

‘Midlife Crisis’ and the scramble for fresh personal purposes amongst middle-aged men

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Abstract

The universality of the midlife crisis has cost so many middle-aged men, with so many men rebooting and restarting their lives in the scramble for a fresh personal purpose. The researcher’s inquisitiveness about the experiences of middle-aged men in an identified community in Masvingo, Zimbabwe ignited the study. However, little research has been carried out in this nation concerning the subject under study. The study aimed to understand the psychological and social experiences of middle-aged men and how midlife crises can facilitate marital instabilities and a drastic change in social life. A narrative biography was obtained from the seven men in-depth interviewed. The purposively selected participants were between the ages of 35 and 45. Confirmation of the different studies that have been carried out in the West, many middle-aged men experience a lot of psychological challenges, including depression, stress, insomnia, and others. The study discovered that the escalation of divorce rates is rooted in the challenges associated with the midlife crisis. Many middle-aged men are not aware of marriage counseling, with quite a number less or not knowledgeable about the existence of psychological services. The study exposed the need for educational campaigns and midlife crisis awareness to the populace.

Keywords: Crisis; death; middle age; midlife crisis; scramble; well-being.

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1. Introduction

Midlife has been termed the prime period, which is linked to the early and later years of life. It is the 'old age of youth' and the 'youth of old age'. This period falls at a critical juncture where we have upward and downward trajectories in so many domains (Freund and Ritter, 2009; Burke & Grandey 2020). These can lead to an optimal balance of strengths and weaknesses (Adams et al., 2023). Something elemental appears to be going wrong in the middle of many of our citizens' lives (Giuntella et al., 2023). According to Rosenberg et al., (1999), midlife presages personal mayhem and sudden changes which are accompanied by a drastic change in individual personal goals, as well as lifestyle. All these are brought about by one's realization of grey hair, a physical decline, or entrapment unwelcome, roles that are too restrictive (Filip et al., 2023).

To some, a midlife crisis is regarded as a 'challenge' and some view it as a 'crisis', which makes the definition of 'midlife crisis' a bit complex. According to Freund and Ritter (2009), a lot of researchers on the midlife crisis have agreed on 35 – 50 years though some have tried to classify the crisis into two different categories which are primary and secondary. The primary indication constitutes a male-family responsibility, family, and job consolidation together with the individual's relationship with parents (Levinson, 1977). The secondary constitutes, retirement, worry about physical health, and others. Though many experience no sickness or an ailment of any nature, Giuntella et al., (2023), stated that something unknown appears to be going erroneous in the middle of many of our citizens' lives. Midlife functions at personal levels that is by linking one's childhood experiences with midlife health and, one's chosen lifestyle in midlife with health in old age. Midlife crisis finds its way from interpersonal to intergenerational levels through socially stated roles, such as parenting, caregiving, and also mentoring.

This is a period when men normally take stock of their lives, which includes their failures, regrets, and achievements and they head on facing the inevitable death. Midlife is a stock-taking period, a period in which many go through insomnia, difficulty concentrating, depressed clinically, and loss of memory, some suffer from disabling headaches, and many become dependent on alcohol (Giuntella et al., 2023). Schwandt (2015), postulated that a mid-career crisis can happen to anyone. It can hit even those who objectively have the most fulfilling jobs. When it does, it inflicts pain on the individual suffering it and causes productivity losses for employers. Yet, the phenomenon remains stigmatized and under-researched, leaving crucial questions unanswered.

This is a fact, that during this period they focus on the negative aspects of their life (Crăciun, 2023). Middle age has been long considered, life's pivotal point. It is more of an unsettling of the other side of the hill after a rapid climb. It is complex and difficult to decide when a midlife crisis occurs. Amongst all the different stage theorists, not even one of them managed to explain the occurrence of midlife crisis in their theories. Some of them have managed to explain the occurrence of a crisis in a case whereby some developmental issues go unresolved and there are likely to be a crisis, however, these developmental issues were not specified (Palk, 2015). Elliot Jacques was the first to introduce the concept of midlife crisis, and by then he believed that midlife was one of the important steps in human life. It was assumed that midlife crises exist for all individuals at a certain period (Chan, 2015).

According to Rozebani and Dehkordi (2018), middle-aged individuals experience a lot of things which include, dual feelings, negative emotions about the past, a strong dual assessment of life accompanied by past accomplishments, and a scramble for fresh personal purposes which in most cases leads to less interaction with other individuals (Kiesow et al., 2021). Motivated by the book '*Doppler*', Eriksen (2021), mentioned the 'Doppler effect' as one of the experiences men in middle age often face. According to Eriksen (2021), in the case of Andreas, means leaving behind the highly feminine-connoted 'nanny state' to become his own man – someone who lives off the land and is highly self-resourceful. The Doppler effect could be one of the major catalysts of divorces in

middle age. Though divorce escalates in the grey age, one reason why the divorce rate is lower in first marriages is because some fraction of them are unhappy but refuse to get divorced (Brown & Wright, 2017).

According to, Freund and Ritter (2009) and Arigo et al., (2022) given the loss of cognitive as well as physical resources that people face in middle adulthood and the changes in social expectations, they also have to set new goals in line with the internal and external changes characterizing middle adulthood. A large number of people in general experience the midlife crisis with most people failing to recognize the crisis in their middle age. The crisis is seen as a normative phenomenon, part of the human trajectory, more of a psychological normalcy that needs close attention. The precise age boundary for midlife crisis causes a lot of confusion within its definition.

The midlife crisis is considered the most popular concept in describing adulthood. This period is associated with a lack of directionality and guidance in trying to come up with new goals and new objectives. This transition from old unachieved goals to new goals is very challenging for a lot of men during this phase of life. Middle-aged men often experience emotional, physical, and social confusion in a battle of transition. Individuals with a lot of expectations about life and social success are the ones affected most for they experience psychological crises such as emptiness, loneliness, meaninglessness, and depression (Kwon and Oh, 2021). Two social psychologists cited by Hushidari (2007), state that, midlife loneliness is a killer and loneliness leads to very negative physiological effects on middle-aged bodies. They discovered that lonely people recognize more sources of chronic stress and even in situations where they face similar challenges that can be easily solved, they appear more helpless and threatened.

1.1. Purpose of study

From different studies carried out by Farrell & Rosenberg (1981), and Hunter & Sundel (1989), it was discovered that several components have been anticipated to be intrinsic to the conceptualization and assessment of midlife crisis which included, the inability to enjoy leisure time, worry about the future, feelings that health is deteriorating, negative evaluation of marital relationship, stress arising from taking care of the aged relatives, existential confusion whom they explained as confused life meaning, out of time to achieve greatness ad a negative evaluation of the work life. The objective of the paper was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the psychosocial challenges associated with the midlife crisis in men?
2. What are men's expectations during the midlife crisis?
3. What is the role of a midlife crisis in the etiology of divorce?
4. What are the possible ways to overcome challenges associated with the midlife crisis?

2. Materials and Method

The study focused mainly on middle-aged men who ranged from 35 years to 45 years of age. All the men in the research resided in the urban town of Masvingo specifically Rijeka C.

2.1. Research approach

The research adopted a qualitative research approach for it was the best suit for the study. The chosen qualitative approach provides insight into the subjective experiences and contests (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2017), yielding a broad considerate understanding of each process (Nilson et al., 2023). According to Chandra et al., (2019), research in qualitative research is defined as the practice used to study things, organizations, and individuals and their reasons, motivations, opinions, and, beliefs in their natural settings. Qualitative research involves an observer or a researcher who spends most of his time in the field transforming the world into a series of representations such as photographs, recordings, conversations as well as memos (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

2.2. Data collection Instrument

In-depth interviews are a form of qualitative research method that facilitates a deceptively familiar logical human interaction. It encourages a discourse where two or more people talk to each other, interacting and answering questions on a relatively known or unknown subject area. According to, Knot et al., (2022), interviews provide a space for extended conversations that allow the researcher insights into how people think and what they believe. The level of trustworthiness of the collected data from the in-depth interviews was very high since only a single researcher conducted the interviews, minimizing the risk of divergent foci.

2.3. Participants and sampling

A phenomenological research design was used for the study. Snowballing and purposive sampling were utilized by the researcher in choosing the participants for the researcher. Purposive sampling was chosen since the number of interviews to be conducted is too small to aim to be statistically representative. According to Matewe & Samson (2021), purposive sampling saves time, and money and its ability to meet multiple needs and interests while maintaining the foundation of a singular focal point. Choosing of participants was done in such a way that the right participants within the midlife phase were to be selected. Seven (7) participants were selected to participate in the research. According to Knot et al., (2022), researchers often stop interviewing when new interviews confirm findings from earlier interviews with no new or surprising insights (saturation).

2.4. Data analysis

With the introduction of themes, the researcher used thematic analysis in analyzing the data. Thematic analysis helps researchers understand those aspects of a phenomenon that participants talk about frequently or in-depth and how those aspects of a phenomenon may be connected. The thematic analysis allows the researcher to understand those different aspects of a phenomenon that most participants talk about frequently and the different ways in which the phenomenon aspects can be connected.

3. Results

3.1. Summary of Participant Profiles

Seven (7) men in their middle age were selected to participate in the research. Table 1 below shows a summary of participant profiles.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Years in marriage.
John	39 years.	13 years.
Ernest	41 years.	21 years.
Arnold	42 years.	12 years.
Melanin	38 years.	15 years.
Kenny	40 years.	8 years.

The study was guided by the research objectives, and three (3) major themes emerged from the data analysis. The major themes and sub-themes are summarized in table 2 below:

Table 2
Themes from the data analysis

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Participant Narratives
Theme 1: Psychosocial challenges associated with the midlife crisis in men.	Depression.	<i>I suffered moderate depression owing to the premarital affairs of my spouse. I am failing to accept that he has two kids outside the wedlock begat after our wedding (Melanin).</i>

	Stress.	<i>Marriage is sometimes stressful, especially when you encounter financial challenges (Arnold).</i>
	Emotional distress.	<i>Emotional distress and largely ambiguous loss (Melanin).</i>
	Bride-price arrears.	<i>One challenge is I have not yet paid the bride price in full; I still have arrears with my in-laws (Arnold).</i>
	Loneliness.	<i>Our marriage is floating in perennial squabbles so much that the romantic branch has been compromised (Melanin).</i>
	Anger and frustration.	<i>Sex is a need and for a married someone, it is something you should not wish for. My wife disappoints me whenever I want to have a feel for her. She always rejects me, which disappoints me to the extent of sleeping even in my car or going to the bar (Ernest).</i>
	Infidelity	<i>I once cheated on my wife and it's because of how people speak of extramarital affairs as something so common these days (Arnold).</i>
	Fear.	<i>I no longer trust my wife, since the day I caught her with another man. It has driven me to act the same; things I had never done before. I stay in fear; she can do anything to me (John).</i>
Theme 2: Men's expectations during the midlife crisis.	A new profession.	<i>I never wanted to change my current job. I changed my previous job to my current one. In my previous job, I always felt, it wasn't the right job for me, which led me to make some changes. I love my current job (Kenny).</i>
	Loving and caring spouse.	<i>To receive love from the one I vowed to be with when we were teenagers. Things have just changed, and the love I used to receive from my wife has drastically changed over the past few years. It seems she is no longer interested in me and I'm also experiencing the same (John).</i>

		<p><i>My wife has lost the beauty she used to have. I loved her for the beauty she had, and slowly nature is wiping off that beauty. She is no longer as interesting as she used to be, currently pursuing a new marriage (Melanin).</i></p> <p><i>I need someone loving and caring. If I can't find that in my house, I will look for it outside (Ernest).</i></p>
<p>Theme 3: <i>Understanding the role of midlife crisis in the etiology of divorce.</i></p>	<p>A rapid reduction in friend circles and spouse attractiveness.</p> <p>Infidelity</p>	<p><i>A significant reduction in ties with my childhood friends, and my spouse looked less attractive (Melanin).</i></p> <p><i>It seems middle age is a whole package of dynamites especially for married individuals. Sometimes I feel work is better than home. This is one of the reasons why many men engage in relationships outside marriage.</i></p>
<p>Theme 4: <i>Possible ways to overcome challenges associated with the midlife crisis.</i></p>	<p>Counseling</p> <p>Emotional management.</p>	<p><i>I have received a lot of marriage counseling over several issues but nothing has changed yet (Kenny).</i></p> <p><i>Not as yet because cultural rudiments compel us not to share our marital issues with strangers (Melanin).</i></p> <p><i>We always quarrel with my wife but I always try my level best to manage my emotions were possible as well as use my emotions to facilitate positive thoughts (Anorld).</i></p>

4. Discussion

The study yielded a lot of results and a myriad of observations on the subject under study. The study aimed to explore much on the men's scramble for fresh personal purposes, battling with the unmentionable challenges of the midlife crisis. The external world is engulfed by a married middle-aged man who is going through a lot. The research study answered four specific questions relating to the self-reported midlife crisis using qualitative analyses. The first interrogation focused on the challenges men face specifically the psychological and social challenges. The research answers to the concept in question were supported by several researchers from different delimitations. Most men from the identified community believed they experienced a midlife crisis at a very young age, with a higher percentage being psychologically affected from different angles. Most of these men are going through a lot of psychological and social challenges. The research has discovered depression as one of the key psychological ailments men are experiencing. This is in support of the study carried out by Kwon & Oh (2021), who postulated that most individuals experience loneliness and depression due to over-expectations in middle age. The results from the study are incongruent with that of Wethington (2000), who discovered that most of his

participants connected midlife crises to their life events such as job loss or forced unemployment, early retirement, extramarital affairs, divorce, separation, deaths of close friends or family members, and other major life crises, such as health problems.

The second question focused on the expectations of men during midlife. The major reason was to understand if some of the problems and challenges men face are a result of social ills and psychological issues. Men in middle age need fresh personal purposes in life. There is a scramble for compensation for things failed to achieve as well as unfulfilled wishes. A wish to have a loving and caring spouse who respects him as her husband was mentioned by almost all the participants in the study, with some in need of a new profession. Most men in middle age are facing challenges to overcome the overly raised expectations about the future which is now heading down the ladder of positive expectations. One of the participants (Ernest), commented that *I need someone loving and caring. If I can't find that in my house, I will look for it outside (Ernest)*. The results are supported by Gallagher (2015), on a call to manage expectations.

Could midlife crisis be an etiology of divorce in middle-aged men? This third question under interrogation explored and exhumed more on the midlife crisis as a factor for divorce. The study reports that many men had divorce ideations as a result of unmentionable squabbles with their spouse, with one participant alluding that; *My wife has lost the beauty she used to have. I loved her for the beauty she had, and slowly nature is wiping off that beauty. She is no longer as interesting as she used to be, currently pursuing a new marriage (Melanin)*. From the different characteristics of midlife crisis which are being used by the study, most participants if not all, report experiencing a component of midlife crisis. Wagner's (2020), study on increasing divorce risk is congruent with the results of the subject under study. Ernest one of the participants mentioned that: *I need someone loving and caring. If I can't find that in my house, I will look for it outside*. This is supported by Li et al.'s (2023), study on remarriage. With the study targeting possible ways to alleviate the challenges associated with the midlife crisis in men as well as reducing divorce rate escalation, counseling for some and emotional intelligence were considered to be key helping factors.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed that there are many psychological and social challenges middle-aged men face. The reality of the midlife crisis has been exhumed by the current study with many participants accepting to have experienced the different characteristics of its nature. Midlife crisis as the turning point brings a myriad of challenges that need someone to manage. One way to manage the harsh conditions brought by the midlife crisis is to first understand its existence in the trajectories of one's life.

With the escalation of divorce rates especially in Zimbabwe, marriage counseling services become essential to overcome the root causes of misunderstandings leading to divorce. Middle-aged men should be aware of the challenges associated with the midlife crisis and how these challenges can negatively impact their marriage as well as how they view their spouse. The growth of unrealistic expectations is a result of the so-called crisis. Psychological challenges can only be treated using psychological approaches, therefore there is a need to aggressively conscientize individuals about the crisis of middle adulthood.

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