultural history’, 17 Feb. 1970, and ‘Alicia Patterson fellowship application’, 23 Oct. 1972, Margaret Mead papers, Library of Congress; Gail Sheehy, ‘Biography’, 1975, Penney-Missouri Journalism Awards Records, The State Historical Society of Missouri. See also Sheehy, *Daring*, esp. pp. 5–49.

¹³ Sheehy’s biography and career are reconstructed on the basis of Sheehy, ‘Cultural history’; Sheehy, ‘Alicia Patterson fellowship application’; Sheehy, ‘Biography’; Sheehy, *Daring*, esp. pp. 5–49.

¹⁴ Sheehy, *Daring*, p. 6. On Sheppard and the *Herald Tribune*’s fashion pages, see Marilyn Bender, *The beautiful people* (New York, NY, 1967), pp. 76–85; Richard Kluger, *The paper: the life and death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 622–5. On Sheehy’s reportage: Kluger, *The paper*, pp. 672, 691–2.

the news. Moreover, the politicization of the women's pages enlarged the options for women reporters – for whom it was difficult to break into the hard news sections – as emergent feminist politics allowed women to cover news.¹⁵ In 1964, an investigative series on the maternity clinics of New York, published at a time when the city was experiencing an upsurge in infant mortality, brought Sheehy some attention and a Newswomen's Club of New York Front Page Award.¹⁶

When the '*Trib*' faltered in the wake of the 1962–3 New York City newspaper strike, editor Clay Felker and designer Milton Glaser built *New York* magazine from its Sunday supplement – the first issue was published in April 1968 – and Sheehy became a contributing editor there.¹⁷ Distributed in the New York metropolitan area with a circulation of just over 330,000, *New York* was a cradle of New Journalism, a style of reportage which used literary techniques. The magazine integrated consumer-oriented lifestyle reporting, investigative journalism, and innovative political and social analyses, a concoction perfected by Tom Wolfe in a piece about 'radical chic'.¹⁸ The magazine dealt with issues of racism and poverty that were seldom picked up by the mainstream press, and represented a progressive gender politics in the types of men and women featured. An incubator for Gloria Steinem's *Ms.* magazine, which it helped to launch in 1971, *New York* was among the first mass-market outlets to deal explicitly with feminism, and feminist writers saw it as sympathetic.¹⁹

Sheehy's writing – her focus on the white, educated middle class; her mass-market audience – was representative of Second-Wave feminism's broad media representation in the 1970s and the movement's focus on sexism, or 'patriarchy' as the ultimate oppression, beyond race and class.²⁰ *New York*

¹⁵ Kay Mills, *A place in the news: from the women's pages to the front page* (2nd edn, New York, NY, 1990); Patricia Bradley, *Women and the press: the struggle for equality* (Evanston, IL, 2005); Kimberly Wilmont Voss and Lance Speere, 'A women's page pioneer: Marie Anderson and her influence at the Miami Herald and beyond', *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 85 (2007), pp. 398–421; Jan Whitt, *Women in American journalism: a new history* (Urbana-Champaign, IL, 2008). See also the informative literature overview by Bernadette Barker-Plummer, 'News and feminism: a historic dialog', *Journalism and Mass Communication Monographs*, 12 (2010), pp. 145–203.

¹⁶ Sheehy, *Daring*, pp. 7–10. On New York City's infant mortality in the 1960s and 1970s, see R. Wallace and D. Wallace, 'Origins of public health collapse in New York City: the dynamics of planned shrinkage, contagious urban decay and social disintegration', *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 66 (1990), pp. 391–434.

¹⁷ On the end of the New York *Herald Tribune* and the beginnings of the *New York* magazine, see Kluger, *The paper*, pp. 703–41. On *New York*'s first decade: Marc Weingarten, *The gang that wouldn't write straight* (New York, NY, 2005). For a helpful analysis of the magazine's politics: Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: how a city in crisis was sold to the world* (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 71–96.

¹⁸ Tom Wolfe, 'Radical chic: that party at Lenny's', *New York*, 8 June 1970.

¹⁹ Mary Thom, *Inside Ms.: 25 years of the magazine and the feminist movement* (New York, NY, 1997), p. 200.

²⁰ On 1970s feminism and the media, see Alice Echols, *Daring to be bad: radical feminism in America, 1967–1975* (6th edn, Minneapolis, MN, 2003); Amy Erdman Farrell, *Yours in sisterhood:*

became Sheehy's main outlet until it was taken over by media mogul Rupert Murdoch in 1977.²¹ The most prolific writer for the magazine during that period, she authored fifty articles in nine years.²² Sheehy covered a variety of topics – counterculture, drug use, the Black Panthers, and local politics – but gender was her mainstay. Early pieces reported on American masculinity, glimpsed in commuter-train culture or male ‘Indian clubs’, the latter done as a photo story with Diane Arbus.²³ Sheehy wrote guest commentaries for Gloria Steinem's feminist column ‘The City Politic’, reported on the first public speak-out on rape, organized by Susan Brownmiller and others in a Manhattan church in 1971, and penned a series on family arrangements beyond the nuclear constellation of male breadwinner, female homemaker, and resident children.²⁴ She published on the sexual revolution, on radical feminism and women activists more generally – in the IRA, with the Black Panthers – and on Lionel Tiger and the first stirrings of the men's movement, and described an installation of Niki de Saint Phalle's provocative Nana sculptures in Central Park.²⁵

By 1970, observers of the media knew Sheehy as ‘one of New York's, and *New York Magazine's* most talked-about young writers’.²⁶ After a fellowship in ‘interracial reporting’ at Columbia University in 1969–70, she published *Panthermania* (1971), about the Black Panther trials in New Haven. This was

Ms. magazine and the promise of popular feminism (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Patricia Bradley, *Mass media and the shaping of American feminism, 1963–1975* (Jackson, MS, 2004); Bonnie J. Dow, *Watching women's liberation, 1970: feminism's pivotal year on the network news* (Champaign, IL, 2014). Recent critiques point out that the wave narrative privileges the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s over earlier and later as well as parallel, non-white, non-middle class feminisms; see Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No permanent waves: recasting histories of U.S. feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010); Kathleen A. Laughlin et al., eds., ‘Is it time to jump ship? Historians rethink the waves metaphor’, Special issue, *Feminist Formations*, 22 (2010).

²¹ See Sheehy's comment on the takeover, Gail Sheehy, ‘A fistful of dollars: featuring the good, the bad, and the ugly’, *Rolling Stone*, 14 July 1977.

²² Weingarten, *Gang that wouldn't write straight*, p. 207.

²³ Gail Sheehy, ‘The tunnel inspector and the belle of the bar car’, *New York*, 29 Apr. 1968; Gail Sheehy, ‘Powwow in Middle Village’, *New York*, 19 Aug. 1968. Arbus's photographic perspective overlapped with New Journalism's interest in non-elites and ‘freaky humanity’; see John W. Johnson, ‘The “New Journalism” and the “new” American studies: some relationships and points of comparison’, *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 9 (1979), pp. 35–6.

²⁴ Gail Sheehy, ‘Teach me tonight’, *New York Magazine*, 17 May 1971; Gail Sheehy, ‘Divorced mothers as a political force’, *New York*, 10 May 1971; Gail Sheehy, ‘Nice girls don't get into trouble’, *New York*, 15 Feb. 1971; Gail Sheehy, ‘Missing elements in New York families part I: bachelor mothers’, *New York*, 13 Jan. 1969; Gail Sheehy, ‘Missing elements in New York families part II: childless by choice’, *New York*, 20 Jan. 1969, pp. 35–41.

²⁵ Gail Sheehy, ‘A city kind of love: a report on the state of the Art in New York City, 1970’, *New York*, 16 Feb. 1970; Sheehy, ‘The fighting women of Ireland’; Gail Sheehy, ‘The great St. Valentine's day uprising’, *New York*, 16 Feb. 1970; Gail Sheehy, ‘The men of women's liberation have learned not to laugh’, *New York*, 18 May 1970; Gail Sheehy, ‘Nanas in the park’, *New York*, 3 June 1968. See also Gail Sheehy, *Panthermania: the clash of black against black in one American city* (New York, NY, and London, 1971), esp. pp. 36–41.

²⁶ Amory Cleveland, ‘Trade winds’, *Saturday Review*, 21 Nov. 1970, 16.

followed by an investigative report about prostitution in New York's Times Square, in the reform-oriented 'muckraking' tradition.²⁷ A feminist analysis, Sheehy's research also revealed the big business structures behind local prostitution. The mayor cited for journalistic excellence her *New York* article 'Landlords of Hell's Bedroom' (1972) – a play on the midtown neighbourhood Hell's Kitchen – and it informed municipal politics; her advice was seen as largely responsible for ridding the Times Square area of prostitution. It won a New York Front Page Award and a National Magazine Award, but also got caught in the New Journalism controversy for its usage of composite characters.²⁸ Sheehy turned the reportage into a book, *Hustling* (1973), which was the basis for a film, in which Lee Remick played Gail Sheehy as – in one commentator's apt characterization – a 'chic, investigative' reporter.²⁹

Tying into Sheehy's long-standing interest in gender politics, *Passages* was a work of social criticism befitting an experienced journalist. She embarked on it in 1973, armed with a one-year journalism fellowship from the Alicia Patterson Foundation to turn a book 'about couples', under contract with the small New York publishing house E. P. Dutton, into a project on 'Ages and stages of development in men and women.'³⁰

II

Passages was based on 115 life histories Sheehy had collected in interviews with men and women between eighteen and fifty-five years old; the vast majority from the white, educated middle class, which Sheehy presented – rather obliviously of class and race differences – as most typical of American society at large,

²⁷ Elizabeth Levy, *By-lines: profiles in investigative journalism* (New York, NY, 1975), esp. pp. 11, 99–114. On Progressive Era investigative journalism: Harold S. Wilson, *McClure's magazine and the muckrakers* (Princeton, NJ, 1970).

²⁸ Gail Sheehy, 'The landlords of Hell's Bedroom', *New York*, 20 Nov. 1972; Walter H. Waggoner, 'Times Sq. bookstores sue city and landlords for "harassment"', *New York Times*, 20 Jan. 1973; David Smith, 'Forty hear reporter discuss investigation of prostitution', *Columbia Spectator*, 30 Mar. 1973. On Sheehy's use of composite characters: Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, 'A report on prostitution: books of the Times almost Jamesian care confusing technique', *New York Times*, 10 Aug. 1973; Walter Pinkerton, 'Believe it or not: the "New Journalism" is sometimes less than meets the eye', *Wall Street Journal*, 13 Aug. 1971. On the New Journalism controversy more generally: Ronald Weber, ed. *The reporter as artist: a look at the New Journalism controversy* (New York, NY, 1974); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the news* (New York, NY, 1978), pp. 160–94.

²⁹ Gregg Kilday, 'Rule in plea for "good taste"', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Apr. 1975. See Gail Sheehy, *Hustling: prostitution in our wide open society* (New York, NY, 1973); *Hustling*, directed by Joseph Sargent (1975; American Broadcasting Company).

³⁰ Gail Sheehy, 'Catch-30: and other predictable crises of growing up adult', *New York*, 18 Feb. 1974, p. 33; Alicia Patterson Foundation, press release, 18 Dec. 1972, and Alicia Patterson Foundation to Margaret Mead, Dec. 1973, Margaret Mead papers and South Pacific Ethnographic Archives, Library of Congress; the Alicia Patterson Foundation to Clay S. Felker, Nov. 1974, Clay S. Felker papers, Duke University.

but also, more programmatically, as the beacon of social progress.³¹ In describing the midlife crisis, Sheehy argued for social change. Most, but not all, interviewees were couples with children – and, as Sheehy highlighted, over half divorced; many based in New York and Washington, DC, some on the coast of California; and all but a few anonymized. One exception was a long section on the anthropologist Margaret Mead, drawn from an earlier *New York* magazine portrait.³² Sheehy linked Mead's midlife crisis to her decision to split up with Gregory Bateson – a decision which, although it would not take effect until several years later, Mead described as propelled by the explosion of the atomic bombs over Japan in August 1945, when she was forty-three.³³ Like for her own experience, Sheehy drew on a scene of war to illustrate the midlife crisis.

Sheehy's study of the adult life course takes off in the late teens, when children leave their parents' homes, then follows the chronology through the twenties, thirties, and forties and tapers out in the fifties. The focus is on the thirties and forties, for which the earlier decades of life – in particular the twenties – provide the backdrop. *Passages* delineates a continuous build-up of problems from the beginning of careers and relationships in the early twenties that culminate in a decisive biographical change in the middle thirties to early forties – just before not during middle age, as Sheehy emphasized, marking the transition from young adulthood to middle age.³⁴ The midlife crisis then demolished gender roles established in the twenties to early thirties.

Sheehy invented a number of telling terms to describe this period of upheaval and change. *New York* magazine was known for an expressive, colloquial style and a knack for inventing catchwords. Most did not catch on, like 'grup', for adults reluctant to grow up, or 'bullcrit', denoting the casual judgement of books and movies based entirely on reviews.³⁵ But *New York* followed 'radical chic' with the 'me decade' (also Wolfe's), and later claimed 'couch potato'.³⁶ In this spirit, Sheehy – a self-described 'metaphor maven' also known as the 'Presiding Princess of Adroit Alliteration' – introduced several terms to denote the 'passages' of life: the 'Trying Twenties' (echoing child doctor

³¹ Sheehy, *Passages*, pp. 19–21.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 268–76; Gail Sheehy, 'Why can't a woman be more like Margaret Mead?', *New York*, 13 Aug. 1973.

³³ Margaret Mead, *Blackberry winter: my earlier years* (New York, NY, 1972), p. 271. On Mead's involvement in the war effort and her initial reaction to the dropping of the atomic bomb, see Peter Mandler, *Return from the natives: how Margaret Mead won the Second World War and lost the Cold War* (New Haven, CT, 2013), esp. pp. 45–176, 189–90.

³⁴ Sheehy, *Passages*, pp. 304–5.

³⁵ Adam Sternbergh, 'Up with grups: the ascendant breed of grown-ups who are redefining adulthood', *New York*, 3 Apr. 2006; Richard Rosen, 'Bullcrit: the reading disorder of the literary fast lane', *New York Magazine*, 6 Feb. 1989.

³⁶ Wolfe, 'Radical chic'; Tom Wolfe. 'The "me" decade and the third great awakening', *New York*, 23 Aug. 1976; David Blum, 'Couch potatoes: the new nightlife', *New York*, 20 July 1987.

Benjamin Spock's 'Terrible Twos'), 'Catch-30' and 'Switch-40' (borrowing from Joseph Heller's anti-war novel *Catch-22*), or the 'release from the nest' (the opposite of the 'empty-nest syndrome') and, to compare men's and women's sexual life cycles, the 'sexual diamond'.³⁷

Throughout *Passages*, Sheehy also used the term 'midlife crisis', which she attributed to the Canadian psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques, who had published a paper on 'Death and the mid-life crisis' some ten years earlier. In a fairly late section of the book, concerned with male middle age, she attributed 'midlife crisis' to the psychoanalyst, summarized his paper, and called it a 'classic'.³⁸ For Sheehy, this acknowledgement elevated her status as a writer and fortified her argument. By doing so, however, Sheehy invented a precursor. Similar effects have been observed within academia. Speaking of scientists, Georges Canguilhem noted that

He who happens on a theoretical or experimental result which had been up to that time inconceivable, which is disconcerting to his contemporaries,...looks to see whether per chance his thought has not already been previously thought. It is in looking in the past for an accreditation of his discovery...that an inventor invents his predecessors.³⁹

Jaques's concept predated *Passages*, but it was in fact neither a classic nor closely related to Sheehy's definition.

Jaques coined the term 'mid-life crisis' in 1957, in a talk to the British Psychoanalytic Society, given as part of his qualifying to become a member.⁴⁰ Born in Toronto in 1917, he had been based in London since being garrisoned there with the Canadian Army Medical Corps during the First World War. Trained in medicine, Jaques was a practising psychoanalyst, organizational psychologist, and management consultant. An expert on corporate hierarchies, he was known for the concept of the 'time-span of discretion', the idea that the main criterion by which the importance of a job is implicitly evaluated is the length of time before decisions taken by an individual are reviewed: the more important the longer the time.⁴¹

³⁷ Sheehy about herself, quoted in: Ken Emerson, 'Gail Sheehy's *Passages*: growing up takes a life time', *Boston after Dark*, 1976, p. 1; Geraldine Sherman, 'The joy of "middlescence" and other passages in time', *Globe and Mail*, 1 July 1995. For the various neologisms, see Sheehy, *Passages*, pp. 99–105, 163–77, 345–6, and 358–76.

³⁸ Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 435.

³⁹ Georges Canguilhem, 'The object of the history of sciences', in Gary Gutting, ed., *Continental philosophy of science* (Malden, MA, 2005), pp. 199–200. See also Augustine Brannigan, 'The reification of Mendel', *Social Studies of Science*, 9 (1979), pp. 423–54; Jeffrey M. Skopek, 'Principles, exemplars, and uses of history in early 20th century genetics', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 42 (2011), pp. 210–25.

⁴⁰ In an interview, Jaques stated that he presented the paper as part of the process of becoming a member, and had started conceptualizing the paper in 1952; see Douglas Kirsner, 'The intellectual odyssey of Elliott Jaques: from alchemy to science', *Free Associations*, 11 (2004), pp. 200–1.

⁴¹ G. S., 'Jaques, Elliott', in Morgen Witzel, ed., *Encyclopedia of history of American management* (Bristol, 2005); 'Elliott Jaques and the glacier investigations', in Derek S. Pugh and David

Jaques's paper on the midlife crisis combined psychoanalytic case-studies with quantitative methods of life-course research such as used by the nineteenth-century neurologist George Miller Beard, who claimed to have been 'the first to make the discovery of the Law of the Relation of Age to Work' (although he acknowledged earlier efforts by Goethe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Montaigne).⁴² *American nervousness* (1881) included a study linking men's age and productivity. Analysing the lives of 500 of 'the greatest men of the world', Beard determined that they did their best work in their thirties and forties: Francis Bacon published his first book, *Essays* (1597), at thirty-six, and the encyclopaedic *The advancement of learning* (1605) at forty-four; art critic John Ruskin worked on the five-volume *Modern painters* (1843) throughout his late twenties to mid-forties. Admiral Nelson was knighted at thirty-nine (after the battle of Cape St Vincent), and was forty-seven at Trafalgar (where he died). William Turner painted his best-known sea pieces in his 'middle period', between thirty-nine and forty-five.⁴³

In similar vein, by 'mid-life crisis', Jaques meant biographical change in the lives of a good 300 male 'geniuses', most of them artists and writers, some scientists, who had lived in Europe – mostly Italy, France, Germany, and England – between the middle ages and the mid-twentieth century. The central case was Dante Alighieri – the *Divine comedy* is a classic in life-course literature; but Jaques also referred to Raphael, Bach, Gauguin, and Einstein, amongst others, as well as an anonymous patient, 'Mr. N', a successful and active man, a 'do-er', with a career, wife, and three children. (He dreamed of broken milk bottles.) The paper also contained a brief report on the Freudian notion of 'death instinct' and its usage by Jaques's former teacher Melanie Klein.⁴⁴

In the tradition of earlier authors such as G. Stanley Hall and Walter Pitkin, Jaques declared middle age the time of achievement and self-actualization.⁴⁵ He argued that, at around age thirty-five, the men in his survey had gone through a 'critical phase' (which not all of them survived), the 'mid-life crisis'. Jaques rejected the term 'male climacteric', the close link of which to

J. Hickson, eds., *Great writers on organizations* (New York, NY, 2016). On the 'time-span of discretion', see esp. Elliott Jaques, *Measurement of responsibility: a study of work, payment and individual capacity* (London, 1956).

⁴² George Miller Beard, *American nervousness: its causes and consequences* (New York, NY, 1881), p. 243. On Beard, see Charles E. Rosenberg, 'The place of George M. Beard in nineteenth-century psychiatry', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 36 (1962), pp. 245–59; Anson Rabinbach, *The human motor: energy, fatigue, and the origins of modernity* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), pp. 153–62.

⁴³ Beard, *American nervousness*, pp. 198–9, 235–43.

⁴⁴ Elliott Jaques, 'Death and the mid-life crisis', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 46 (1965), pp. 502–14. For an example of Dante in midlife literature, see Willi Hirdt, 'Lebensmitte: Zu archetypischen Vorstellungen im Zusammenhang mit "Inferno I,1"', *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch*, 67 (1992), pp. 7–32.

⁴⁵ G. Stanley Hall, *Senescence: the last half of life* (New York, NY, 1922); Walter B. Pitkin, *Life begins at forty* (New York, NY, 1932).

sexual behaviour did not express the idea of the emergence of genius in midlife. Comparing work executed by artists before and after this crisis, Jaques diagnosed a shift towards more refined approaches and techniques. Dante began writing the *Divine comedy* (1321) at the age of thirty-seven, and Jaques read its opening stanza as autobiography: 'In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.' In music, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) 'was mainly an organist until his cantorship at Leipzig at 38, at which time he began his colossal achievements as a composer'. Similarly, 'At 33 Gauguin (1848–1903) gave up his job in a bank, and by 39 had established himself in his creative career as a painter. The work of Donatello (1386–1466) after 39 is described by a critic as showing a marked change in style.'⁴⁶

The midlife crisis was an in-built opportunity for 'creative enhancement'; and Jaques argued that what held for Bach and Gauguin was true also for his patient 'Mr. N': 'Although I have...taken my examples from the extreme of genius, my main theme is that the mid-life crisis is a reaction which...manifests itself in some form in everyone.'⁴⁷ However, Jaques made a series of exclusions to the concept, some explicit – women, he held, went through menopause instead of midlife crisis (and several years later); others more implicit (his sample comprised elite white Europeans only).⁴⁸ The 'mid-life crisis' thus exemplified what Sontag criticized as the 'double standard about aging'. She attributed this to overarching gender hierarchies: 'The prejudices that mount against women as they grow older are an important arm of male privilege. It is that present unequal distribution of adult roles between the two sexes that gives men a freedom to age that women are denied.'⁴⁹

Jaques's paper on the midlife crisis is a citation classic today and he is known as the 'scientist who coined "midlife crisis"'.⁵⁰ In the more than fifty years that have passed since its 1965 publication, over 950 papers and books have cited 'Death and the mid-life crisis', an average of over fifteen citations annually.⁵¹ And yet, Jaques is marginal to the beginning of the history of the midlife crisis. The references to his work only confirm Sheehy's pivotal role in this history.

The 'midlife crisis' was hardly taken up initially. Probably because of Jaques's fraught relations to the British Psychoanalytic Society, his paper was published

⁴⁶ Jaques, 'Death and the mid-life crisis', pp. 502, 505. On Stanley Hall and Walter Pitkin, see ch. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 512, 506.

⁴⁸ On menopause, see *ibid.*, p. 502.

⁴⁹ Sontag, 'Double standard of aging', p. 38.

⁵⁰ Stuart Laviettes, 'Elliott Jaques, 86, scientist who coined "midlife crisis", is dead', *New York Times*, 17 Mar. 2003. See also 'mid-life, n. and adj.', in *Oxford English dictionary online* (Oxford, 2017).

⁵¹ According to GoogleScholar and the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP-Web) Archive.

with a delay of eight years.⁵² The article circulated in the psychoanalytic community, where it was mentioned in a few papers on aging and death, as well as among some British organizational psychologists working on career plateaus and retirement.⁵³ Roger Gould, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst at UCLA, referred to Jaques in a paper on age-groups in group therapy, while the *Archives of General Psychiatry* refuted the ‘midlife crisis’, along with the ‘empty nest’.⁵⁴ At times, Jaques was cited but misinterpreted. A government report on *Work in America* (1973) used the term ‘midlife crisis’ to express managerial alienation and fear of failure. Describing ‘white-collar woes’, the report stated:

A general feeling of obsolescence appears to overtake middle managers when they reach their late 30’s. Their careers appear to have reached a plateau, and they realize that life from here on will be along an inevitable decline. There is a marked increase in the death rate between the ages of 35 and 40 for employed men, apparently as a result of this so-called ‘mid-life crisis’.⁵⁵

This was closer to William H. Whyte’s ‘organization man’ and David Riesman’s ‘lonely crowd’ than to the ‘creative crisis’ described by Jaques. When the psychologist reprinted ‘Death and the mid-life crisis’ in his essay collection *Work, creativity and social justice* (1970), the paper was ignored by most reviewers or dismissed as unimaginative and old hat.⁵⁶

Moreover, key publications on middle age, such as *Men in middle life* (1967), published two years after his paper, did not refer to Jaques.⁵⁷ Bernice Neugarten’s reader *Middle age and aging* (1968), an often-referenced tome of almost 600 pages, reprinted texts touching on middle age by eminent scholars from various disciplines – Erik Erikson, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Robert Havighurst, and William Masters and Virginia Johnson, alongside previously unpublished papers, notably Neugarten’s own programmatic ‘Adult personality: toward a psychology of the life cycle’.⁵⁸ Jaques’s paper was not included,

⁵² Kirsner, ‘The intellectual odyssey of Elliott Jaques’; Elliott Jaques, ‘On leaving the Tavistock Institute’, *Human Relations*, 51 (1998), pp. 251–7.

⁵³ References included Eddy de Wind, ‘The confrontation with death’, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 49 (1968), pp. 719–31; Robert N. Rapoport, *Mid-career development: research perspectives on a developmental community for senior administrators* (London, 1970), pp. 136, 219.

⁵⁴ Roger L. Gould, ‘The phases of adult life: a study in developmental psychology’, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 129 (1972), pp. 521–31; Marjorie Fiske Lowenthal and David A. Chiriboga, ‘Transition to the empty nest: crisis, challenge or relief?’, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 26 (1972), pp. 8–14.

⁵⁵ Education Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, and Welfare, *Work in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1973), p. 41.

⁵⁶ Elliott Jaques, *Work, creativity and social justice* (New York, NY, 1970). See for example the dismissal of ‘midlife crisis’ in A. Brook, ‘Review of *Work, creativity and social justice*, by Elliott Jaques’, *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 28 (1971), p. 314.

⁵⁷ Kenneth Soddy, *Men in middle life: based on the study made by the one-time Scientific Committee of the World Federation for Mental Health*, Cross-cultural Studies in Mental Health (London, 1967).

⁵⁸ Bernice L. Neugarten, ed., *Middle age and aging: a reader in social psychology* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1968). Similarly, psychoanalyst Judd Marmor, whose *Psychiatry in transition*

nor did the volume anywhere mention ‘mid-life crisis’. Nobody defended Jaques’s claim when the social psychologist Daniel Levinson, from Yale University, re-coined the term in a talk at the Society for Life History Research annual meeting in 1972.⁵⁹ In the mid-1970s, a Social Science Research Council Committee on middle age knew of Jaques’s paper but did not include it in their comprehensive bibliographies.⁶⁰

Most people learned about Jaques from Sheehy’s *Passages*. By calling his 1965 paper a ‘classic’, she in fact conferred that status.⁶¹ After the publication of *Passages*, citation rates for ‘Death and the mid-life crisis’ rose sharply, from an average of twice a year before Sheehy’s book to more than ten times after it.⁶² Crucially, Jaques was now cited by experts on middle age who had previously ignored him, including Bernice Neugarten and re-inventor Daniel Levinson.⁶³ Social scientists hardly ever referred to *Passages*, but journalistic or not, enough of them seem to have read it to make Jaques’s paper the ‘classic’ Sheehy had claimed it to be. As Ludwik Fleck has remarked, science in public ‘furnishes the major portion of every person’s knowledge. Even the most specialized expert[s] owes to it many concepts... They build up their specialized sciences around these concepts.’⁶⁴ The subsequent emergence of the ‘mid-life crisis’, however, was not a ‘revival’ of Jaques’s concept nor did Sheehy ‘popularize’ his idea. Directly linked to *Passages*, the references speak to the impact of Sheehy more than Jaques. If *Passages* drew attention to Jaques’s ‘midlife crisis’, this was not central in the book. Sheehy interviewed several social scientists, but not him – although he was still alive. Moreover, her concept of midlife crisis had little in common with his. Sheehy challenged the very double standard that Jaques had corroborated. *Passages* was closer to Betty Friedan’s *The feminine mystique* than to his psychoanalytic analysis of male achievement.

(1974) included a chapter on ‘The crisis of middle age’, made no mention of Jaques, see Judd Marmor, *Psychiatry in transition* (New York, NY, 1974).

⁵⁹ Linda Wolfe, ‘A time of change’, *New York*, 5 June 1972.

⁶⁰ Jaques was mentioned as an insider’s tip, see Elliot G. Mishler to Orville Brim, 28 Feb. 1974, and Orville Brim to Elliot G. Mishler, 18 Mar 1974, Social Science Research Council Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁶¹ Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 435.

⁶² According to GoogleScholar and the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP-Web) Archive. There was also an additional review of Jaques’s essay collection, see Sebastian De Grazia, ‘Cumulative review’, *American Political Science Review*, 70 (1976), p. 1273.

⁶³ Daniel J. Levinson, *The seasons of a man’s life* (New York, NY, 1978), p. 26. Not cited in Bernice L. Neugarten and Nancy Datan, ‘The middle years’, in Silvano Arieti, ed., *American handbook of psychiatry* (New York, NY, 1974). Jaques was cited in ‘The middle years’, in Dail A. Neugarten, ed., *The meanings of age: selected papers* (Chicago, IL, 1996). Similarly, Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant made no mention of Jaques in a 1972 paper, but discussed his paper in 1977, see George E. Vaillant and Charles C. McArthur, ‘Natural history of male psychologic health I: the adult life cycle from 18–50’, *Seminars in Psychiatry*, 4 (1972), pp. 415–27; George E. Vaillant, *Adaptation to life* (Boston, MA, 1977), pp. 221–3.

⁶⁴ Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and development of a scientific fact* (Chicago, IL, 1995), p. 112.

III

Passages may be considered something of a sequel to *The feminine mystique* (1963), the ‘midlife crisis’ a new label for the ‘problem with no name’. Change in middle age, Sheehy’s central issue, had already played an important role for Friedan. The restless women of *The feminine mystique* were between thirty-five and forty years old – just in the age-range of ‘midlife crisis’. Drawing on psychological theories of identity development, Friedan reasoned that roughly fifteen years into their marriages, many women were experiencing a ‘rebirth’ and second adolescence. She depicted scenes of dissatisfaction as they would come to epitomize the midlife crisis, writing of the suburban American wife: ‘As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Club Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?”’⁶⁵

A good dozen years later, Sheehy displayed the end of motherhood as a phase of empowerment in which women reached their ‘sexual peak’ (the height of sexual desire and orgasmic capacity) and – more central in her description – re-entered the working world.⁶⁶ Case-histories included ‘Kate’, a Radcliffe graduate, housewife, and high-school teacher, who, at forty, switched to publishing, and, before long, was promoted to editor; at the same age, ‘Peggy’ went into real estate and filed for divorce; while Katharine Graham, after her husband’s death, assumed leadership of the *Washington Post*.⁶⁷ Such accounts confirmed the established feminist credo of women’s self-fulfilment through work. As Friedan had written: ‘The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own. There is no other way.’⁶⁸ She went on to explain that volunteer or part-time work would do as little as housework: middle age was about careers.

Sheehy and Friedan not only employed similar topics of life-planning, change, and self-fulfilment, addressed to a white, educated audience, they also wrote in an older tradition of feminist concepts of middle age, which portrayed midlife as the welcome end of a woman’s childbearing years and the moment when she would receive a ‘new deal’. This was how journalist, educator, and independent minister Anna Garlin Spencer, a leader in the women’s suffrage movement, put it in her treatise on women’s equality, *Woman’s share in social culture*, first published in 1913 and reissued in 1925. Using a metaphor of social and economic reform, Spencer offered an understanding of middle age diametrically opposed to the notion that aging meant decline: ‘When, however, the climacteric of middle life is reached, nature gives a new deal

⁶⁵ Betty Friedan, *The feminine mystique* (New York, NY, 1977), p. 11.

⁶⁶ Sheehy, *Passages*, pp. 287, 306–19.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 253–4, 348–50, 412–13.

⁶⁸ Friedan, *The feminine mystique*, p. 332.

and starts a fresh balance of power between men and women.⁶⁹ This distinguished a woman's from a man's life course, but to her advantage. Men proceeded along a 'long, straight path of progress, passing [from boyhood] on into youth, and later manhood, up to the point where senile decay threatens'. By contrast, women experienced a period of rejuvenation in midlife, a '*second youth*', when they redefined their lives, trading domesticity for public 'achievement'. Middle age meant self-actualization: 'At last she emerges...and becomes in a peculiar and a new sense a citizen of the world, a *Person*, whose relationship to the social whole may now of right become her main concern.'⁷⁰

Spencer's definition of women's 'second youth' was typical of positive concepts of midlife change, put forward by social reformers and sociologists, policy-makers and journalists but also physicians and psychiatrists – many of them women – in political treatises, sociological studies, and self-help literature. They shared an emphasis on social contexts rather than bodily functions: even physicians often highlighted issues unrelated to medicine, stressing the social changes concurrent with menopause. In some of this literature, middle age or menopause were the main topic, but many authors, like Spencer, drew on notions of midlife in the context of broader debates about women's rights.

A general focus in historical writing on middle age on medical texts and thus on pathological concepts of menopause has obscured these alternative definitions, which have been passed over, read as evidence of what dominant discourses about aging lacked, or even dismissed as reinforcing the notion that before middle age women were obligated to sacrifice personal ambitions to the needs of family and nation.⁷¹ In fact, writers often drew on the notion of midlife change to argue for women's continued employment. The feminist psychiatrist Olga Knopf, in *The art of being a woman* (1932), expressed a common line of argument, cautioning that 'The wife and the mother can decrease her outside activities, but she should never give them up entirely. It demands a far greater expense of energy to begin all over again than merely to continue and intensify a well-loved and customary activity.'⁷² Moreover, if, as Carl Degler and Carol Smith-Rosenberg, respectively, showed, women often ignored oppressive medical advice and were inclined to view menopause as a 'release from a "world of troubles"', celebrations of aging may have repre-

⁶⁹ Anna Garlin Spencer, *Woman's share in social culture* (New York, NY, 1913), pp. 230–1. Spencer's early use of the metaphor 'new deal' suggests that it was rooted in the context of social reform, even before Stuart Chase's 1932 *A new deal*, which provided an economic agenda for President Roosevelt.

⁷⁰ Spencer, *Woman's share in social culture*, pp. 231, 233, 234.

⁷¹ Houck, *Hot and bothered*, passim, e.g. pp. 89–91, 94, 102–3; Lois W. Banner, *In full flower: aging, women, power and sexuality* (New York, NY, 1992), p. 7.

⁷² Olga Knopf, *The art of being a woman* (Boston, MA, 1932), p. 241. See also Spencer, *Woman's share in social culture*, pp. 236–8; Eva von Baur Hansl, 'What about the children? The question of mothers and careers', *Harper's Magazine*, Jan. 1927, p. 224.

sented their experience more accurately than pathological depictions.⁷³ At the very least, they indicate that the modern understanding of middle age and gender was more complex than morbid and gloomy definitions suggest.

Sheehy combined the celebration of women's second youth with an analysis of the 'masculine mystique'.⁷⁴ The comparison of the male and female life courses was crucial to the layout of *Passages*; alternating between men's and women's lives, chapters, sections, and paragraphs focused on differences. Not only did women go through the midlife crisis earlier than men – at thirty-five rather than forty; but the implications also differed vastly, in various areas of life. Men's midlife crisis was depicted as the opposite of women's. When a woman was 'brimming with ambition to climb her own mountain', a man felt himself 'to be standing on a precipice, his strength, power, dreams, and illusions slipping away beneath him'.⁷⁵ While women were said to experience a sexual surge, men had to cope with incipient impotence, which Sheehy also spoke of as the 'male climacteric' or 'male menopause' (which they sought to hide by blaming the age of their wives). Women re-entered the working world, men dropped out or phased out.

Middle age was a challenge for women but more of a crisis for men, who, at middle age, struggled with remorse, doubt, and uncertainty. Throughout *Passages*, Sheehy applied the term 'midlife crisis' somewhat more frequently to men than women. In part, or so she explained, men's entry into middle age was harder because they did not know how to read the signals of impending crisis; so that their midlife crisis was delayed and aggravated.⁷⁶ While such age lag seems to reiterate a double standard under which women grow old earlier than men, it also inverted scientific androcentrism by presenting male development as a deviation from female standards: men were 'late', not women 'early'. Most of all, Sheehy inverted the double standard of middle age: she claimed achievement for women as much as domesticity for men.

The corporate structure made middle age difficult for men:

In our society, turning 40 for a man is a marker event in itself. By custom, as if he were merchandise on a rack, he will be looked over by his employers and silently marked up or down, recategorized by his insurers, labeled by his competitors. Pyramids being what they are in the professional world, most men will have to adjust their dream downward to some degree.⁷⁷

'Adjusting downwards' could mean a severe cut in salary, relegation to a lower position, even job-loss. In times of recession and restructuring, one often

⁷³ Carl N. Degler, 'What ought to be and what was: women's sexuality in the nineteenth century', *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), pp. 1467–90; Smith-Rosenberg, 'Puberty to menopause', pp. 194–5.

⁷⁴ Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 327.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7, 320–1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

followed the other. ‘Ken Babcock’ saw his dream of becoming company president going bust at forty-three, when the recession hit his company; he wasted his savings in a doomed attempt to renovate a Wall Street brokerage firm, and had to sell the house he shared with his wife.⁷⁸

But Sheehy emphasized that even the men whose dreams had come true were unhappy. A Manhattan professional by the pseudonym of ‘Aaron’ – probably the designer Milton Glaser; the alias seemed to invoke D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s rod*, a novel about a man who abandons his wife and children, known as a target of Kate Millett’s *Sexual politics* (1970) – received award after award and had his work shown in international exhibitions, yet felt depressed and inane.⁷⁹ He gave up his studio, and took up cooking and baking while his wife went back to graduate school. Another interviewee 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.’⁸⁰

Passages combined Friedan’s *Feminine mystique* with Whyte’s, Riesman’s and others’ accounts of soul-crushed men in grey-flannel straitjackets that underlay much of American social science at the time.⁸¹ Taken together, men’s and women’s midlife crises meant a switch in gender roles: she, from housewife to full-time professional and breadwinner, he, from breadwinner to homemaker. Sheehy spoke of this pattern as the ‘sexual diamond’:

The whole configuration can be seen in the shape of a diamond. That is, males and females...start out quite alike. In the twenties, they begin moving apart in every way...By the late thirties and early forties, the distance across the diamond is at its greatest. In the fifties, they both go into a sexual involution, which eventually brings them together in the unisex of old age.⁸²

Jean Campbell, a psychologist and expert on women’s re-entry, praised this parallel treatment of men’s and women’s life cycles as ‘[p]articularly well done’, pointing out that Sheehy ‘manage[d] to do this without using the word “androgyny”’.⁸³

The diamond was a trope of vaginal iconography, which Judy Chicago, whose sculpture *The dinner party* (1979) is a major example, defined as ‘a central focus

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 414–16.

⁷⁹ Kate Millett, *Sexual politics: a surprising examination of society’s most arbitrary folly* (New York, NY, 1970), pp. 269–80.

⁸⁰ Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 334.

⁸¹ Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The open mind: Cold War politics and the sciences of human nature* (Chicago, IL, 2014).

⁸² Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 361.

⁸³ Jean W. Campbell, ‘Review of *Passages*, by Gail Sheehy’, *Group & Organization Studies*, 1 (1976), p. 514. See also Jean W. Campbell, ‘Women drop back in: educational innovation in the sixties’, in Alice S. Rossi and Ann Calderwood, eds., *Academic women on the move* (New York, NY, 1973).

(or void), spheres, domes, circles, boxes, ovals, overlapping flower forms and webs' that invoke female biology.⁸⁴ In a *New York* article on the 'sexual diamond', the graphic designer Barbara Nessim supplied Sheehy's text with illustrations of rhombi organized around pools and open space (see Figure 1). The figure of the diamond also alluded to social models of equality, used in the 1960s and 1970s to criticize hierarchical social structures, such as in corporations.⁸⁵ Here, the diamond was presented as the opposite of the pyramid in which 'the majority of...individuals...rank very low'. In contrast, the diamond represented societies organized around a higher number of middle-ranking jobs. Drawing on the imagery of feminism and social change, Sheehy presented the midlife crisis as a crucial step towards gender equality. Midlife crisis meant a reversal of gender roles that, ultimately, would lead to their dissolution.

Sheehy's book was published at a time when economic crisis and changing social norms were unsettling the model of the nuclear family, with a male breadwinner and at-home wife and mother. This 'male-breadwinner model' was prevalent in the white middle class, and widely relevant as an aspirational ideal that provided the central paradigm for social policies.⁸⁶ Sheehy's concept of a normal transition at middle age made sense of the recent transformation of gender roles in which the distinction between men and women as providers and caregivers was challenged. *Passages* sold extraordinarily well: a bestseller within four weeks of publication and the most-sold book in the United States within three months, it remained on American bestseller lists for two years – longer than any other book published the same year.⁸⁷ In this time, it sold a half million copies in hardcover and another three to four million in paperback. On a rough estimate, one in five American book

⁸⁴ From a 1973 interview with Judy Chicago, cited in Jane F. Gerhard, *The dinner party: Judy Chicago and the power of popular feminism, 1970–2007* (Athens, GA, 2013), p. 81, see also pp. 81–3, 137–42, 217–19.

⁸⁵ Bernard Barber, 'Social stratification structure and trends of social mobility in Western society', in Talcott Parsons, ed., *American sociology: perspective, problems, methods* (New York, NY, 1968). For an older critique of the pyramid of power, see C. Wright Mills, *The power elite* (New York, NY, 1956).

⁸⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap* (New York, NY, 1992); Linda J. Waite and Mark Nielsen, 'The rise of the dual-earner family, 1963–1997', in Rosanna Hertz and Nancy L. Marshall, eds., *Working families* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Andreas Wirsching, 'Erwerbsbiographien und Privatheitsformen: Die Entstandardisierung von Lebensläufen', in Thomas Raithel, Andreas Rödder, and Andreas Wirsching, eds., *Auf dem Weg in eine neue Moderne? Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren*, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte. Sondernummer (Munich, 2009).

⁸⁷ Nationwide sales are charted by the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists; for *Passages*, see 'Best seller list', *New York Times*, 20 June 1976; 'Best seller list', *New York Times*, 28 Aug. 1976; 'Paperback best sellers', *New York Times*, 21 May 1978; 'PW hardcover bestsellers', *Publishers Weekly*, 28 June 1976; 'PW paperback bestsellers', *Publishers Weekly*, 15 May 1978. On the repeat from 1976, see *The Bowker Annual of Library & Book Trade Information* (New York, NY, and London, 1978), p. 434.

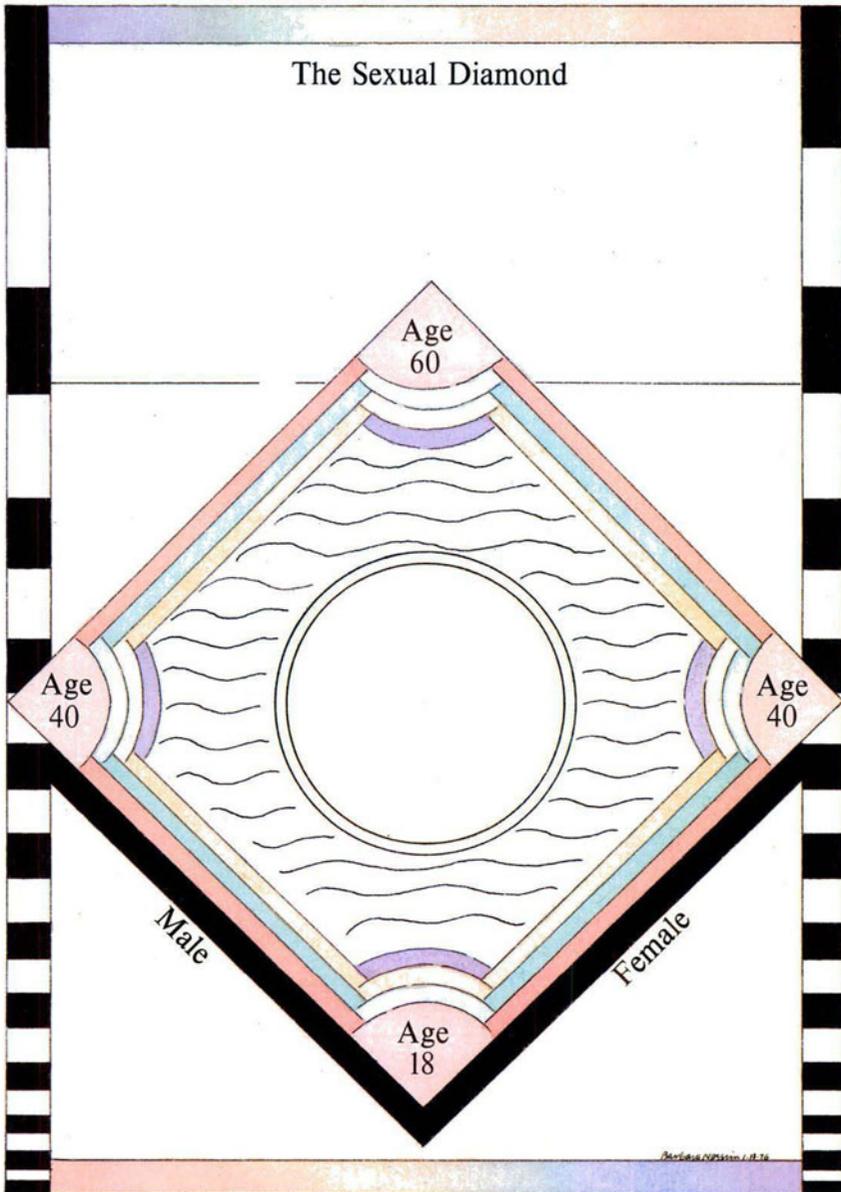


Fig. 1. The graphic designer Barbara Nessim, who illustrated several of Sheehy's pieces, compared this diagrammatic image of the 'sexual diamond' to a baseball field. Copyright Barbara Nessim 1976/2016.

readers read *Passages*.⁸⁸ In addition, it attracted much media attention in the form of reviews, author interviews, excerpts, and digests, and thus became known to an audience that extended beyond its immediate readership.⁸⁹ In Library of Congress surveys in the 1980s and 1990s, readers voted *Passages* among the ten books that influenced their lives most—together with Friedan's *The feminine mystique* and the Bible.⁹⁰

IV

In 1972, Sontag was not the first nor the only one to speak of a 'double standard of aging'.⁹¹ Her contribution to the history of middle age is remembered because she gave a powerful voice to a familiar idea shared by many. Sontag concluded her critique by invoking positive concepts of middle age. 'Women', Sontag wrote, 'have another option. They can aspire to be wise, not merely nice; to be competent, not merely helpful; to be strong...; to be ambitious.'⁹² Writing at the same time, the journalist Gail Sheehy deployed such notions of middle life empowerment in her definition of the midlife crisis as a critical period of change and gendering in men's and women's lives.

Sheehy's *Passages* made the midlife crisis popular. The concept challenged an established idea of middle age that highlighted the privileges of hegemonic masculinity. The psychoanalyst Jaques channelled this understanding when he coined the term 'midlife crisis' in the 1950s, thereby referring to the advantages of middle age to white middle-class men. However, Jaques's concept of midlife crisis had little impact. Twenty years later, *Passages* made the midlife crisis popular as a feminist idea. Unlike Jaques, Sheehy used the term to

⁸⁸ 20 to 25 per cent of the adult American population read books regularly (that is, more than two books a year), which meant that there were about 35 million readers in the 1970s. The majority of these obtained books from friends, relatives, or public libraries, so that most copies were read by more than one or two people. See *The 1978 consumer research study on reading and book purchasing: a study inquiring into the nature of reading and book buying habits of the American public* (Book Industry Study Group, 1978), pp. 17–18; Helen Damon-Moore and Carl F. Kaestle, 'Gender, advertising, and mass-circulation magazines', in Carl F. Kaestle et al., eds., *Literacy in the United States: readers and reading since 1880* (New Haven, CT, 1991), p. 189; *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2011* (Washington, DC, 2010), Table 1: Population and Area; Gallup Organization, *Book reading and library usage: a study of habits and perceptions* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), p. 12.

⁸⁹ On the relevance of media coverage to book publishing, see Priscilla Coit Murphy, *What a book can do: the publication and reception of Silent spring* (Amherst, MA, 2005), pp. 157–8.

⁹⁰ Gordon Sabine and Patricia Sabine, *Books that made the difference: what people told us* (Hamden, CT, 1984); Esther B. Fein, 'The book that made the most difference in people's lives', *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 1991.

⁹¹ Note especially the slightly earlier essay by sociologist Inge Powell Bell, 'The double standard', *Trans-Action*, 8 (1970), pp. 75–80. Also Pauline B. Bart, 'Why women's status changes in middle age: the turns of the social ferris wheel', *Sociological Symposium*, 3 (1969), pp. 1–18; Tish Sommers, 'The compounding impact of age on sex: another dimension of the double standard', *Civil Rights Digest*, 7 (1974), pp. 2–9.

⁹² Sontag, 'Double standard of aging', p. 38.

describe a reversal and dissolution of gender roles. With Sheehy's *Passages*, this idea of midlife crisis became widely known in the United States and beyond.

In the wake of Sheehy's success, her enemies – among them Christopher Lasch, the historian and social critic known for opposing the women's movement – used her position on the fringes of academia to discredit her bestselling book as 'narcissistic' pulp psychology.⁹³ In the two years following *Passages*, psychological and medical experts who authored their own books on middle age drew on the demarcation between good and bad psychology to sidestep Sheehy's feminist perspective and assert their own scientific respectability. This reaction sometimes involved attributing conceptual origins to Jaques in order to delegitimize Sheehy and appropriate and redefine 'midlife crisis'. (The psychoanalyst himself did not intervene.) Many experts advanced a male-centred definition of middle age, which normalized men's transformation from breadwinners into playboys and banned women from reimagining their domestic and work lives. Like Sheehy, they affirmed the change in the nuclear family, but unlike her, reinforced gender roles. Presented and read as more exact and scientific, the psychological, chauvinist definition of midlife crisis became dominant. Yet this was not a tale of conquest and total domination.

Sheehy's concept resonated among millions of readers, although many had limited access to the media and those who did found it difficult to identify publicly with her. As a response to *Passages*, even the psychological co-optation of the midlife crisis attested to Sheehy's popularity. Her impact on the history of the midlife crisis speaks to the wider phenomenon and historical relevance of a feminist sense of aging and the life course. This demands that we look at concepts of aging not only as oppressive, but also acknowledge the key role middle age played in public controversies over women's roles.

⁹³ Susanne Schmidt, 'The anti-feminist reconstruction of the midlife crisis: popular psychology, journalism and social science in 1970s America', *Gender & History*, 30 (forthcoming, 2018). On Lasch's gender politics, see Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Americanization of narcissism* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), esp. pp. 72–9; Natasha Zaretsky, *No direction home: the American family and the fear of national decline, 1968–1980* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), pp. 183–221.