
Growing up and growing old: negotiating the generational shift in midlife

Bethany Morgan

Abstract

Midlife is a transitional phase in the life course which sees a shift in generational positioning, that is the loss and increasing agedness of the generation above and changes in the lives of the generation below. Midlife is often partially characterised by the death of parents and other older relatives, children reaching adulthood and leaving the familial home and can also be signified by changes in seniority and respect in the workplace.

This paper is based on a series of psycho-social interviews with 22 men and women aged between 39 and 58 years old. It explores the psychological effect the movement of the generations has on those in midlife, how people feel about becoming the next older generation and how this impacts upon their own sense of ageing and own mortality awareness. It pays particular attention to how people in midlife negotiate relationships with their parents and how the emotional and practical changes which occur with their parents' increased agedness and deaths are managed. It looks at how anxieties about ageing are evoked and how psychological defences are triggered as a response to the upward shift of the generations.

Key Words

Midlife, Ageing, Death, Generational Shift, Parents, Separation, Attachment, Life Course.

1. Introduction

Midlife is a transitional phase in the life course which sees a shift in generational positioning, that is the loss and increasing agedness of the generation above and changes in the lives of the generation below. Midlife is often partially characterised by the death of parents and other older relatives, children reaching adulthood and leaving the familial home and can also be signified by changes in seniority and respect in the workplace. This paper is based on case studies of two men, Jeff and Adrian, whose interviews come from a series of psycho-social interviews with 22 men and women aged between 39 and 58 years old, which explore the "new external circumstances"ⁱ faced with this movement of the generations and the effect this has on people in midlife. In addition it explores the new internal (or psychological) circumstances which also occur alongside them.

2. Separation and Attachment in the Generational Shift

Since infancy most loving parents will have offered protection, security, comfort and guidance. In the psyche of the defenceless infant, parents provide the ultimate security and they are dependent on them for their survival. The loss of parents has the potential to lead to the infants own demise, yet this fear of separation from someone on which they are so dependent is something which still needs to be faced. In these early stages of development, psychological separation must occur in order for the child to develop and lead an independent existence, becoming responsible for its own survivalⁱⁱ. This process of separation and individuation is about gaining a separate existence from the mother; about separating oneself from the loved object and it shares some similarities to the mourning process. I argue this is something which is in part revisited when the middle aged child faces the ultimate separation from their parents through death. As a mature adult, even if they do not need the direct practical and emotional provisions from a parent, certain comfort can be derived from knowing that they are still there as a safety net or psychological backup. One interviewee named Anna (46) said when parents die “we lose our sense of being a child”. A middle aged friend of mine also cried “I am now an orphan” after having lost both of her parents within 6 months of each other. Satisfactory relationships with parents help maintain a sense of childishness and youth in the middle aged child, whilst offering a sense of security and dependability. But how do people respond when this safety net is lost through the death of parents, or when the safety net becomes inadequate due to the changed nature of the relationship with parents as they have aged?

It has been shown how people become more aware and anxious of their own ageing process and mortality when parents showed signs of getting older or died. However I also found that some people felt the presence of their parents had hindered them from a full transition to adulthood. Midlife is a period in which they finally feel they have had a chance to be “grown up” and once the parental generation has died, this was now the first opportunity to feel free from their parent’s constraints. Just as conflicts arise with parents in early infancy and again in adolescent years about becoming more autonomous, there seems to also be a process of separation and struggles for autonomy which occur in midlife: a struggle to be “grown up” and free from parental influence, particularly amongst those in midlife who realize that time is passing by and that they are getting older, and a struggle to hold onto that sense of security and dependence which most loving parents offer whilst they are alive.

The parental generation hold a significant position in the family tree and their loss can have profound implications for the midlife generation. But, what if parents live longer than anticipated? Do middle aged children resent not being able to take their place at the top of the family hierarchy? How

does the middle aged child feel when the parental relationship does not fulfil its usual function of protecting and providing and shifts to a new relationship where the child becomes their parent's parent? How are feelings of separation, attachment and loss negotiated when there exists a struggle between the need to live a fulfilled life as a grown adult, and still also feeling oppressed, dependent or an obligation towards one's parents?

In some cases the burden of care of elderly parents can be quite significant during the midlife period. If that care has been prolonged or particularly difficult then there is often relief at their parent's deaths due to the end of suffering for the parent but also due to the end of care duties. One interviewee 48 year old Jeff, for example, had a heavy care responsibility for his mother and he felt he needed his mother to die in order for him to start having a life of his own. Along with his sister they have cared for their mother their entire adult lives as she suffered from severe mental health problems and now has severe physical and mental disabilities. Neither he nor his sister has lived away from their mother and consequently Jeff has never formed a serious romantic relationship with anyone, never had children and never been able to achieve his main life ambitions. He talks about his ambiguous feelings about his mother's death. On one hand he would like her to die, but then finds himself shifting to a fear of her dying. He says

I suppose I want her to die really. I mean I will be sad. I will be sad in some ways and I think I've purposely distanced myself from the emotional bond sometimes. I think people are very flexible. I could easily find myself getting back into more of a sort of son/mother relationship and being terrified of her dying.

It is as if Jeff cannot separate himself from his child-like role. Despite having lived with and been the carer for his mother all his life, his mother is still his mother and he is still her son. He has not moved on from his childhood role and although he has a deep desire to grow up and be independent, he also has a fear of separation. After all, he is looking after her out of a moral duty and if he truly wanted to be independent from her it is a move that he could have made a lot sooner in life. He is battling with a strong attachment to his mother and a need for separateness. Jeff himself is aware about the ambiguity of his feelings towards his mother. When I asked, "Was it ever an option to put her into institutional care?" He replied, "It's a very difficult option. It's still an option. It's almost an impossible option". He talks about his concern that she will not be cared for in the way that he can and then goes on to say,

It doesn't seem an option which is a great pity in various ways because I feel trapped. I feel I can't offer someone the sort of relationship that they might want and I haven't been able to for 12 or 13 years but in the same way that's been an excuse for me. But if I get involved with people, I can step back a bit. So it works both ways.

He listed the excuses as to why he should not put his mother in care, but also recognises that by looking after his mother it provides him with a good excuse not to participate in grown up life, and enter into an intimate relationship with anyone. I suggest that for Jeff this is something which he perhaps has been struggling with for many years, a yearning for an independent life, but also a sense of duty and guilt about separating from his mother. Jeff also spoke very candidly about the phantasy of his mother dying and the excitement he felt when he thought she would die.

One of the GPs diagnosed that my mother had bowel cancer from the blood tests and this was about a year back and I suddenly thought I had a thrill go through me, that this is an escape, an escape for me from all this being tied down not being able to go on holidays and things like that. But it's an escape for mum from all the pain and all the other things that she has to go through. But of course the GP got it wrong so it was nothing of the kind [laughs] I suppose that's a good test of my reaction to mum.

I suggest that the passage into adulthood is something which both intrigues Jeff and is something to fantasise about but at the same time it also frightens him and he retreats into the security of being close to his mum through her care. He mentions, "Yes, even though physically I'm quite trapped in a way, there's lots of things I can't do. Then again that makes life less stressful in certain ways". I suggest that Jeff is torn between a loyalty towards his mother and a realisation that his own life is passing him by. He is torn by his love for his mother and the resentment he has for her. He is also split by the security he feels with her and his need for autonomy and independence. He fluctuates between the different emotions, which I suggest are evident of being in the Kleinian paranoid schizoid position. Jeff has split feelings about his situation and relationship with his mother. Throughout the interview he fluctuates between the "good breast" of the loving, security providing mother, and the "bad breast" of the inadequate mother, who controls his life and holds him back. It is perhaps the guilt he feels about the psychological attack on the bad elements which ultimately keep him in a

reparative state of trying to make his mother better and his prolonged care role.

In some cases though it is not just the care responsibilities which hold people back from achieving their full potential or becoming fully fledged adults. For example, 43 year old Adrian's parents are both healthy, independent, only in their mid-sixties (which was relatively young compared to the rest of the sample) and they were not a burden to him in terms of care. However, in response to the question, "how do you feel your life would change when your parents die?" He responded,

I would expect a certain amount of relief actually, that I will not have an obligation of any sort to anyone then. They held expectations of me, that sounds a bit narrow, I have been struggling with the idea with my parent's expectations, felt kind of oppressed by them for many, many years, it's only recently that I have shaken that off. When they are gone, if they were to go tomorrow I would feel that, I would miss them, but I would feel that.

For both Jeff and Adrian, their situations and feelings about their parents dying are reminiscent of the separation from parents which most people experience in young adulthood, when they first leave home. Jeff has not left home for a significant period of time before and Adrian feels that he has always been oppressed by his parent's presence, even though he does not live with them. When asked "Do you worry about them getting older?" he replied, "...I am worrying about it for the impact it will have on me rather than for them." Adrian's attitude towards his parents future care needs seemed unjustifiably callous and he only commented on the impact and inconvenience that their ageing and death would have upon his life. It is also interesting to note the importance for Adrian to ensure that he has as much time as possible, without his parent's presence or burden so that he can achieve all that he wants to with his remaining time. He says,

I think care com[ing] in would be the sort of solution I would prefer...It's just how much I will be able to, it's how much it will be a stretch for me for the things I want to do, given that my late onset mid life is all about enjoying what I can do with the time I have got left. I do worry about that a bit, I'm a bit selfish in that respect, I don't suppose anyone else is different.

Adrian's anxieties about doing all that he wants to do with his life seem to outweigh his relationship with his parents. Jeff also believed that when his mother died it would also grant him more freedom than he currently has, in order to enjoy things which he feels he is missing out in his life. He says

...what I'm hoping for when my mother dies, or when we can't look after her any more, that will suddenly be a lot more freedom than I've had. Yes, I'm hoping that it will be a comfortable time where I can do a bit of travelling and do the things that I want and feel that when I'm going to work I don't have to. I can just do that.

The generational shift can be a liberating opportunity for some people in midlife. As I have shown the death of parents is often preceded by a period of dependency upon the middle aged child and in this role reversal they may find themselves in a position of becoming their parent's parent. The relief from this responsibility may result in a sense of liberation and a chance to achieve all that could not whilst one's parents were alive.

Moreover, when coupled with increased mortality awareness in midlife which may arise from the realisation that parents are in their final stages of life and that the midlife cohort is soon to move up to become the older generation, it could be suggested that there is often urgency for parents to die, as there is urgency for the midlife individual's life to become fulfilled before time runs out for them too. I suggest that this is true for Adrian who felt he would become more grown up when his parents died and he would be able to live his life as he wanted. Similarly Jeff spoke about how when his mother dies he would like to move out of the family home, travel to Africa, perhaps live with a lady pen-friend that he has, change career etc. He has a packed agenda for his future years but this is all on hold until his mother dies and he feels that his own time is running out.

Melanie Klein recalled a case in which someone was faced with the impending death of a parent. She states that "the recent increase of hatred against his mother was a defence against his sorrow and despair about her approaching death"ⁱⁱⁱ. For those who feel the death of a loved one is imminent, this could be experienced as an impending loss which requires mourning before the bereavement itself occurs. According to Freud this mourning process requires a certain level of separation from the loved object and the process of mourning involves "withdrawing" each attachment one has to the loved object.^{iv} I suggest that when an individual is faced with the inevitable demise of their loved parent, they often need to detach themselves from their emotional involvement in order to protect themselves from the pain of losing them. I suggest that this could be one explanation as to why Adrian and Jeff seemed so callous in their need for detachment from their

parents. This process of splitting may serve to protect them from the imminent pain of losing their loved object (parent) and by starting to psychologically break the bonds which bind them, the loss of parents would be lessened. The unconscious detachment from parents could be a result of anxieties about their own ageing process, fears and mourning for the parents which they fear losing, combined with their own insecurities that they had failed to be fully dependent from their parents and could not yet consider themselves fully “grown up.”

For both Adrian and Jeff, their parents do frustrate them. For Adrian they annoy him by asking the wrong questions and for Jeff, his mother is demanding of his care and attention. Ultimately though, they are both close to their parents even if this is something which they do not explicitly admit. If they did not have some kind of close bond why would their parents matter so much and why would they not, up until now, have made the break for independence and moved away? Both Jeff and Adrian need their parents. Jeff, in particular has never experienced life without his mother dependence on him. It could be also argued that they need their parents as they fill the generational buffer which protects them from considering their own ageing and mortality. However, both Jeff and Adrian resent this dependency on their parents. They want to make the break, to become fully fledged adults and to ensure that their own lives are maximally fulfilled before they get to old or die themselves.

Pritchard (1995) states “the loss of a parent evokes all the old fears and threats of the lost child”^v. Archer (1999) says to lose a parent in adulthood is “difficult to cope with because they make the individual’s personal world an unsafe and unpredictable place”^{vi}. Just as a child first ventures from the security of its mother, so too must the middle aged child renegotiate the world around them alone after their deaths. Just as an infant they had to deal with the struggles of individuation, loss and separation from its parents, now the middle-aged child has to face the definitive loss of a parent and cope with a new set of challenges. Although aspects of this separation process from parents are reminiscent of earlier infantile experiences, it is now experienced in a qualitatively different way. Jaques (1965) suggested that one of the differences between earlier infantile experiences of loss and of those experienced in midlife is that midlife “calls for a re-working through of the infantile depression, but with mature insight into death and destructive impulse to be taken into account”^{vii}. In midlife people have an understanding and awareness of the reality of death and mortality, which they do not have as a child. This awareness can create a fear which is experienced differently to the fears of an infant. Another difference is that when the young child or adolescent gains independence from their

parents, they would always be there in the background and there was always the option to revert back to a child-like position in relation to them; now in midlife the child faces the ultimate and final loss of their parents. There is no option for the middle aged person to revert back to the child-like state, they themselves are becoming the older generation.

4. Conclusion

Midlife can be considered to be a critical transition point in many people's lives and such transitions in the life course are often characterised by loss and readjustment. Practical and emotional changes need to be managed to cope with culminating losses and changes in this period of the life course. The individual must try to fit back into the world and their lives which have undergone significant transformations and where their roles and demands have changed. The impact of such changes can vary considerably depending on the individual personality structure, the experiences one had prior to the transitional period and the relationships with all of those affected by the changes.

The death of parents is arguably the most common bereavement suffered in midlife; it is a bereavement which is often anticipated at some level, yet can also have a profound effect on the generations left behind. This paper has gone some way to explore the psychological and behavioural effect the death of parents has on the middle aged individual. It has considered how anxieties about separation and attachment are experienced, and although these are reminiscent of earlier infantile anxieties they are experienced in a new form in midlife. Splitting, denial and sublimation were some of the psychological defence techniques which were identified. It was shown that these psychological mechanisms were used to assuage anxieties about the fear of ultimate separation from parents and from the realisation that time is passing and that they have now become part of the older generation. Early infantile development is associated with the child's realisation that it is not omnipotent and that it will have to detach itself from its mother in order to gain its own independence. In effect it has to deal with a changing identity and a "loss" of its mother. In a comparable sense the middle-aged child often has to face the definitive loss of a parent.

Bibliography

- Archer, J *The Nature Of Grief*. Routledge, London, 1999.
 Jaques, E, (1965) "Death and the Midlife Crisis". *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 46: 502-514
 Klein, M, 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States'. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 21:125-153. 1940.
 Pritchard, C, *Suicide- The Ultimate Rejection?* Open University Press, Buckingham, 1995.

Author Affiliation

Bethany Morgan, Department of Sociology, The University of Essex

ⁱ E Jaques, 'Death and the Midlife Crisis'. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis.*, 46: 502-514, 1965: p506.

ⁱⁱ M, Klein, 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States'. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 21:125-153. 1940.

ⁱⁱⁱ Klein, op.cit., p. 148.

^{iv} S Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 237-258, 1917, p. 244.

^v C Pritchard, *Suicide- The Ultimate Rejection?*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1995, p. 153.

^{vi} J Archer, *The Nature Of Grief*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 213.

^{vii} Jaques, op.cit., p. 505.