

This is a peer-reviewed, accepted author manuscript of the following research article: Smith, M. (2022). [Book review]: Suzanne Schmidt, *Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché*. *European Journal for the History of Medicine and Health*, 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26667711-20220005>

Suzanne Schmidt, *Midlife Crisis: The Feminist Origins of a Chauvinist Cliché* (Chicago, IL:

University of Chicago Press, 2020), 280 pp., 12 illus., \$22.50 (paperback),

ISBN 978 0 226 63714 3.

I recall the first time, a few years ago, that someone referred to me as middle-aged. It came as quite a shock. My age justified the description, but the term did not feel right. Reflecting later, I thought this might have been because I had never experienced a midlife crisis. I was not panicking about being (optimistically) half-way through life. I had not purchased a sports car. And I had certainly not had an affair with someone half my age.

Suzanne Schmidt's *Midlife Crisis* contends that my understanding of a midlife crisis was rooted in a misleading cliché. She argues that, rather than being associated with middle-aged men behaving badly, the idea of the midlife crisis stemmed from the work of American journalist Gail Sheehy (1936-2020) and her bestselling book *Passages* (1976). Based on 115 interviews of largely well-educated professionals in New York, Washington, D.C., and California, Sheehy argued that aging often had a positive impact on both men and women. In so doing, she upended the prevailing view that aging was automatically detrimental for women. Instead, somewhat relieved of parenting and domestic responsibilities, middle-aged women could reassess what they wanted in life and take on new challenges and opportunities.

Despite the success of *Passages*, however, Sheehy's benign conceptualisation of a positive midlife was attacked and then hijacked by a series of male social scientists who redefined the midlife crisis in masculine terms that still dominate how we think of the term today. In addition to asserting Sheehy's role in establishing the idea of the midlife crisis, Schmidt explains convincingly how Sheehy's status as a female journalist, rather than a male

social scientist, undermined how her role in developing the idea of the midlife crisis has been judged. Sheehy did not merely popularise the term, Schmidt argues, but clearly and persuasively conceptualised it in a way that influenced subsequent social scientific research, triggering debates within the feminist movement, and, most importantly, inspiring millions of readers to reconsider their own lives.

It is somewhat unfortunate that Schmidt's argument hinges so much on stressing that the midlife crisis originated in Sheehy's *Passages*. This is partly because it is relatively easy to poke holes in this provocative claim and partly because other aspects of the book are arguably more interesting and more important.

On the one hand, and as Schmidt explains, Canadian-born psychoanalyst Elliot Jacques (1917-2003) coined the term midlife crisis during the 1950s but was largely ignored. Sheehy was also sued for plagiarism by psychiatrist Roger Gould, who would end up earning tens of thousands of dollars in royalties from *Passages* due to a rather generous out-of-court settlement. Putting the issue of priority to one side, however, it seems clear that the notion that midlife could result in crisis was not a new one, at least in popular culture. As I read *Midlife Crisis* over the holiday period, my thoughts turned to both Ebenezer Scrooge and *It's a Wonderful Life's* George Bailey, who can be seen respectively as representative of the end and the beginning of middle age, as defined by Sheehy and others. In addition to both requiring supernatural intervention to ease them through their crises, both characters emerge as more contented and as better people, thus reflecting Sheehy's idea that midlife crises can have happy endings.

On the other hand, the focus on Sheehy's priority distracts from other themes, such as the issue of how psychological knowledge has emerged, how it has been debated in both popular and academic settings, and what sort of impact it has had on readers. Connected to

this theme are ideas about who counts as an expert when it comes to psychology. Although Schmidt does an excellent job of analysing these aspects in the case of Sheehy, she could have provided more context regarding how other female experts (both academic and non-academic) negotiated such dynamics in writing about psychology and other scientific subjects. The success of Sheehy's *Passages* reminded me of the success enjoyed around the same time of Frances Moore Lappé's (b. 1944) *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), a non-academic work which sold several million copies and initiated debates about meat consumption and environmental sustainability. In addition, the backlash Sheehy experienced brought to mind the struggles Rachel Carson (1907-1964) experienced as a female non-PhD writing about the environment both before and after the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962).

The focus on Sheehy also means that other aspects related to the midlife crisis are understated. For instance, the midlife crisis Sheehy described was a decidedly middle-class and white phenomenon, signified by her choice of interviewees. Although Schmidt acknowledges that this was the case, she could have written more about how Americans from other backgrounds could have engaged with and, possibly, contested the idea. The elephant in the room, moreover, is death (indeed, this is the elephant in almost *every* room, with one notable exception being Mark Jackson's 2021 book *Broken Dreams: An Intimate History of the Midlife Crisis*) Any mention of mortality in Schmidt's account is conspicuously absent. In Sheehy's case, the impulse to write *Passages* came in Northern Ireland on Bloody Sunday. She was immediately caught up in the tragic events of that day in 1972 when a boy she was talking to was shot in the face and fell dead into her arms. In other cases, the inevitability of mortality emerges more slowly and less dramatically. But it is always there.

Matthew Smith

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

m.smith@strath.ac.uk