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**Interpersonal dynamics of women in midlife living with involuntary  
childlessness**

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## **Interpersonal dynamics of women in midlife living with involuntary childlessness**

### **Abstract**

Becoming a parent creates a new phase in adult development where the creation of a family brings new meanings and relational dimensions to one's life. For people who are involuntarily childless, however, the absence of children can have a multifaceted impact on their everyday lives. Although extensive studies concerning childlessness have been conducted, past work has tended to have a clinical focus on women's infertility and fertility treatments and much less attention has been paid to how involuntarily childless people live beyond the phase of trying for a child while contemporaries pursue their lives with children. This study explores the experience of 11 White, heterosexual British women in midlife living with involuntary childlessness. To gain experiential insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcripts analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Analysis reveals two interrelated key patterns exemplifying intrapersonal and interpersonal features. This paper focuses on the latter. The findings bring to light not only layers of complex relational issues caused by being involuntarily childless, but also different ways of reconstructing meaning in relational reconnections that impacted positively on developing generativity. The paper presents the dynamics unique to each woman and offers micro-level understandings helpful for health professionals, family therapists, life coaches, and researchers looking into childlessness and midlife/adult development.

Keywords: involuntary childlessness, interpersonal experiences, women in midlife, generative identity, qualitative

### **Interpersonal dynamics of women in midlife living with involuntary childlessness**

For the majority of people, becoming a parent is a natural development in adulthood where the creation of a family brings a new phase particularly during midlife. Many people find personal meaning through parental roles (Marcia, 2002; Newton & Stewart, 2010) as they establish care and responsibility for their children (Erikson, 1959/1980; McAdams, 2001). People develop family identities, interpersonal relationships shift and create “ways of interacting with a variety of other systems, such as schools, workplaces, local community, neighbours, friends, in-laws, and extended family” (Dallos & Draper, 2015, p.8). Midlife, therefore, is a phase where people engage dynamically in society and develop self-identity in their relational worlds. While there are individuals who choose not to have children, for those who are involuntarily childless, living among contemporaries who are pursuing their lives with children can have a multifaceted impact.

The advancement of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) has resulted in extensive reproductive studies with a clinical focus on infertility and fertility treatments, many of which have used questionnaires and scale-based measures (Greil, 1997). For example, studies focused on infertile women who pursued ARTs trying to conceive for the first time have revealed the high levels of anxiety and depression, showing the distress caused by fertility treatments (Gameiro et al., 2012; Massarotti et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2016). However, a survey on 66 Norwegian women 10 years after IVF treatment (Sundby et al. 2007), reported that the distress caused by fertility treatment was temporary and lessened as time went on. In their study, however, 55 of the women had children through, for example, successful IVF or adoption, and only 11 remained childless. Such a study may undervalue the experiences of women who underwent IVF but continue to live with involuntary childlessness.

Focusing the research on relationships, a longitudinal survey in Germany conducted

by Klaus and Schnettler (2016) on 5,782 individuals (over 40 years of age), found childless adults had more positive relationships and support of friends and collateral kin compared with parents, indicating childlessness does not impact negatively on social relationships in mid and later life. Albertini and Mencarini (2014), who used survey data of 33,759 Italians (aged 30-70+, mean age = 53.7), found similar positive relational outcomes; however, their study also revealed fewer relationships for those in their 50s and 60s, suggesting the need for help among childless individuals in later life.

Arnett (2018) made the point that midlife is complex and cannot be considered as a negative period nor a peak period in life, and conducted a survey-based study focusing on adults in midlife. The results from 834 Americans (aged 40-60) showed that financial issues were the top cause of stress (62 %) and relationships with their children were the highest source of enjoyment (88 %). The study described people in midlife as being “happily stressed” (p. 275) and showed the positive impact that children bring. However, the voices of childless people were missing.

While quantitative surveys are helpful in establishing a nomothetic presentation associated with childlessness, and also generalized views of people in midlife, they can undervalue individuals’ personal experiences. It should be noted, however, that there has been a gradual increase in qualitative studies, including research using phenomenological methods.

Johansson and Berg (2005) interviewed eight childless women aged between 34 and 41 who had all stopped fertility treatments two years prior to the study. The authors used a descriptive phenomenological method to examine a life-world of involuntary childlessness, and identified the core structure of childlessness as “life-grief” (p. 60), revealing on-going grief over the unwanted outcome of life without biological children.

In another phenomenological study, Daniluk (1996) interviewed 37 infertile women

(mean age = 36) who had recently stopped fertility treatment. The duration those women spent trying to conceive was between 2 and 15 years (average of 6.4). The study pointed to the cognitive involvement of “reevaluation of their beliefs, needs, and priorities” (p. 95), and the need for support to help these women through long-term adaptation processes.

The enduring impact of failed fertility treatments was evidenced in Ferland and Caron’s (2013) qualitative study on 12 involuntarily childless women aged between 46 and 59, who reflected on their infertility. Their study found similar findings to those in Johansson and Berg’s (2005), and Daniluk’s (1996) studies, but also indicated that caring for children of others could help childless women adjust to the lost meaning attached to motherhood.

These studies have added qualitative understanding. However, the focus did remain on clinical outcomes of infertility and there have been on-going concerns about “clinical emphases” (Greil et al., 2010, p. 140) of infertility studies, and the lack of research on involuntarily childless people unable to experience the transition to parenthood (Matthews & Matthews, 1986).

According to Letherby (2002), as life goes on, unresolved infertility can continue as “the social experience” (p.282) of involuntary childlessness. Grief over the loss of an envisioned family life can also linger as life progresses. The participants in our present study have indeed revealed internal struggles and grief pertaining to their involuntary childlessness (see Fieldsend & Smith, 2020), which can be understood as a form of *ambiguous loss* that Boss (2006, p.7) conceptualized: physically absent and psychologically present loss. Such psychological impact can complicate relationships in a family-oriented social world. Sociologically-oriented qualitative studies on infertility/involuntary childlessness have reported women’s stigmatized sense of self (Letherby, 1999), failure and exclusion (Loftus & Andriot, 2012), and discrepancies between self-belief and social expectations (Riessman, 2000), illustrating the incoherence such women feel within society. Given that midlife

bridges the years between young adulthood and later adulthood, and spans a majority of a person's life (Lachman, 2004), the impact of childlessness can indeed be significant.

Research on infertility and involuntary childlessness in men should also be noted as important (Fisher & Hammarberg, 2012; Hadley, 2018). However, there is a vital need for psychological research on involuntarily childless women living beyond the phase of trying for a child, from a meaning focused experiential perspective, as they are currently underrepresented in existing literature (Fieldsend, 2018).

The present study sets out to explore phenomenologically the social relationships of involuntarily childless women in midlife.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

In order to explore the lived experience of involuntary childlessness as closely as possible, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2022) was used. IPA is the well-established qualitative approach that allows researchers to do a detailed and nuanced investigation of the phenomenon under study. IPA does this through a double hermeneutic, which is the interpretative process where the researcher actively tries to interpret the participant, who is trying to make sense of significant phenomena happening to them. Together with the idiographic focus, through the use of verbatim extracts and cross-case analysis of their experiences, IPA facilitates a way of giving voice to the experiences of people living with involuntary childlessness.

With the aim of making connections to potential participants from wider childless communities, recruitment information sheets were distributed through three online childless support networks, and this in turn further created a snowball effect helping the recruitment.

In agreement with IPA's idiographic commitment, and in searching for experiential meaning of involuntary childlessness for a particular person in a particular context, purposive

and homogeneous sampling was applied, using the following inclusion criteria: White British women aged between 45 and 55 who had wanted to have children but were no longer trying to do so; in a long-term heterosexual relationship living without children (no adopted children, step-children, or children of a partner from a previous relationship); resident in the UK; and not receiving any therapy or counselling. Twelve women were initially recruited, however, one had to be excluded as she did not meet the criteria and, therefore, the experiential data of 11 women were used for this study.

### **Participants**

See Table 1 for participant characteristics. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality. In addition, while nine of the women had had unsuccessful fertility treatment and/or had miscarried, two had not undergone ARTs nor had had instances of miscarriage. Before taking part in the study, each participant signed a consent form. Ethical approval was granted by Birkbeck University of London.

----- Please place Table 1 about here -----

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and the interview schedule made as a flexible guideline (see Appendix for interview schedule). All participants clearly understood the nature of the interview that would involve talking about their personal experiences of involuntary childlessness. However, as we wanted to be careful about sensitivities surrounding individuals' experiences of childlessness and allow the narratives to unfold naturally, questions that directly asked about childlessness were not included in the interview schedule, with the exception of one to be asked at the end of an interview should a prompt be felt necessary. However, this was not used as all the participants described their childlessness typically as they talked about their everyday lives and activities with other

people. The interviews were carried out by the first author, with five taking place at Birkbeck University of London, four at the participants' homes, one at the participant's private office, and one at a rented therapy/counselling room. The interviews lasted between 52 and 95 minutes, were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Analysis<sup>1</sup>**

The data were analyzed according to the idiographic and inductive commitment of IPA beginning with a detailed analysis of each separate case and only after this did the process continue to identify patterns across cases.

Each case was read several times, taking exploratory notes on descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels of importance. These notes were then converted into experiential statements where the researchers interpreted the various elements attached to what a participant had said while trying to make sense of her experience. The experiential statements were analyzed further: aspects of a participant's experiences were put together and condensed into more comprehensive statements. The following stage looked for connections across statements to identify higher order clusters, each of which was then given a name becoming a personal experiential theme (PET). Finally, a table was produced illustrating the emergence of the PETs showing sub-themes supported by short extracts taken from the transcripts. The aim of the case analysis was to identify experiential themes that were particular to each participant and to create tables for each case. In final cross-case analysis, all tables were analyzed looking for divergence and convergence across all. This generated a main table of group experiential themes of the 11 participants that illustrated the commonality drawn from individuals' personal lived experience. The first author led the analysis, and analytical processes were discussed and audited with the second author ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research.

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<sup>1</sup> We have modified the terminology to describe the IPA process slightly, in line with the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the key text on the approach: Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022).

Our study revealed two key interrelated patterns exemplifying, a) intrapersonal features, and b) interpersonal features. Due to the complexity of our findings, and as we want readers to feel the depth of experiential meanings attached to the themes identified, this paper focuses on and explores the latter. The first pattern was published in Fieldsend and Smith (2020).

### **Authors**

This paper arises from the doctoral research of the first author under the supervision and mentoring of the second author who is a leading expert in IPA. Both authors made significant contributions to the research and writing of this paper. The second author provided training to the first author and offered guidance in the design and running of the study. The first author carried out the interviews and took the lead in analysis. At each stage, provisional analysis was checked with the second author who suggested appropriate modifications which were then negotiated and agreed. Both authors contributed to the writing of the paper.

### **Results**

The interpersonal features of the participants are presented within two themes developed from the cross-case analysis of their interviews: a) Encountering relational losses, and b) Reconstructing the self through relational reconnections. The first theme highlights diverse issues around the social connectedness that all of the women in this study face, and the second elucidates ways each finds new meanings in relational contexts. Both themes are presented here with sub-themes and illustrative extracts. Although all the sub-themes are supported by extracts from more than half of the participants, meeting the sufficient sampling criteria suggested by Smith (2011), due to limited space, representative extracts only are included. In the extracts, *italics* denote emphasis, ... indicate a short pause, and [ ] indicates editorial elision.

## Encountering Relational Losses

### *Not sharing normative social values and statuses*

For involuntarily childless individuals interacting in a family-oriented society can be challenging and difficulties arise in sharing social values with those who have children.

Emily found the judgement of others to be painful:

Erm...where it becomes much more painful is that when I sense people pass judgement. Because...you don't have children, therefore, you cannot *possibly* have an opinion about whatever subject it is. [ ] Or... you don't know what it's like to worry about a child. Well, no, but I do worry about others. (6.13-23)

Emily is trying to justify her values pointing to the role of caring. Although unable to share social values from the perspective of a parent, she is a person who shares the values of caring for others. Her sense that her experiences are devalued by other people appears as emotional pain. Difficulties in sharing social statuses can impact on ways of developing identity.

Penny described her struggle:

I think I might gonna be constantly...you know infantilized by society. [ ] you know, because I haven't had children an am I never fully a woman? You know, a mature woman? Am I...am I viewed as not having properly grown up somehow... (25.31-34)

Penny raises concerns at being categorized as an 'infantilized' person and 'constantly' viewed as an incomplete being in the normative world. Here her strong rejection of this appears over socially constructed values.

Alana, who started to write a children's book, found unshared values within close relationships:

I sometimes wonder that...my friends and family don't feel that it's...erm...I'm a suitable candidate to be writing children's books, because I don't have my own children, but I thi...I think that's...rubbish. (3.40-43)

Writing children's books is the career she wants to pursue and, therefore, has value for her. However, her word 'rubbish' connotes the rejection of judgements that are based on her childless status. And for Alana, finding the unshared values within close relationships results in her feeling of great disappointment.

In each case these women experience or are concerned they may experience a generalized and prescriptive rejection. Childlessness tends to be labelled categorically under social value systems where normative conceptions around parental status result in the creation of boundaries for those without the same status. Particularly punishing is how this normative model includes strong presumptive judgements: for example that a woman who does not have a child cannot be a proper woman remaining locked as a child and yet, ironically, is also unable to imaginatively enter the space of a young person to write a children's book.

### *Feeling excluded*

More than half the women in this study expressed feelings of detachment. The experiential features depicted include isolation and separation from those who have children; however, some also talked of their sense of exclusion when engaging in everyday conversation. Renee explicated on this:

I can talk about holidays, I can talk about walking, I can talk about gardening, but I can't talk about these things that all these other women have got in common...and that...you feel excluded...quite a lot of the time... (8.32-33)

Exclusion for Renee results from an inability to participate in everyday conversation where other women talk about their children—an inability to participate in everyday conversation can result in losing contact with the normative world. Renee possibly feels vulnerable in such a situation.

If daily conversations become a trigger for having a sense of exclusion, it will be

difficult to associate with people who are parents; once women become mothers, babies and children are common and naturally engaging subjects. Maggie pointed to this:

When people have children, all they wanna talk about is their children, really...erm...it can be hard...it *is* hard. (20.39-41)

Maggie's thoughts turn inward as she comments on her own experience when she says 'it is hard'. Her relational struggles with people with children amplify her emotional struggles that are revealed by the repeated use of the word 'hard'. Everyday conversation with people with children, therefore, triggers a sense of exclusion.

Clare was unequivocal in this regard:

I still feel a little bit...out of it. If you're with a group of mums and there're talking baby talk or children talk, it's quite difficult...to join in the conversation. And they most of the time they don't mean to but you do get excluded. (3.41-46)

For Clare, her sense of exclusion seems to point to her powerlessness to change her relationship with mothers. Her efforts to be recognized and join in a group of mothers is difficult; the mothers 'don't mean to' exclude her, but there is no specific solution she can work on to be included. Her account further points to unreachable connections with 'a group of mums'. In each case the exclusion is so powerful because it is from something that has become such a major part of the discourse of the people the woman only recently considered their peers and equivalents.

### ***Feeling a lack of affinity***

Kelly realized that she is different from 'a lot of people who do have children' and also 'different from what I [she] perceived of normal society to be' (15.5-8), because she has no children. When comparing themselves with others, a salient sense of deviation from the normative world appeared. Most participants expressed that they felt a lack of affinity, the affinity that influences interpersonal qualitative connections with friends who have children.

Loving one's own children is a characteristic feature of motherhood. Penny said that 'there's a love that I [she] will never understand' (25.19-20). This illustrates one feature that all participants share: a love they could not establish with their hoped-for children. Penny spoke of her inability to share the meaning of love that mothers have for their children:

They're all different types of love. And that the love you have between a parent and child is a different type of love, but it's not better than other types of love. [ ] There isn't really a love Olympics, although it...it feels like there's a love Olympics, you know... (26.1-11)

A logical and emotional conflict over the meaning of love appears as she tries to understand it using a competitive analogy from the Olympics, and by looking at 'a different type of love'. Penny, who places value on the quality of other types of love, struggles to find the meaning of 'love' of equal value to that which mothers have for their children, resulting in her feeling beaten by the mother-baby love.

Children typically grow with love and care from parents or parental figures. For Emily, becoming a parent was the 'big experience of mankind':

This big experience of...of mankind, that you know, we're supposed to be, for most of people I suppose...because one of the milestones in their life and I sort of passed it by. (4.21-24)

There is a sense of regret and sadness in her words where the loss of motherhood signifies the loss of relational connections with others as she feels an unattainable developmental quality that human beings are supposed to experience. Like Penny, Emily emphasizes the scale of the separation they feel from mothers. For Emily this is captured in her missing one of the important measures of the life course 'the milestones in their life' while for Penny it is suggested in her failing to be able to compete with the other elite Olympian women who procreate.

Alana talked about this, but with envious feelings towards mothers:

I'm envious of their potential of the...of them watching their children go through these next stages and trying to guide them through...erm...the difficult situations, at school, and with their own friends and their life choices, and I envy that...role that they have in their lives and in helping to shape their lives (7.8-15)

Her sense of envy is not directed to mothers per se, but towards the role that mothers have. She sees children as people who go through life 'stages' that give parents new stages in their lives. Life for parents progresses in parallel with child development, so those unable to have a parental role risk losing the developmental experiences that accompany child-rearing: to guide and be guided. The role of a parent shapes one's own life as well as one's social life.

It is not surprising for childless people to have unshared feelings towards parents. Heather, however, spoke about these feelings towards an involuntarily childless woman who expressed happiness in her childlessness:

she says...now that she's happy now. And she's accepted not having children. I can't imagine what that would be ever like, what that would be like, or whether that will ever happen... [ ] I wonder if she really is...if [she] really is over it. (16.15-29)

For Heather, it is difficult to find the positives in her childless life, so meeting an involuntarily childless woman who feels happiness in her life is also difficult to comprehend. She also seems to point out the dichotomy between what the woman 'says' and the 'real[ity]' of being childless, revealing uncertainty towards herself as to whether she can ever get over the situation. A shared context of involuntary childlessness can become unshared as a result of losing interpersonal affinities.

Half the participants revealed feeling of inferiority caused by unattainable motherhood. Penny expressed her hope to gain a sense of equality with mothers:

I'd like to be able to sit with mothers and feel an equal to them, [ ] and it doesn't

feel like that at the minute...I don't feel OK...I feel that I am less than they are...and

I'd like to feel that they're OK and I'm OK, and that's OK [little laugh] (34.10-15)

Penny feels less than what she is: she desires to be valued equally with mothers. Interestingly, here is a sense of minimizing self against mothers appearing as a spatial difference where the hope is to be able to 'sit with mothers'. The incompatibility of *lived space* or *felt space* may draw a line for Penny in her sense of inferiority in the presence of mothers.

In contrast, Alana, who started writing children's books, described the relationship with her brother who has four children:

Erm...my brother is quite celebrated within the family, [ ]...[tearful] and my Dad and the wider family sort of celebrate him...[ ] I feel sad sometimes...I feel like less...I feel a bit invisible sometimes I think within the family. (19.3-12)

Her expression 'feel like less...' and 'invisible' suggest a non-existential sense of self within families. Her sadness is emerging as she compares herself to her brother who has a family. Alana's account suggests that her experiences have left her feeling inferior and having less value than her brother. Her account illustrates a lack of affinity that is associated within close family members.

### **Reconstructing The Self Through Relational Reconnections**

All participants described unavoidable relational difficulties as a result of not having had children; however, they also talked of how they have started to move beyond what they perceived their world to be. Their empowered identities are emerging as they find meaning in relational reconnections.

#### ***Building new connections***

Two key features of interest emerged from several of the women's accounts in which connections were made. Four of the participants talked of their associations with people who are childless. For Maggie, a childless world appeared to govern 'belonging':

We all search for that don't we... that sort of belonging to something, and you know our childless group belong to that... (8.5-7)

Denise was trying to connect with childless people, but is hoping to expand her world at a local level:

do lots of things together [with her husband] but it'd be nice to have some people nearby who were in the same situation as us. That would be my...hope. Yeah. (16.10-16)

Despite the fact that Denise seems to have a good relationship with her husband, she is hoping to connect to 'more people nearby'. This suggests that she is looking for new relationships in a wider context going beyond that with her husband.

In contrast, and in the second feature to emerge, three participants were 'looking for similarities' in a normative world, and trying not to see childlessness as a boundary in society. Clare and Susie illustrated this well. Clare was emphatic:

Don't keep saying you're different...Look for similarities. [ ] Don't make yourself stand out by saying I haven't got children. Make yourself stand out by saying...I'm just like these people you know. But through no fault of my own...through chance I don't have children. But, but that's it. It doesn't define me...which is easier said than done, but you can get there. (19.23-32)

Clare reveals her reconstruction of the self. Her perception of the relationships between a childless self and the world has altered from categorical distinctions to qualitative similarities: childlessness 'doesn't define' who she is, because she is a human being like others; being childless is not one's own 'fault' and is a 'chance' that anyone could experience. In this shifting process, she appears to be normalizing her experience as can be evidenced in the use 'I' and 'you'. For Clare, reconstructing the self reconnects her, not as a childless woman, but as a person to a normative world.

Similarly, Susie's determination to reconnect to a normative world was clear. Susie,

52 at the time of the interview, was preparing for her 'last job'. Aware of the point in her life, she spoke about making 'more friends' with people in a new environment:

I'm hoping I'm gonna make more friends in the next job. Because, I think it's me last job in nursing. So, it's make or break time for me. (3.1-3)

She suggests that she wants to challenge normative society by actively trying to move across the boundary of childlessness into a normative world. This job, for Susie is a 'chance' (Clare, 19.23-32) to develop her sense of self.

### ***Power of disclosure***

Being part of a childless support group or initiating new relationships gave participants better opportunities to talk about their experiences. Talking helps cognitive processes that enable positive changes within the self. Many participants revealed this shift through self-disclosure. Noticeably, the effectiveness of talking appeared as individuals became aware of themselves and able to integrate into their external world; rather than just talking, some participants chose to disclose experiences.

Heather described speaking to her sister-in-law:

When I told her ...she didn't realize I'd always wanted kids. Anyway, *thank God* I told her. I really wanted her to know that, you know. [ ] She said "I'm really proud of you, Heather". You know [tearful] I thought that was really nice...after everything I'd been through, [ ]...that was really lovely of her to say that. (23.30-45)

Heather's desperation for understanding of her struggles appear here. Disclosure has given voice to her suffering and she has gained a sense of recognition and acceptance from her sister-in-law. Heather also reveals the importance of sharedness that comes from the two-way interaction.

For some participants, however, disclosure was about directing experiences towards others as a way of raising social awareness. Maggie and Susie in particular showed their

willingness to ‘talk about’ themselves ‘openly’.

I’m you know quite happy to talk about my life now...erm...to help, because it helps to raise awareness about the situation... (Maggie, 18.42-46)

I’ve decided that in my next job, I’m gonna be *totally open*, and see what happens.

I’m gonna tell them about my fertility treatments, I’m gonna tell them about how we live, that we’ve got no children, but I wanted them. And I’m just gonna *see*...how people react, because I’ve never done it before... (Susie, 2.25-38)

What is illustrated here is the perceptions of childlessness which have turned outward from intrapersonal to interpersonal. Both Maggie and Susie choose to disclose experiences in order to gain attention and recognition of personal experiences as well as ‘how we live’ a life without children.

Several participants spoke explicitly of helping other childless people by participating in this study. Renee said:

I was scouring the Internet, [ ] I found [a support group] and that was about the first source of support that I’d come across. I found it was *really* helpful to have somebody that had been through the process. [ ] I’m hoping that by taking part in this, that this may produce some information that will be helpful for *other* people. (20.44/21.6)

The disclosure of one’s own experience becomes a source of engagement and that enhances support for involuntarily childless people, as well as making a contribution to society.

### ***Connecting the self and the world***

All participants understood how emotional reactions shifted through interpersonal relationships, and how this shift influenced and shaped their lives. Engaging in society helped participants develop a new sense of care and love. Penny had ‘started to think’ of what ‘care’ meant to her:

I've started to think that actually I do need to...we do need to look after the planet. I know it's not my children, but it's still a really important thing to do. So it's like... having to rethink and re-come back to what was important to me, but it is with a different slant now. Cos it won't be my children, but actually I care for the human race and I care for the planet. [ ] I still want to make the world a better place. It won't be for my children, but it'll be for other people's children and that's great. (32.2-17)

This statement captures Penny's values that connect her to the world. She has started thinking of herself as a human being 'looking after the planet'. This is an important responsibility for her even though 'it's not my [her] children'. She now re-claims her loss by 'rethink[ing] and re-come[ing] back' to her core value, that of 'care for the human race', suggesting that her understanding of caring has transformed; from being self-centered to being generative. This is evidenced in the last part of the extract as she repeats 'It won't be for my children, but it'll be for other people's children and that's great'.

Care and love have objects that they attend to. For most of the participants, people were the focus of this attention. Renee found positives in doing something for others through voluntary work (12.25). Susie emphasized gratitude and respect towards a supportive partner, which seemed to be turning into care for each other (21.23-31). While Lucy described her relationship with her husband as 'yin and yang' (11.14-15), suggesting they care for each other through interdependency, Kelly appeared to reconstruct the meaning of care and love by describing her marriage as the key element of her life creating meaningful togetherness with her husband (14.3-6).

Atypically, however, Heather was drawn to animals:

One thing that has helped is having a dog [ ] well, it's not my baby, I...it's not a substitute child, but [ ]. Because, it's something to care for together, you know, our, kind of, lives revolve around our care for our rescued greyhound. And he is a rescued

greyhound. [ ] I don't...I wouldn't like not to have an animal now, a dog... because, it does kind of make your wee family in a way (17.7-25)

Indeed, animals are often referred to as good companions, and some participants talked about pets. What makes Heather atypical is her sense towards the meaning of care. Heather and her husband adopted their dog and his presence and need for care are important in her life.

However, she also indicates that what makes life meaningful is through caring for something that is not just her own act, but 'our' act, taking responsibility and being there. As she says, her life with her husband 'revolve[s] around our [their] care for our [their] rescued greyhound'. Although an animal is not 'a substitute child', she is developing her own generative identity. For Heather, caring for and loving the dog signify a way of being generative and, together with her husband, finding meanings as a family unit in society.

### **Discussion**

"Meaning is found relationally" (Boss, 2006, p. 75) and as such, interactions among people bring new opportunities, connections and meanings in life. Self-efficacy and self-esteem are sources (Baumeister, 1991) for meaning-making in a manner of "searching for coherence" (Yalom, 1980, p. 423).

This paper has presented detailed accounts of 11 women facing the challenges of involuntary childlessness and in doing so has provided greater understanding of the impact that the absence of children is having on their lives and interpersonal relationships.

Previous studies using scale-based measures have tended to examine childlessness from medical perspectives (Massarotti et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2016). The increase of qualitative research (e.g., Daniluk, 1996; Johansson & Berg, 2005) has added experiential understanding to reproductive issues. However, the majority of these earlier studies have lacked depth in understanding how women in midlife adjust socially and interpersonally after experiencing unsuccessful attempts at having children.

The current study, focusing on each woman's experiences in their own terms, sheds light on ways in which they experience deviation from daily norms and how they work to reconnect the self to the world. These are made manifest in two key themes: a) Encountering relational losses, and b) Reconstructing the self through relational reconnections.

Feelings of incompatibility that involuntarily childless women experience within a socially normative context are reported in the existing literature: the challenges that exist in social expectations to have a family (Riessman, 2000); the inability to share a gendered status (Loftus & Andriot, 2012); and the dominant social discourse of motherhood (Letherby, 1999).

While similarities can be found to in existing literature, the women in this study described in considerable detail the range of relational issues caused by being childless: Emily is concerned with being judged by society because she has no children, indicating a less-valued sense of self within society which impacts on her identity development; Alana's experience further demonstrates the existence of unshared values with 'friends and family', suggesting that being childless in itself can be a source of judgement that exists within close relationships; while Penny finds herself being 'infantilized by society', leaving her with a sense of being incomplete as a woman.

Ordinary conversations create social engagement. However, this ordinariness becomes problematic. An inability to join in the conversation that 'all other women have got in common' is an experience that happens 'quite a lot of the time' (Renee). For childless women in 'a group of mums' (Clare), it can trigger a sense of exclusion (Loftus & Andriot, 2012). The absence of children can, therefore, result in reducing social connections.

Experiences around unshared endeavors with contemporaries are also captured. Penny describes difficulties in finding shared meaning ascribed to love that is equally important to that of 'mother-baby love'; Emily shows her envy towards mothers, but points more specifically to the role of mother. These illustrate the loss of connections which

motherhood provides through hoped-for children and the foregone developmental experiences family life could have brought into their world.

Children certainly provide extended social connections as mothers gravitate towards each other through activities, such as finding ‘friends at the school gate’ (Maggie, 3.39). One aspect of gender is described as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). In this sense, participants compare themselves with others based on gendered roles as well as parental roles. This may result in role confusion (Erikson, 1950/1995) with the feeling of being ‘strange’ (Letherby, 1999), being ‘outsiders’ (Malik & Coulson, 2013), and being ‘different’ (Peters et al., 2011). The absence of children, therefore, may hinder the development of a secure identity as a woman, unlike that of women ‘feel[ing] confident’ in their identity as a mother with her child (Imrie et al., 2020, p. 477). Holmes (1993) commenting on Bowlby’s attachment theory states:

Attachment Theory is in essence a *spatial* [emphasis in original] theory: when I am close to my loved one I feel good, when I am far away I am anxious, sad or lonely. [ ] But the consummation of attachment is not primarily orgasmic – rather, it is, via the achievement of proximity, a relaxed state in which one can begin to ‘get on with things’, pursue one’s projects, to explore. (Holmes, 1993, p. 67)

This points to characteristics that participants in the current study revealed. For all participants, “my loved one” (Holmes, 1993, p. 67) refers to their hoped-for children, so missing such proximal relationships leads to an insecure sense of self. However, Penny’s hope to ‘be able to sit with mothers’, and Denise’s to connect with involuntarily childless people ‘nearby’, further suggest that establishing secure connections in everyday life is an important task for involuntarily childless individuals to feel comfortably compatible within society.

Becoming generative is a key task in developing identities in midlife (Erikson, 1959/1980). When people become parents, the parental role provides an opportunity to develop generativity by establishing responsibility and care for others, “the next generation” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 103). Findings in the current study reveal the importance of establishing generative identities through caring for others, both humans and animals that reflect back meaningfully to the self. This is the second salient feature to emerge, highlighting how relational reconnections help this process in two distinct ways: one by connecting people who are similarly childless and trying to create experience-close relationships which provide a shared discourse and offer opportunities to care for others who have been through similar experiences (Malik & Coulson, 2013); the second by trying to find qualitative similarities – ‘just like these people’ (Clare) – without distinguishing themselves as childless. These findings add to our understanding of different ways in which childless women start rebuilding connections.

Disclosure provides relational connections and the findings here explicate positive influences, not only in the ways people reconnect to society, but also in the way they gain recognition, as can be seen with Heather when she confided her emotions to her sister-in-law. Disclosure also helps to raise social awareness of involuntary childlessness: Maggie and Susie talk about personal experiences openly to make involuntary childlessness visible, and Renee’s disclosure contributes to childless people looking for support. Developing the ability to position the self in wider communities allows a childless person to acknowledge their childlessness as a psychosocial experience (Matthews & Matthews, 1986), which further promotes the development of one’s own generative identity (Erikson, 1959/1980).

Extant literature often describes involuntary childlessness as being in a developmental crisis (Bergart, 2000), a life-event crisis (Mälkki, 2012), or a failed life course transition (Loftus & Andriot, 2012). However, the women in the current study demonstrate their unique

ways of achieving generativity that dynamically enhance their transition towards non-motherhood. Layers of processes are revealing as the women start to find new meanings through caring for others as well as animals, as the participants actively engage in society through caring relationships: Penny finds ‘what was important to me [her]’ and regains the lost ‘mother-baby love’ through caring ‘for other people’s children’. This agrees with Ferland and Caron’s (2013) findings which point to the importance that caring for others, particularly “other children” (p. 187) plays in adjusting to the loss that involuntarily childless women need to face in life. The meaning of care may be understood by the notion Heidegger posits:

The authentic mode of “being” in a world is *caring* [emphasis in original] in the sense of producing, putting in place, directing ourselves to tasks, taking into possession, preventing, protecting against loss, etc. [ ] In its caring, life approaches itself and addresses itself in a worldly manner. (Heidegger, 1988/1999, p. 79)

Peters et al. (2011) talk of the power of dyadic relationships on childless couples as they try to cope with everyday life. This is evidenced particularly in Heather’s account of how love and care for her dog has brought new meanings into her life and empowers the relationship with her husband as a unit in society.

This paper provides a multidimensional but holistic understanding of the long-term interpersonal impact that the absence of children has on childless women living in midlife. Ultimately, although infertility can be recognized clinically as a reproductive crisis, or “a defined temporal period of a life, with a beginning and an end” (Robinson et al., 2013, p. 29), involuntary childlessness has no end; childlessness remains unchanged for the rest of a person’s life, and “when we are no longer able to change a situation [ ] we are challenged to change ourselves.” (Frankl 1946/2004, p. 116). Relational reconnections are critical in enhancing ways of being and living in a given time, in a given world.

We realize that our sample is relatively small and the fact that we recruited from

support groups means we are not accessing the experience of some women who may feel more isolated or those who feel well-adjusted. However, the main purpose of IPA is to offer a lens which presents an in-depth and detailed portrait of a small number of participants complementing other studies which provide a less detailed examination of a larger sample. The study also offers room for theoretical generalizability whereby readers can consider similarities with and differences from other potential participants. In future research it would be valuable to try to recruit a larger sample of women who had not pursued ART.

We value the work of Levitt et al. (2018) in providing practical and pluralist criteria for assisting the reporting of qualitative research and believe that we meet these criteria in our presentation. In addition, we have heeded the more specific quality criteria developed for IPA by Smith and colleagues (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith, 2011). Key pointers in these guides are: the collection of powerful data from individual participants; a systematic analysis of convergence and divergence in participants' responses; an interpretative account of lived experience. We believe we have demonstrated each of these in this paper.

In conclusion we hope and believe this paper presents a detailed examination of the lived experience of women who are childless and are reaching mid-life. The findings, therefore, offer the value of micro-level understanding helpful for health professionals, therapists, life coaches, and researchers looking into childlessness and midlife/adult development. A further contribution to this paper may be to invite the reader to have an open dialogue in wider contexts about what makes a meaningful family today. Future research investigating the experiences of involuntarily childless people in wider populations, living in different countries, and at different stages in life, is most certainly needed.

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**Table**Table 1 *Key characteristics of the participants*

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Marital Status	Recency <sup>a</sup>
Maggie	53	Married	10+
Penny	45	Co-habiting	4-5
Alana	45	Co-habiting	4-5
Kelly	46	Married	1-2
Renee	54	Married	10+
Susie	52	Divorced/living with new partner	4-5
Heather	52	Married	1-2
Emily	50	Co-habiting	8-9
Lucy	45	Divorced/re-married	1-2
Clare	54	Married	10+
Denise	50	Divorced/re-married	8-9

*Note:* This table is partly adopted from the Supplementary Table in “‘Either stay grieving, or deal with it’: The psychological impact of involuntary childlessness for women living in midlife,” by M. Fieldsend and J. A. Smith, 2020, *Human Reproduction*, 35.

<sup>a</sup> Degree of recency = number of years since stopped trying for a baby. 10+ = more than 10 years.

## Appendix

### Interview schedule

#### **I. Life at the moment** (Practical things/activities in life now)

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself?  
Prompts: job, family, hobbies, interests
2. What sort of things do you usually do on weekends or when you have free time?  
Prompts: How do you spend your free time?  
Do you go out often on weekends? If so, with whom?
3. What things make you feel good about yourself?  
Prompts: In what sort of situation do you find yourself feeling fulfilled?

#### **II. Goals and Meaning of life**

4. How do you feel about being your age (e.g. 50)?  
Prompts: What is the best thing about being (e.g. 50)?  
How about the worst thing about being (e.g. 50)?  
Mentally/physically/emotionally/spiritually
5. Do you think of yourself as having goals that you are working towards?  
If so, could you tell me about them?  
Prompts: Do you see yourself working towards something?
6. When you think about your future, say in five years' time, what do you hope to be doing?
7. Could you tell me who the important people are in your life?  
Prompts: Could you tell me why? In what ways?  
Personally? Socially? Family?

#### **III. The past**

8. Could you tell me about the best thing that has ever happened in your life?  
Prompts: Personally? Socially?
9. Could you tell me about the biggest change that has ever happened in your life?  
Prompts: Personally? Socially?  
Could you tell me about the biggest decision you've ever made?
10. Do you see yourself as being the same person as you were when you were 25?  
Prompts: In what ways are you similar or different?

\*\*\* *If there is no reference to children, then I will bring it in as the last question.*

11. You said that you wanted to have children. How do you feel about it now?
12. Is there anything else that you feel we haven't covered, that you would like to tell me?

*Note:* This interview schedule is taken from the Supplementary material in “‘Either stay grieving, or deal with it’: The psychological impact of involuntary childlessness for women living in midlife,” by M. Fieldsend and J. A. Smith, 2020, *Human Reproduction*, 35.