

Midlife Crisis. Age and Gender in the long 1970s

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My PhD thesis historicizes the “midlife crisis”, a term which was first used in the mid-1960s and became popular in the United States and in Western Europe during the 1970s. The project sees the midlife crisis not so much as an ailment which befalls individuals, but rather as a concept which people – often men – draw on to make sense of their life.

Accounts of the midlife crisis center around biographical ruptures between the ages of 40 and 60, such as divorce and job-quitting, typically linked to a sense of stagnation and dissatisfaction. Under the label of “midlife crisis”, these problems are usually not rationalized nor are they depicted in order to be treated, cured or prevented. Rather, the midlife-crisis narrative highlights the state of emotional “crisis”, and makes it the part and parcel of biographies, particularly autobiographies. It frames emotional conflict in midlife not as neurosis, but as a mark of mental health.

The PhD project asks for the historical circumstances under which the notion of crisis came to be seen not just as an inevitable side effect of the onset of aging, but as an important, even desirable element of (male) adulthood, and a sign of maturity. It traces the increasing interest in the so-called “middle years” in the American society after the Second World War by looking into which features of this “new” life period were connected to “crisis”, and how, while midlife was seen as a phenomenon applying to women and men alike, the *crisis* of middle age was rendered a predominantly male phenomenon.

The project focuses on two cases: the Grant Study of Adult Development, or “Grant Study” for short; and the Social Science Research Council committees on “Work and Personality in the Middle Years” and “Life Course Perspectives on Middle and Old Age” respectively. The papers of both are in the Rockefeller Archive Center. Before explaining the relevance of the archival materials to the PhD project, the research project will briefly be situated in the field of research.

The history of the midlife crisis is not yet written. Issues of age and gender have long not been at the fore of historical research. The last two decades have, however, seen an increasing amount of studies on the topic, including work on gender and “middle age”. Taking up Lois Banner’s and Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s earlier works on femininity and aging, Elizabeth Watkins (2007) has recently chronicled the history of the medical treatment of menopause in the 20th century. Hans-Georg Hofer (2010) has studied the debate on the *climacterium virile* in male medicine (“andrology”) in the 1960s. It is, however, not by chance that both Watkins and Hofer mention the midlife crisis only in passing, at the most. The focus of both and similar studies is on the medical rather than the psychological disciplines and the ways in which these shape the relation of age and gender to the body, not the mind.

Historical research on issues of age and gender in the psychological sciences is rare, especially for the more recent decades – notwithstanding the fact that historians agree on the importance of the 1960s and 1970s as a watershed period. Laura Hirshbein’s works on depression in Cold War America (2009, 2013) are among the few studies to touch on the issue of gender and the psyche, yet Hirshbein focuses on the history of depression and femininity, rather than masculinity.

To say that the history of the midlife crisis is not yet written means to say more than that there is to date no historiographical analysis of the concept. As a study of masculinity and crisis, the history of the midlife crisis takes up historical research on age and gender, and tends to questions of masculinity and the psyche, which have hitherto not been in the focus of research.

The papers of two of the main cases the PhD thesis studies are part of the collections of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC): the Grant Study of Adult Development (established in 1938; in the RAC William T. Grant Collection), and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) committee on “Work and Personality

in the Middle Years”, morphed into the committee on “Life Course Perspectives on Middle and Old Age” (1972–82; in the RAC SSRC Archives).

The Grant Study is a longitudinal study of male Harvard graduates, established in 1938, and continued today under the name of “Laboratory of Adult Development” at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Originally a physiological undertaking concerned first and foremost with anthropometrics, the Grant Study changed scope – and notoriety – significantly when psychiatrist and psychoanalyst George Vaillant became its principal investigator in 1972. Under the auspices of Vaillant, the Grant Study turned into one of the studies characteristic of and central to the invention of the midlife crisis (see Vaillant’s monograph *Adaptation to Life*, 1977).

The case of the Grant Study is relevant to my project because it is representative of midlife crisis research, and, moreover, because through its history, the Grant Study spells out a change in research objectives as it occurred over one and the same sample of probands. By depicting this shift, the Grant Study illustrates the emerging interest in and approval of adult life crises in the 1970s. The Grant Study papers allow for identifying this “paradigm shift” (Thomas Kuhn) more neatly than it is possible from the more cumulative accounts of the Grant Study’s history Vaillant has provided us with (e. g., and most extensive: *Triumphs of Experience*, 2012).

The RAC material on the Grant Study derives additional value from the fact that Vaillant prohibits access to further papers, archived at Harvard.

Archival material at the RAC delineates the discontinuities that characterize the Grant Study. It morphed from an endeavor in college hygiene and masculinity physiology into a study dedicated to the war effort, then disappeared from the radar for awhile to reemerge as a study of men’s smoking habits – funded by the Tobacco Industry. In the 1960s, it sought to digitize its material on IBM punch cards in an attempt to cohere and make accessible the mass of diverse information accumulated in the previous decades that resulted in yet another

wave of data multiplication. In the 1970s, under the aegis of George Vaillant, it was declared a longitudinal study and perceived in the context of research on middle age and the midlife crisis.

Vaillant used the Grant Study's research material and probands as examples of "healthy" masculinity. The archival material shows that Vaillant's project began in the late 1960s as an investigation into the psychoanalytic concept of ego defense mechanisms – such as projection, denial, suppression, sublimation – as they had been defined by Anna Freud. (Vaillant repeatedly expressed surprise at the fact that the Grant Study, when devised in the late 1930s, did not take into account Freud's 1936 monograph *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*.) Vaillant sought to apply Freud's theory to the Grant Study data, using both previously collected material and newly-devised unstructured interviews conducted by himself.

Vaillant's book *Adaptation to Life*, which resulted from the research project, also included some paragraphs on the midlife crisis, defined as a "normal" developmental step – a sign of mental health – that provided an important chance for emasculation, primarily expressed through love affairs and the acquisition of status symbols. Vaillant's research had essentially been an exploration into the theory of defense mechanisms, but *Adaptation to Life* was published in the wake of an increased interest in the midlife crisis in the 1970s, and received most attention for this depiction of the midlife crisis.

The Grant Study papers allow for tracing in detail the various contingencies that shaped the history of the midlife crisis.

The SSRC committee on "Work and Personality in the Middle Years" (1972–78), continued as the "Life Course Perspectives on Middle and Old Age" (1978–82), was an interdisciplinary committee of social and human scientists held together by the assumption that understanding midlife was key to understanding human beings. The Committee was essentially a large network, and at its peak, it reached out to close to 900 scholars, journalists and policy makers worldwide. They met

at conferences and in study groups, and were connected throughout the year through regular newsletters which gave an overview of research in the field, including extensive bibliographies. The Committee defined questions of gender as one of the explicit foci of research on midlife, represented through Committee members and speakers such as sociologist and Committee chairperson Mathilda White Riley, Committee member Janet Giele, or Older Women's League co-founder Tish Sommers.

The RAC papers of the SSRC Committee are unique historical documents because they allow for studying a large network, as influential as ephemeral, and hardly if at all to be traced by way of published material. The SSRC documents are central to the history of the midlife crisis first, because they show that research on midlife was a common interest shared by scientists from various disciplines as well as a more general public. Secondly, looking at the SSRC Committee allows for tracing the gendered politics of middle age.

The RAC collections contain the articles and research papers accumulated by the Committee, the bibliographies compiled on middle age, as well as the newsletter lists of interested scholars and laypeople. They give insight into the literature the Committee conceived of as pertaining to middle age which mainly comprised of sociological and psychiatric papers, but also included various magazine publications.

Researchers like Vaillant and Roger Gould, who later came to be regarded as experts on middle age and the midlife crisis, received the SSRC Committee's newsletter, but were not Committee members, and from the papers at the RAC it appears that they were not considered "experts" by the Committee. This suggests that their status as midlife-crisis experts is in some ways a function of their representation in the media rather than a reflection of their academic impact.

The Committee study group on women, led by Janet Giele, assembled contemporary research on middle age in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies and contributed to making middle age a key focus of feminist scholarship,

represented by scholars such as Lillian Rubin, Marjorie Fiske Lowenthal, Rosalind Barnett, and Grace Baruch. They used a feminist perspective to redefine the “double standard of aging” (Susan Sontag) negotiated in the concept of middle age.

Minutes of meetings, presentations, and discussions show how the SSRC working group on women cohered research on women and challenged previous research on middle age, such as that presented by the above-mentioned Roger Gould. Middle age developed as an established focus of women’s studies in the late 1970s and the 1980s, and many of the critiques and refutations of the midlife crisis stem from that period, and can be traced back to the SSRC working group.

In summary, RAC material on the SSRC Committees on middle age show the lines along which middle age was constituted and established as a research field in the 1970s.

While the Grant Study and SSRC papers are the two main collections I studied at the Archive, other RAC material cross-fertilized with my research. The papers from the SSRC committee on the “Methodology of Longitudinal Research” (1976–80) shed light on the contemporary interest in development, and in the influence of time more broadly. And the material by Tish Sommers and the Older Women’s League on “Midlife Planning for Women” clarified contemporary perspectives on femininity and middle age (RAC, Commonwealth Fund Records).