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# **How do women experience midlife divorce? A Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA)**

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**Submitted for the degree of PhD, Psychology,  
Birkbeck, University of London**

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own, except where other sources are clearly and identifiably cited.

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**Suzi Godson**

## **Acknowledgements**

*I would like to thank my supervisor Jonathan A. Smith for his insight and guidance.  
I would also like to thank Isabella Nizza for setting such a good example and being a constant source of support for me and so many others in the department.*

# Abstract

The prevalence of divorce has been embedded into population surveys since the 1960s and the resulting large-scale longitudinal datasets have facilitated a glut of quantitative research. In contrast, the qualitative corpus on divorce is extremely limited and is mostly comprised of cross-sectional analyses of retrospective data. Because divorce is a both an extremely common and an extremely stressful life event, it is ideally suited to qualitative research with an idiographic focus. In recent years several studies of divorce have used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand how people make sense of divorce, but this is the first Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) study to track the experience, in real time, as it is happening.

This thesis is comprised of two studies. Study 1 uses IPA to explore how three married women, aged between 50 and 56, make sense of marital difficulties once their youngest child has left home. Study 2 uses LIPA to understand how eight women, aged 50-65, all of whom have adult children, experience midlife divorce. Interviews at three time points capture the changes in their psychological states as they move through the legal process. The first interviews occur shortly after the women receive their Decree Nisi. The second interviews occur just after they receive their Decree Absolute and the final interviews take place six months after the women's divorces have been finalised. Through the study the women move from a state of anxiety to one of relief, and from a state of self-doubt to one of self-esteem. Pre-divorce, repartnering is an aspiration that they fear their age will deny them. Post-divorce, repartnering feels available, but is no longer desirable. At the beginning of the study all eight women have strong and stable relationships with their adult children. By the end of the study, there has been a pronounced deterioration in the relationship between six of the women and their adult children. In three cases the relationship has broken down completely.

LIPA is still considered to be in its infancy (Farr & Nizza, 2019), but this study demonstrates its unique importance as a research method which has the power to dynamically capture dramatic changes in emotional register, altered aspirations and shifts in allegiances, as people move through major life transitions.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Roughly two-thirds of older-adult divorces are initiated by women (Montenegro, 2012), and most of them do so knowing that their life will probably be more, rather than less difficult. Divorce is a life changing experience which negatively impacts physical and mental health for both men and women. A meta-analysis which included over 600 million people found that divorced adults had a 30% higher risk of mortality compared to their married counterparts (Shor et al.; 2012). However, the strain on men is tough but transient, whereas the impact on older women is chronic (Leopold, 2018), largely because divorcing in midlife has such well documented long-term financial implications (Hilton & Anderson, 2009; Wallerstein 1986; Bogolub,1991).

This is timely research because although the divorce rate has been falling steadily since the 1990s, between 1991 and 2011 there was a 73% increase in the number of divorces in people over the age of sixty (ONS, 2012). These changes are of particular importance to women because after the age of fifty, the incidence of divorce is 12% higher for females than it is for males (Brown & Lin, 2012). Women who divorce in midlife are more likely to live alone (Rolls et al., 2011) and experience higher rates of loneliness than younger women who divorce (Sakraida, 2005). This is largely because longer female life expectancy and male age hypergamy limits the possibility of women repartnering. In contrast, the pool of eligible partners for men grows with age (Schimmele and Wu 2016).

The widespread prevalence of divorce means that scant attention has been paid to the emotional consequences, yet Hald et al. (2020) found significantly higher rates of clinical depression and anxiety in recently divorced people, compared to the rest of the population (Hald et al., 2020). Kposowa (2020) interrogated the US 2015 National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS) and found that divorced people have a suicide risk that is over 97% higher than that of married people (Kposowa, 2020). In women, Brown and Lin (2021) found that midlife divorce increased the probability of cognitive impairment and depression by about 16%, compared to 12% for men. It is an important differential because cognitive impairment increases the likelihood of a person developing dementia (Choi et al., 2018).

Existing research has established the relationship between divorce and changes in social status, mental health, physical health and ‘negative wealth shock’ (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022), however the dearth of qualitative research means that the psychological experiences that coincide with these macro level changes are not well understood. Because divorce is a both an extremely common, and an extremely stressful life event, it is ideally suited to qualitative research with an idiographic focus. In recent years several studies of divorce have used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand how people make sense of divorce, but this is the first Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) study to track the experience, in real time, as it is happening. LIPA is still considered to be in its infancy (Farr & Nizza, 2019), but this study demonstrates its unique importance as a research method which has the power to dynamically capture dramatic changes in emotional register, altered aspirations and shifts in allegiances, as people move through a major life transition.

The thesis is comprised of two studies. Study 1 uses IPA to explore how three married women, aged between 50 and 56, make sense of marital difficulties once their youngest child has left home. Study 2 uses LIPA to understand how eight women, aged 50-65, with adult children, experience midlife divorce. Interviews at three time points capture the changes in their psychological states as they move through the legal process. The first interviews occur shortly after the women receive their Decree Nisi. The second interviews occur just after they receive their Decree Absolute and the final interviews take place six months after the women’s divorces have been finalised. Through the study the women move from states of anxiety to relief, and from self-doubt to self-esteem. Pre-divorce, repartnering is an aspiration that ageism will deny them. Post-divorce, repartnering feels available, but is no longer desirable. At the beginning of the study all eight women have strong and stable relationships with their adult children. By the end of the study, there has been a pronounced deterioration in the relationship between six of the women and their adult children. In three cases the relationship has broken down completely.

Chapter One introduces the subject, provides a brief historical overview, and explains my personal connection to the thesis.

Chapter Two presents a literature review on the history of divorce in general with a specific



focus on female midlife divorce. The literature review reveals an abundance of quantitative data on the subject of divorce, often with a particular focus on the impact on younger children, but limited availability of good qualitative research. There are no studies that use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to understand the experience of divorce for women in mid or later life. The literature review confirms the necessity of experiential study to provide a deeper understanding of what it means for an older woman to divorce.

Chapter Three traces the emergence of qualitative methodologies and the development of well-defined procedures for the collection of empirical real-world accounts of actual situations or lived experiences, in order to yield new, ecologically valid knowledge. The chapter then provides a detailed exploration of the philosophical and practical underpinnings of defined Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Chapter Four introduces Study 1 and answers the research question ‘How do middle aged women with an empty nest make sense of marital conflict?’ This small study uses IPA to explore how three married women, aged between 50 and 56, made sense of their ongoing marital difficulties once their youngest child left home. The women were all openly unhappy about aspects of their marriages, but they were not at the point where they were considering divorce. The study aimed to increase understanding of whether relationship difficulties are experienced and managed differently when they are not mediated by the needs of younger children.

Chapter Five introduces Study 2 and answers the research question ‘How do women experience midlife divorce?’ This larger study uses Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) to capture the dynamic change as eight women aged 50-65 make the transition from married to divorced. The chapter outlines the best way to structure a good LIPA study and gives examples of how LIPA has been used effectively. This chapter describes the research design, including recruitment, study design, data collection, interview schedule and an introduction to the participants. The analysis section explains how I managed the data and provides a step-by-step guide to my analysis process. It ends with an introduction to a technique for visualising change over time which is a new addition to the LIPA methodology.

Chapter Six presents the results and introduces Theme 1: From Anxiety To Relief. This

theme captures the intense feelings of anger and distress that define the women's emotional state at Time 1. They are worried about money and fearful of the future. By the third interview, the women are relieved that the process is over and five of them have had counselling as way of coping with the trauma of marital breakdown and divorce.

Chapter Seven introduces Theme 2: From Self-Doubt To Self-Worth. This theme explores the impact of midlife divorce on female agency. In the first interviews, the women reflect on how marriage has disempowered them and as a result they are now in a much more vulnerable position. By the third interview, a change has occurred, and the women are significantly more confident and determined.

Chapter Eight introduces Theme 3: Repartnering moves from being something that they want but can't have, to being something that is possible, but no longer desirable. This theme explores the women's aspirations to repartner after divorce, however they worry that their age is a barrier. Post-divorce, the women are much more focused on protecting their assets and their independence than finding a new relationship.

Chapter Nine introduces Theme 4: Relationships with adult children move from stable and strong, to unstable and distressing. This theme explores the impact of midlife divorce on maternal relationships with adult children. In the first interviews the women were all very confident about the strength of the bond between them and their children. By the third interview this has changed significantly and with the exception of Mandy, all the women find that their relationships with their children are destabilised by the divorce process.

Chapter Ten presents the Conclusion. This chapter draws both studies together and looks at how this research contributes to existing research on divorce. It evaluates the validity of the study against IPA and LIPA criteria and provides ideas for further research.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

Phenomenological inquiry is rooted in the belief that truth can be found in lived experience, so there has, historically, been some concern about the undue influence that literature reviews might have on researchers. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest that the literature review be delayed until after data collection and analysis so that researchers don't phrase questions or analyse data for themes that they know already exist in the literature. This 'Tabula Rasa' approach, which was originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1968) in 'Discovering Grounded Theory' is a way of avoiding any preconceptions and when I conducted my MSc dissertation in 2014, it was still the guidance. In their recent book 'Essentials of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' Smith and Nizza (Smith & Nizza 2023) reiterate the argument for IPA researchers to remain 'naive' to the topic under investigation. Because IPA is inductive and the participants are the topic experts, conclusions should be based on what emerges from the data rather than existing research or personal assumptions. However, the general consensus now is that literature reviews are a necessary first step for the IPA researcher and an understanding of existing quantitative and qualitative research helps to clarify and refine research questions.

### The Narrative Literature Review

The methods used in qualitative literature review research have evolved over time. Earlier methods focused on narrative reviews that provided a summary of the literature, and these reviews were often based on the author's own interpretation of the evidence. Qualitative literature review research methods have now shifted towards more rigorous, transparent, replicable and systematic approaches, that allow researchers to synthesise and interpret the findings of multiple studies in a more nuanced and meaningful way. The two most dominant styles of literature review are now the narrative literature review and the systematic literature review.

Prior to an IPA study, researchers conduct a narrative literature review, which is also known as a semi-systematic literature review, to attune themselves to the work that has been done before. The purpose of a narrative literature review is to provide an overview and interpretation of existing research, as well as highlighting major or recurring themes, and identifying obvious

gaps in the literature. In contrast, a systematic review is a self-contained research project that aims to identify all of the existing literature and uses rigorous and replicable protocols to answer highly structured and specific research questions (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). If executed correctly, a narrative literature review can effectively address more areas and broader topics than a systematic review.

A narrative literature review is the right approach when a qualitative researcher is attempting to link together many different studies which look at the same topic from a number of different angles, using different research methodologies. Sometimes the aim of a narrative review is to generate a hypothesis, but an IPA narrative literature review is simply designed to survey the state of existing knowledge without the intention of generating new ideas, interpretations or conclusions. A narrative literature review can also provide a theoretical foundation for the proposed study and confirm that a study will contribute something new to existing knowledge or validate the approach for the proposed study (Hart, 1998).

This narrative literature review asks the question ‘what does existing literature tell us about the experience of female divorce at midlife?’ and answers it by synthesising the findings of thirty key papers. The papers use a variety of methodologies; both quantitative and qualitative and they were selected because collectively, they provide holistic insight into what has been done and what is now in the field of divorce research. This review uses a storytelling approach to summarise the papers and evaluate the quality, limitations and overall contribution of each study. Because people have been getting divorced since 1923, there is a wealth of existing research on the topic so conducting a scholarly narrative review requires a systematic and bounded approach to ensure that searching is effective and relevant.

## **The Literature Search**

There is a huge amount of information about women and midlife divorce available on the internet. A Google search of the word string ‘Women, Midlife Divorce’ yields 1,120,000 results. However, there is a lot less academic research on the subject. The same terms in University College London (UCL) library produces 157,716 results and a Google Scholar search further reduces the results to 43,200.

I initially used in PsychInfo/PsycARTICLES (EBISCO) to define the extent of the corpus

with a view to narrowing my selection down to 30 key papers. There were some specific search constraints. The papers had to be written in the English language and in order to focus on the most recent research, I narrowed the publishing window to between 2000 and 2016. I constructed a set of search terms which were broad enough to allow a certain degree of serendipitous discovery but structured enough to ensure that the focus was on the experience of divorce in middle-aged women between 40 and 64 years of age. I used three academic sources to conduct my search and conducted consecutive searches for qualitative, quantitative, and longitudinal studies.

The search terms used in PsychInfo/PsycARTICLES (EBISCO) were; 1. Women, Midlife Divorce, Psychology, 2. Gray Divorce, 3. Women, Later Life, Divorce, Psychology, 4. Amato, Women, Later life, Divorce 5. Women, Post-Divorce Identity, 6. Silver Splitters, 7. Post-Divorce Adjustment, Midlife, Women, 8. Gender, Divorce. This search yielded 48 papers that were potentially promising.

I then conducted a search of University College London (UCL) library using the following terms: 1. Women, Midlife, Divorce, Psychology, 2: Women, Identity, Divorce. 3: Post Divorce Adjustment, Midlife, Women, 4: Divorce Personality, 5: Gender, Divorce. The UCL search provided access to The Journal of Marriage and Family and The Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, authoritative peer reviewed journals which specialise in research into marriage, family, marital separation, and divorce, as well as children's responses to divorce and separation. This search revealed 189 papers that merited consideration.

Finally, I used Google Scholar to research a final series of search terms: 1: Gender, Ageing, Life Course, 2: Marital dissolution, health. 3: Late life divorce, health, 4: Gender ageing, sexuality, life course, 5: The divorce experience, 6: AJ Cherlin, Divorce history, 7: Divorce, women, midlife, health, life course 8: Relationship dissolution, life stage, transition, 8: Divorce, cosmetic surgery. This search yielded 39 papers that looked interesting.

I accessed a total of 276 papers which were filtered down by quickly reading both the abstract and the method to understand both the aims of the study and the population under investigation. My aim was to exhaust all available searches, in order to find studies which fit my precise criteria. Since most research on divorce is concerned with families, studies that were focused on younger mothers with co-resident children, single parent families, or the

experience of divorced fathers, were immediately excluded. The quality of all the papers was, to some degree, assessed in terms of the number of citations relative to the paper's publication date. However, although citations are a useful indicator, when it comes to research in the field of divorce, the status of the academic conducting the research has a big influence on the number of citations. Paul Amato's (2010) 'Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments' which was published in the Journal of Marriage and Family had amassed 610 citations by 2016, whereas Radina, Hennon & Gibbons very interesting (2008) study of 'Divorce and mid- and later life families: A phenomenological analysis with implications for family life educators' which was published in the Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, had achieved just 9 citations.

The final selection process was governed by how relevant the studies were to my specific research. I chose a total of thirty quantitative, qualitative, and longitudinal papers which were focused on a number of different aspects of midlife divorce from a female perspective. Each paper was summarised using verbatim text from the original paper. Summaries included the details of the type of study, the methodology the sample size and the number of citations as well as an abbreviated outline of the Abstract, Design and Method, Sample, Results, Discussion, and Implications. Each summary was then followed by a detailed critique to assess whether the research had methodological flaws, internal consistency and was interesting and informative. The critiques also provided an opportunity to explain the studies relevance to my own research.

The field of divorce research has long been dominated by quantitative research, because ever since divorce was introduced in 1923, there has been a great deal of apprehension about the social consequences of marital breakdown. As a result, questions about divorce were integrated into almost every large-scale social survey. The availability of large datasets has ensured an abundance of quantitative research on divorce, but good qualitative research is harder to find. Although Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has become one of the most popular qualitative research methods in recent years, I found only two studies which professed to be 'phenomenological' and there were no relevant studies using IPA.

# The Literature

## Recent changes in divorce law

Throughout history, divorce has been an adversarial legal process, but in 1969 the first no-fault divorce law was passed in the United States (Cherlin, 2009). At the time of writing, UK divorce still adheres to a statute that was passed in 1973 which requires couples to assign 'fault' to one partner before a divorce is granted. The spouse who initiates the process (the petitioner) must justify their decision by accusing the other spouse of misconduct based on one of the following grounds: adultery, unreasonable behaviour, or desertion. If the accusation of misconduct is not accepted, the couple have to live apart for two years in a 'separation' period before the marriage can be legally dissolved. If one spouse refuses to cooperate the spouse who wants a divorce must wait five years before they can proceed with an uncontested divorce.

For at least a decade, there has been a great deal of pressure on the Government to change the divorce law because the current system exacerbates conflict and creates intense animosity. In June 2020, an act was finally passed to implement no-fault divorce, but COVID delays mean that the government is now working towards a commencement date of 6th April 2022. Once the new laws are implemented there will be no need to apportion blame and either the couple, or an individual spouse can instigate divorce based on grounds of 'irretrievable breakdown', without having to provide evidence of misconduct by the other partner. The application for divorce will also be digital which will speed things up and it will simplify the legal terminology so that, for example, 'decree nisi' will be called the 'conditional order' and 'decree absolute' will be called the 'final order' (The Law Society, 2020). As the new bill was passed as I was analysing my data, the experiences of my participants reflect the divorce process before the implementation of any of these changes.

## Divorce rates in mid and later life

Divorce rates have been falling gradually since the 1990s and overall estimates suggest that 42% of marriages in England and Wales will end in divorce (ONS, 2012), however between 1991 and 2011 there was a 73% increase in the number of divorces awarded to men over the age of sixty (ONS, 2012) and this trend also applies to women.

In the US Brown & Lin (2012) used data from 1990 U.S. Vital Statistics Report and the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) to estimate the change in the US divorce rate over time. They found that between 1990 and 2010 the divorce rate doubled for people over fifty. This is a consequential increase for a country where half of the married population is aged 50 and older (Brown & Lin, 2012). Research has begun to focus on specific factors related to divorce outcomes, such as health, or finance, but until relatively recently, 'grey divorce' had largely been ignored (Amato, 2010; Cooney & Dunne, 2001). Midlife is defined as "the central period of a person's life, between around 45 and 60 years old" and the unprecedented upswing in divorce in this age group requires more detailed research.

Quantitative studies have been helpful in identifying the escalation in midlife divorce, but statistical analysis does not allow meaningful interpretation of ambiguous or emotional life experiences. In contrast, qualitative methodologies enable us to understand how, and get close to, the ways in which individuals make sense of the experience of divorce. The implications of midlife divorce are particularly pertinent to women because after the age of fifty, the incidence of divorce is 12% higher for females than it is for males (Brown & Lin, 2012).

### **Midlife divorce in a socio-historic context**

Demographers have described the baby boomer population as a "pig in a python": a large bulge in an otherwise uniform population distribution. Baby boomers have the most complex marital biographies of any other group in the population (Kreider, 2011) and as they move through the life course, they bring with them a unique legacy of divorce, remarriage, and individualism. In the last sixty years, contraception, unilateral divorce, feminism, equal rights, and the emergence of a more individualistic view of marriage and family life have combined to challenge traditional gender role ideologies. The pace of change has been so rapid that studies which track the divorce behaviours of female baby boomers who were born between 1946 and 1964 may only generate data that is unique to the baby boomer cohort.

The different ways in which people construct, commit, and deconstruct relationships reflects a complex mix of cultural and socio-economic transformations (Manzoli et al., 2007). Although the divorce rate provides an estimate of marital breakdown, it must be interpreted



through an appropriate socio historic lens. For example, prior to the divorce reform act in 1971, greater acceptance of traditional gender role ideologies and stigma surrounding divorce inhibited the divorce rate, even though as many marriages were probably unhappy. Since the divorce reform act, the escalation in cohabitation has served a similar function in limiting divorce statistics, even though the consequences of cohabitational family breakdown are little different.

Divorce is also experienced within specific socio historic parameters, which change over time. These parameters influence post-divorce outcomes as well as divorce predictors. For example, marrying at a young age has been consistently recognised as a predictor of divorce and when women are in their late teens and early twenties, delaying marriage by a single year can reduce the risk of divorce by up to 12% (Hiedemann et al., 1998: Raschke, 1987: Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

Hilton and Anderson (2009) studied a subset of data from the third wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (1987 - 2002). The participants included 459 married women and 180 divorced women with a mean age of 57.8 years and the age at which they had first married was identified as the strongest predictor of divorce. The mean age for first marriage for the divorced women was 20.3 years and for the married women it was 21.3 years. Although that would be considered young by today's standards, in 1970, when these women were getting married, the median age for first marriage for women was 20.8 years (US Census Bureau, 2010). The average age at which women in the UK get married is now 34.0 years of age (ONS, 2012) so it is important to note that findings from longitudinal studies of baby boomer behaviours may be of limited relevance to younger populations.

### **The motivations for midlife divorce**

Marital dissatisfaction unequivocally escalates the risk of divorce (Amato, 2010: Booth et al., 1984: Gustavson et al., 2014). However, about a quarter of mid to later life divorces happen despite the absence of any apparent difficulties in the marriage (Montenegro, 2004). In Montenegro's (2004) AARP study of 1,148 people aged between 40- and 79, who had divorced between the age of forty and seventy, 24% of participants said that they simply fell out of love or had had no obvious problems. Canham et al., (2014) explored factors that delayed or influenced the decision to divorce in later life in their qualitative analysis of seven

women and three men, with a mean age of 63.5. Their study confirmed previous research that found that many couples who divorce in mid-life have been unhappily married for years, but they remain together for the sake of their children (Montenegro, 2004).

As women age, their child-rearing responsibilities diminish (Degges-White & Myers, 2006) and this culminates in the period known as the “empty-nest” when the last adult child leaves home. For couples who are at risk of divorce, the empty nest stage is one of the most vulnerable periods in the life course (Hilton & Anderson, 2009), because when attention is directed away from children and back towards the primary relationship, it can highlight any shortcomings in the marriage. When children leave home, gender roles are often reassessed and there can be a conflict of interest when women want greater independence and men who may be newly retired want more of their wife’s attention (Hilton & Anderson, 2009).

Midlife can also be a time when women are subject to multiple stressors as they cope with the demands of employment and responsibility for both ageing parents and adolescent children (Shifren, 2009). Women bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities for parents and for adult children. Data from the US AARP (2015) into Caregiving in the US suggests that three in every five care givers are female. For some couples, the strains that accumulate at midlife result in decreased marital satisfaction (Amato, 2010: Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003) and this can motivate women who are unhappy to review their past and choose a different future. Menopause is an additional developmental transition which may be interpreted as a period of ‘loss’, or alternatively, as an opportunity for growth (Busch et al., 2003).

Qualitative research finds that getting older makes women more conscious of personal goals (Sakraida, 2005). They characterise their age in terms of a ‘pinnacle time’ or a time for a life review and a review of marital satisfaction (Sakraida, 2005). As children grow up and leave home, fear of being alone and financial uncertainty may continue to be barriers to divorce, but increased life expectancy may facilitate the decision (Brown & Lin, 2012).

### **Decider status and the decision to divorce in midlife**

Divorce is never an easy decision. Younger couples are more likely to file for a speedy divorce following infidelity (Pittman, 1991), but it is unusual for older women to rush into divorce. Montenegro (2004) found that a total of 37 percent of female divorcees deliberated

for five years or longer before finally deciding to end their marriage. Women begin the process of withdrawal from the marriage long before the suggestion of separation is even voiced. Feelings of estrangement, a gradual breakdown in communication and emotional withdrawal begin a process of detachment which can last several years (Amato, 2000). Sometimes the preparation process is not even conscious. When Belfer et al., (1979) conducted pre-operative psychiatric assessments on 42 patients seeking cosmetic surgery, none of the patients indicated that they were planning any major life changes, but within 3-6 months of surgery, four patients had obtained a legal separation or filed for divorce (Belfer et al., 1979).

Hilton & Anderson (2009) used social exchange theory to determine the cost benefit ratios of a decision to divorce in midlife. The authors selected 459 married women and 180 divorced women with a mean age of 57.8 years from a subset of data from the third waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) which was collected between 1987 and 2002. The authors proposed that people are motivated by self-interest and that the rewards of a marriage that has lasted more than 20 years will grossly outweigh the costs of divorce. The study found that women with higher levels of self-worth were more likely to divorce. This corresponds with social exchange theory, since a woman who feels that she is entitled to more than she is getting from her husband would be more likely to divorce.

Women initiate divorce more than men. Overall, just 34% of divorces in the UK are awarded to men (ONS, 2012), and Sakraida (2005) estimates that two thirds of all midlife divorces are initiated by women. However, UK statistics suggest that after the age of sixty, men are equally likely to call time on a marriage (ONS, 2012). The fact that men are more likely to initiate divorce in later life is pertinent to the divorce experience because research shows that initiator status has some bearing on post-divorce adjustment.

In her qualitative paper addressing the 'Divorce Transition Differences of Midlife Women', Sakraida (2005) explored the significance of decider status in a group of 24 women who had divorced in the previous two years. Participants had an average age of 43.5 and had been married for an average of 17.8 years. They were grouped according to self-classified 'decider' status and the three groups constituted 'initiators' (n = 8) who had decided to end their marriages, non-initiators (n = 8), who had involuntarily divorced, and mutual deciders (n = 8) who had shared decision to divorce. Six of the women in the initiator group had

agonised over their decision for a long time. The other two had made the decision in response to their partner's infidelity. All the non-initiators were more likely to identify the divorce experience as an unanticipated and negative change, but the initiators felt that divorce had led to positive changes. The study confirmed that decider status is significant and that women who initiate divorce tend to be more optimistic and possibly more resilient. This difference echoes Amato's (2000) finding that women who initiate divorce experience greater distress prior to the divorce, whereas non-initiators who don't realise that divorce is imminent experience greater levels of distress after the divorce (Amato, 2000).

The length of time since divorce differed significantly (1-29 months) for participants in Sakraida's study (2005) and this may have had some bearing on her findings. Pettit and Bloom (1984) found that men and women who initiated divorce reported fewer problems compared to non-initiators, but that there were no significant differences between the two groups after an eighteen-month period. Sakraida (2005) does not specify which women divorced when, but previous studies that have examined divorce initiation status have found that people often alter their decider status over time. In order to save face, or alleviate guilt, both the 'left' and the 'leaver' may eventually report that the decision was mutual (Ahrons, 2007; Braver et al., 1994).

### **The financial implications of midlife divorce**

Divorcing in midlife has negative long-term financial implications for women (Hilton & Anderson, 2009). The median post-divorce income change for wives is -22 per cent, whereas for husbands it is +13 per cent (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999). Income and employment increase a woman's odds of divorce in midlife (Brown & Lin, 2012)); a finding which suggests that financial autonomy might encourage women to divorce, but Amato (2010) found that women's income can make a positive contribution to marital quality by alleviating economic stressors (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000). However, money does make it easier for unhappily married women to exit an unhappy relationship (Schoen et al., 2002).

Women who have not worked or who have had prolonged absences from the job market while raising children are disadvantaged, whereas women who are liberated, independent and financially self-sufficient have better psychological adjustment after divorce (Kurdek & Kennedy, 2001). Being part of the labour market has other protective benefits for women

too. McMunn et al., (2006), tracked the relationship between social roles and body mass index (BMI) in 1,563 women born in the UK in 1946. The women were assessed first at age 26 and then again at age 53 in order to investigate whether social roles (employee, partner, mother) and health are explained by health selection into employment and parenthood. The study found that women who occupied multiples social roles were less likely to be obese, whereas women who were home makers and who didn't work had the highest BMIs at 53 and that this relationship increased with age. Previous research has found that in younger women (but not men), persistent obesity is associated with never having been gainfully employed, as well as not having a current partner (Viner & Cole, 2005).

### **Theoretical frameworks for divorce**

Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment model recognises that divorce is not a single event, but a series of transitions which can, over a period of months and years, create additional stress. Splitting assets, moving house, lower incomes, solo parenting, less contact with children and social isolation can be cumulatively detrimental to psychological and physical well-being. McDaniel and Coleman (2003) describe midlife divorce as "a complicated process consisting of multiple ceasing's and new beginnings that take place over an extended period of time." In their qualitative study of 'women's experiences of midlife divorce following long- term marriage' they used Hagestad and Smyer's (1982) and Bohannon's six stations model (1970) as theoretical frameworks to understand how middle-aged women adjust to divorce and negotiate the transition to singlehood.

Hagestad and Smyer (1982) classified the separations required to complete the divorce process as (1) emotional cathexis, (2) attachment to the spousal role, and (3) shared routines. Bohannon (1970) identified the divorce transition as six distinct separations, namely: emotional, legal, economic, coparental, community, and psychic divorce. Each of these separations can have their own individual time frame so, for example, the legal divorce may be complete, but the divorcee may not yet be emotionally detached. Bohannon's model illustrates the multifaceted nature of the divorce process, but Hagestad & Smyer's theory provides a better understanding of the psychological experience of divorce. In applying these theories to the five participants in their study, McDaniel and Coleman (2003) illustrate how the longer a marriage has lasted, the greater the number of bonds that need to be severed in order for complete separation to be realised.

## **Midlife divorce: the impact on wellbeing**

Studies of emotion and subjective wellbeing often find that people are affected by stressful life events for a period of time, but eventually they return to a baseline level of happiness (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996). This is not necessarily true for people who divorce. Lucas (2005) carried out a quantitative study using existing data from Waves 1 through 18 of the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP), a longitudinal study of German households that began in 1984. More than 30,000 respondents participated in at least 1 of the 18 waves and 845 participants divorced at some point after the first year. Because the study included data on life satisfaction, the authors were able to assess the impact that divorce had on satisfaction before, during and after the divorce. The authors found that men's satisfaction dropped more sharply than women's prior to divorce, but neither men, nor women, returned to baseline happiness unless they went on to remarry. The authors also noted that people who got divorced had lower levels of happiness to begin with. Lucas (2005) suggests that this finding supports a 'selection effect': and that it is not divorce that makes people unhappy, but unhappy people who make divorce, however the control for baseline happiness was measured at 'three years prior to divorce' and many women who are unhappily married deliberate divorce for five years or more (Montenegro, 2004).

Allemand, Hill, & Lehmann (2015) tested for the selection effect in their study of divorce and personality development across middle adulthood. They wanted to establish whether personality changes in reaction to a divorce, or whether personality might predict divorce. Data from 526 middle-aged adults aged 42 – 46 who had taken part in the Interdisciplinary Longitudinal Study on Adult Development were assessed three times over a 12-year period. The study found a decrease in extraversion in the years following divorce, but the effect was modest, and the authors suggest that it is evidence of a socialisation, rather than a selection effect. After a divorce, people are focused on the challenges and constraints of their new role so there is greater focus on their internal world. Divorce can also disrupt social and familial networks, and this in itself limits opportunities for extraversion.

Prigerson et al., (1999) examined the effects of marital dissolution and marital quality on health and health service use by comparing the mental and physical impact of divorce and separation against the experience of widowhood. The study used data from the longitudinal

‘Americans’ Changing Lives’ survey which had a nationally representative sample of people over the age of 25 and an oversampling of participants who were over the age of sixty. The study followed changes in 927 men and women who married in 1986 and specifically looked at 101 people who were either divorced (20), widowed (66) or separated (15) by the time of the follow-up study in 1989. Although the study had clear methodological problems because the sample was distorted by an excess of widows and the data only spanned three years, the authors found that widowhood was associated with worsened health, but not with greater health service use. In contrast, women who divorced were not more depressed, but they were more likely to access mental health services. The authors interpreted the lack of depression in divorced women in terms of agency. They proposed that although divorce is a stressful experience, it is often a choice, whereas widowhood involves the involuntary loss of a spouse (Prigerson et al., 1999).

In 2019, Lin et al. expanded their research on grey divorce by exploring ‘Depressive Symptoms Following Later-life Marital Dissolution and Subsequent Repartnering’ (Lin et al., 2019). The study, which aimed to assess whether divorce constitutes an acute crisis or a chronic strain, compared individuals who transitioned to divorce, or were widowhood, with individuals who remained married. The results showed that those who got divorced, or were widowed, experienced higher levels of depressive symptoms compared with those who remained married. It took about four years for divorce related depression to lift which is twice as long as would be expected based on the crisis model. For those who were bereaved recovery took up to eight years. Lin et al., (2019) suggest that grey divorce does not correspond to either the acute crisis or chronic strain models and propose instead, an alternative ‘convalescence model’ which describes a slow, gradual recovery from a weakened state (Lin et al., 2019).

More recently, Tosi and Van Den Broek examined the impact of Gray divorce on mental health in the UK using data from nine waves (2009/2010–2017/2018) of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS). In total they analysed the impact of marital break-up on the mental health of 909 adults aged 50+, and their results showed that depressive symptoms in this cohort increased in the years before divorce and during the divorce process, but post-divorce, depressive symptoms decreased and returned to approximately previous baseline levels between one and three years’ post-divorce. The study found that later-life divorce was more detrimental to mental health and lead to a slower recovery for parents than it was for

couples with no children (Tosi & Van Den Broek, 2021)

### **Midlife divorce: the impact on families**

Because of the implications for society in general, and families in particular, divorce has been intensively researched from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. Research tends to frame divorce as a social problem because numerous quantitative studies have identified negative mental, physical, and financial consequences (Amato, 2000; Hughes & Waite, 2009; Steitz & Welker, 1991; Wickrama et al., 2006). Divorce is a unique life event because one single divorce, is experienced by two different people, who interpret the same sequence of events in entirely different, often opposing, ways (Radina, Hennon, & Gibbons, 2008). This makes it a very complex phenomenon and how adults and children are affected is determined by such a multitude of mental, physical, economic, educational, behavioural, and relational variables, that it is virtually impossible to construct a single unifying theory for divorce outcomes.

The vast majority of research which has examined the impact of divorce on families has focused on psychological, familial and health outcomes for younger children (Amato, 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2001). Large-scale longitudinal studies confirm that although some children of divorce do experience a lower level of well-being than children living in continuously intact families, the effect size is weak (Amato & Keith, 1991). Although around 20% of divorces occur in couples married over 15 years (Cooney, 1994) there is surprisingly little research on the impact of mid and later life divorce on adult children. The most common theme emerging from existing studies is that of role reversal, or 'parentification', where adult children are forced to take on roles and responsibilities that were previously managed by mothers in particular (Pett & Lang, 1992; Jurkovic et al., 2001). Adult children of divorce also report being forced to take sides (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986) or to act as mediators between their parents (Campbell, 1995; Pryor, 1999). Most of the variability in adult children's relationships with their parents after divorce relates to the divorce process itself rather than the quality of the marriage (Cooney, T. M., Hutchinson, M. K., & Leather, D. M., 1995).

Later life parental divorce has been linked to lower relationship quality and contact in both the mother/adult child and father/adult child dyads: however, the effect is much stronger on



paternal relationships (Aquilino, 1994). The deterioration in parent/adult child relationships is not necessarily permanent. Qualitative research by Joleen Loucks Greenwood (2012) found that adult children whose parents divorced within the past 5 years were more likely to report having a strained parent– child relationship than those whose parents divorced more than 5 years ago (Greenwood, 2012). Adult children of divorce have a 60% higher risk of developing depression compared to those whose parents are still married (Uphold-Carrier, & Utz, 2012).

## **Post-Divorce Adjustment**

Although divorce is associated with negative mental, physical, social, and financial outcomes, particularly for women, it improves life satisfaction for women who have been in high conflict or low quality marriages (Bourassa et al., 2015). Using data from 1,638 participants with an average age of 46.4 who had taken part in the ‘Midlife in the United States Study’, Bourassa et al., (2015) assessed marital quality, marital status, and life satisfaction in 1995 and then again in 2005. Interactions between marital quality, gender, and marital status established that women in the lowest quality marriages had higher levels of life satisfaction after divorce, compared to women who remained in lower quality marriages. In contrast, women in high quality marriages who divorced had lower levels of life satisfaction compared to women who remained happily married.

Similarly, Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) identified 509 couples who had participated in the National Survey of Families and Households and had separated between the two waves of the study. They sorted the couples into two groups: high distress and low distress, and found that after divorce, the high distress couples were happier than the low distress couples. Lorenz, Wickrama, & Elder (2006) used Amato’s (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment scale to assess the short-term and decade-long effects of divorce on 416 middle aged women, including 102 who had recently divorced. The women were part of the Iowa Midlife Transitions Project (MTP). They had an average age of 40 when the study began in the early 1990s, and by 2001, 88% of them were aged between 45 and 56. The researchers found that between 1991 and 1994, the divorced women in the study experienced greater levels of psychological distress, but no health differences compared to married women. However, by 2001, the incidence of ill health was significantly higher for divorced women, even after controlling for age, remarriage, education, income, and prior health (Lorenz, Wickrama, &

Elder, 2006). All the women in the study were mothers, but the divorced women had an income that was less than half that of the married women. The authors conclude that the toxic combination of psychological distress and stressful life events make divorced women more susceptible to ill health over time. Illness further escalates stress levels because it impedes the capacity to work and parent effectively.

## **Post-Divorce Identity**

Because getting married involves creating a couple identity, divorce necessitates a reversal of that process. Divorce can be a point of reorganization for ‘who a woman is’ and ‘who she is not’ and in time, women recognise that they can be a good mother, a good friend, and a good provider even when the identity of “wife” is no longer available to them (Radina, Hennon, & Gibbons, 2008). Divorce can be a much more challenging process for women who have adhered to a very traditional gender role and the level of psychological distress that a woman experiences after midlife divorce is proportionate to the level of importance she attached to being a “wife” (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996). There is consensus that the status of “wife” is generally a positive identity change, but the status of ‘divorced’ is ambiguous and when it occurs in midlife, women are forced to redefine themselves at a time when all women, married or not, are dealing with biological and physical changes which can either undermine their self-confidence, or liberate them from biological constraints.

Colburn, Lin, & Moore’s (1992) mixed methods analysis explored gender differences with regard to cause of, and adjustment to, divorce in 268 participants aged between 25 and 34. The younger age of the sample means that the marriages in question were relatively short, but the study identified that men construct their new post-divorce identities in different ways. Men ‘changed’ their lives by changing their wives, and their post-divorce identity was created externally by forming a new intimate relationship. In contrast, women were more likely to locate change within themselves. They spoke positively about the advantages of becoming more independent and being free to do what they wanted to do without having to answer to anyone else. The authors suggest that women, unlike men, have an opportunity to change identity and modify their social roles as adults. They have the potential to move from dependence to a state of independence where they are allowed to become themselves (Colburn, Lin, & Moore, 1992).

This theme of rediscovering the self is explored in Gregson & Ceynar's (2009) qualitative study of 31 divorced women. Their study addresses the issue of identity through the material changes that women make to themselves and their lives after divorce. In the aftermath of their divorces, all of the women described altering themselves so that they looked and felt different from their former married 'self'. Getting a different hairstyle, losing weight, or even having a tattoo made the women feel better about their physical appearance and helped them to create new post-divorce identities. Rather than becoming a new person, the women described this process of transformation as a reclamation, a rediscovery of their former identity which had been relinquished during the marriage (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009).

Although the women's ages (28-66 years), and the time since their divorce (from 1 to 29 years) varied wildly, the authors argue that this does not limit the validity of experiences that maintain their meaning and resonance over time. In a later study Ceynar & Gregson (2012) explored an aspect of post-divorce identity that is uniquely available to women. After divorce women who have taken their husband's surnames have the opportunity to revert to their maiden name. The authors conducted a narrative analysis of 29 women's post-divorce surname decisions. There is no defined legal framework to assist women with this decision and this adds to the ambiguity around how women should behave after divorce. In this study 13 women out of a total of 21 who were mothers decided to keep their husbands' surnames in order to minimise disruption for their children. For them, the married surname was a legal connection to their children which legitimised that relationship. The 18 women who chose to change their surname did so because they wanted autonomy and independence and returning to their maiden name was symbolic of a new beginning and the creation of a distinct post-divorce identity (Ceynar & Gregson, 2012).

For older women who are no longer caring for dependent children, divorce can be an opportunity for reinvention. In Baum et al.'s (2005) quantitative study of changes in self-concept in 70 Israeli divorcees who had divorced in the previous two years, most of the women (77%) experienced an increase in both their self-concept and their level of satisfaction since the divorce. A small number reported no change and 19% had experienced a decline in satisfaction. The authors suggest that divorce forces women to become more independent (Baum et al., 2005). Becoming the head of the household and supporting the family increases both confidence and competence and the divorced women finds herself assuming roles that are valued as traditionally masculine. In contrast, men who divorce find

themselves immersed in duties such as cooking cleaning and childcare, jobs that have traditionally been socially devalued by their association with femininity (Diedrick, 1991). This might explain why explain why Shor, Roelfs, Bugyi & Schwartz' (2012) meta-analysis of 104 studies with more than 600 million participants which found that the mean mortality risk for middle-aged men after divorce was substantively higher than the risk for middle-aged women.

## **Divorce Narratives**

One aspect of midlife divorce that has been overlooked is the way in which women construct post-divorce narratives as way of making sense of the experience. Divorce is a disruptive life event and the way in which women restore a sense of order to the chaos, is to create an account of the divorce experience that they can share with others. As Holstein and Gubrium (2000, p103) observe: *“Narrators artfully pick and choose from what is experientially available to articulate their lives and experience. Yet, as they actively craft and inventively construct their narratives, they also draw from what is culturally available, storying their lives in recognizable ways”*

In telling her story, the divorced woman rarely chooses to cast herself as the villain. Women tend to construct stories which absolve them of responsibility and blame their ex-spouse the breakdown of the marriage (Montenegro, 2014). Riessman (1990) proposed that the accounts given by divorcing women and men allowed them “to convince a listener who was not there that a marriage was seriously troubled, and that he or she was justified in leaving it”. In Wallerstein's (1986) ten year follow up of 52 women who went through divorce in the early 1970's, more than half the women in the study claimed no responsibility at all for the breakdown of their marriage. Wallerstein also noted that the participants engaged in retrospective trivialisation of the serious issues that triggered the divorce. Narrative accounts allow women to make themselves the victim of external forces. This identity is one that women may find easier to adopt because it fits with cultural ideas of femininity and passivity.

Women's midlife divorce stories often include the disclaimer that flawed reasoning led to their decision to marry in the first place (Canham et al., 2014). Women describe ignoring warning signs because their desire to have the status of 'married' was stronger than intuitions about negative personal traits, or behaviours (Thomas & Ryan, 2008). Kayser & Rao (2006)

found that more 40% of unhappily married men and women had doubts about their decision within the first six months of marriage and a further 20% admitted that they had doubts within the first year.

## **Moving On**

Although it is a life changing experience for everyone who experiences it, divorce presents particular age-specific stresses for the older woman. In a society that privileges youth, older women are marginalised. For example, studies of film, television and advertising consistently find that older women are grossly underrepresented and negatively stereotyped in comparison to men (Kessler et al., [2004](#)). This ‘invisibility’ has a direct influence on explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs about female ageing.

Throughout history women have been valued in terms of their sexual attractiveness, whereas men have been valued in relation to their employment status (Maguire, 1995). This bias becomes more extreme in later life, so for the older woman, divorce disrupts much more than a marriage. The probability of remarriage for a woman who divorces after the age of fifty is much lower than it is for a divorced man of the same age or older. When Wallerstein (1986) conducted her study of women and divorce, not one of the 12 women who were over 40 at the time of their divorce had remarried ten years later (Wallerstein, 1986). In 1985, less than three in every hundred divorced women aged 45 to 64 remarried and in the intervening years, that figure has declined further (Uhlenberg et al., 1990).

Because women live longer than men, the population of older women is much larger than the population of older men. In 1991, single older women outnumbered single older men by more than four to one (Steitz & Welker, 1991). This demographic imbalance means that women who would like to repartner after midlife divorce are fishing in a greatly diminished pool, and they are doubly disadvantaged by the fact that older men tend to date downwards.

In 1990, it was estimated that by 2025, roughly 50% of all women would be single in old age (Uhlenberg et al. 1990). Since then, online dating and smartphone dating apps have revolutionised the opportunities for people meet new romantic or sexual partners. A survey of AARP members in 2012 revealed that 43% of men over 50 and 57% of women over 50 use online dating (AARP, 2012). However, when Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon (2018) examined

the dating profiles of older men and women, they found that men with grey hair and wrinkles were not judged by their physical appearance but older women who showed normal signs of aging such as wrinkles and grey hair were viewed as too old for dating (Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2018).

Although there is a lot of evidence that ageing is a romantic disadvantage for women, but not for men, when Miller et al., (2021) analysed data from the 2014 wave of the Singles in America survey they found that older women who divorce are less likely to look for a new relationship than men. They argue that researchers should avoid the assumption that aging is an issue of disadvantage, decline, and dysfunction for women and suggest that the desire to maintain autonomy, relinquish caretaking responsibilities and embrace independence and agency are equally viable explanations (Miller et al., 2021).

## **Key Papers**

The following five papers each played an important role in helping me to define the structure of my main study.

**Lloyd, G. M., Sailor, J. L., & Carney, W. (2014). A phenomenological study of post-divorce adjustment in midlife. *Journal Of Divorce & Remarriage*, 55(6), 441-450. doi:10.1080/10502556.2014.931757**

The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of post-divorce adjustment for people in midlife. The research is important because well-being studies have shown that people who are divorced, or divorcing, have greater levels of anxiety and fear and are at higher risk of depression and suicide. There is also a higher incidence of murder, alcoholism, and accidental death in this demographic (Amato, 2010; Sakraida, 2008). Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney (2014) adopt a phenomenological approach to try and distil the essence of post-divorce adjustment because “life experiences cannot be reproduced in a research laboratory”, making them almost impossible to study using quantitative inquiry.

The study is based on interviews with 8 women and 6 men and the data was analysed using Clark Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenological research model. This included epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, synthesis of texture and

structure, and an integration of the essence (Moustakas, 1994).” The participants in Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney’s (2014) study were all aged of 42 and 64 and had divorced a minimum of 2 years earlier.

The main themes of the study were ‘time, emotional pain, post-divorce parenting, and “starting over from ground zero, in both emotional wellbeing and material objects”. The study did not account for gender differences which seems odd since the process of post-divorce adjustment must be framed within the context it is experienced in. For example, the experience of a father who loses joint custody of a child is markedly different to the added responsibility that a mother might feel when she loses her spouse and co-parent.

Although the stated aim of this paper was to try and understand the essence of post-divorce adjustment, the descriptions of the experience of divorce - from feelings of devastation and shock, to anger, grief, mourning and pain - are overwhelmingly negative and although one of the themes is ‘starting over’, there is very little emphasis on the positives that emerge from this particular theme. It is also clear from the selected quotes that several participants had remarried and found happiness, yet this fact is ignored.

This study does, however, confirm that divorce is not a static experience. It is a state of transition: personal, physical, emotional, relational, financial, that begins with mourning the loss of the marriage. Adjustment was found to be a developmental process which involved going through several transitions and taking at least two years for the individual to adjust to life as an independent person

The study involved a single ninety-minute interview, during which time, participants were asked to reflect on an experience, that had taken place at least two years earlier. The focus was on post-divorce adjustment yet the interviews, by necessity, jumped back to the time of the legal divorce, in order to benchmark the participant’s current emotional state. The obvious deficiencies in this study design confirmed the need for a longitudinal study which tracked a series of ‘present tense’ interviews which, over time, might better capture the transition from hot cognition during the divorce process to a more reflective state two years later. This was an important realisation and informed the structure of my main study.

**Radina, M. E., Hennon, C. B., & Gibbons, H. M. (2008). Divorce and mid- and later life families: A phenomenological analysis with implications for family life educators. Journal Of Divorce & Remarriage, 49(1-2), 142-170. doi:10.1080/10502550801973146**

Radina, Hennon & Gibbon's (2008) phenomenological study is interested in how middle-aged people who are getting divorced make sense of their life worlds, and their social position as 'divorced' within this world. The study shows how divorce can be a point of reorganisation for who a woman is, and who she is not. She can still be a good mother and friend even though she is no longer a wife. She is a person who supports her family but is no longer "just a housewife." This study contains a lot of useful information on the way in which people use language to craft an identity and how a socially constructed reality is often accomplished by talking with other people about the marriage, the affair, the divorce, and what it all means.

This study explored the lived experiences of three middle-aged women and one middle-aged man who were experiencing divorce in mid-and later life. The authors employ phenomenology to understand how people "make sense" of their life worlds, and their social position as "divorced" within this world. Divorce is a difficult life event which can be bound up in feelings of guilt, shame and failure, Negative social stigma is still associated with divorce, and this is especially true for older people. The older a person is when they divorce, the more difficult they can find it to detach from previous lifestyles, and the newly divorced can perceive themselves as having more limited options for the future and a general uncertainty about what to do next (Hennon & Brubaker, 1994).

The study presented four separate case studies which represented a typology of divorce in mid-and later life: career divorced, serial divorced, newly divorced, and interrupted career divorced. The case studies provide useful insights into the different ways that the same experience can be interpreted, however in casting such a broad net, it fails to find any common ground amongst the four participants. In my critique of the paper, I focus on the case study of Karen, who was married to Michael for 25 years before they finally divorced. Feelings of resentment between them had been building for about ten years, before they jointly came to an understanding that their marriage was essentially over. They agreed that



they would wait to separate for the sake of the children, but when they eventually decided to instigate the legal divorce, the process took two years. During that time Michael began a new relationship. When Karen found out she tried to commit suicide.

In 2016, I had no idea how pertinent Karen's story would prove to be to my own research, but this study certainly braced me for the possibility that investigating the experience of divorce might involve dealing with women who are in extreme emotional distress. Divorce is now such a common phenomenon that people are expected to 'deal with it', yet the impact it has on people's wellbeing can be extremely profound. This study also confirmed to me the importance of strict homogeneity within my sample. Homogeneity doesn't mean that findings are applicable generally, but purposive sampling limits the variables and makes it easier to assess psychological variability within emerging patterns of convergence and divergence.

**Brown, S., & Lin, I. (2012). The Gray Divorce Revolution: Rising Divorce Among Middle-Aged and Older Adults, 1990–2010. *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 67(6), 731-741.**

Although previous studies had already established the increased prevalence of divorce amongst the over fifties, Brown & Lin's (2012) study was the first to quantify the incidence of midlife divorce at a specific time. Prior to this study, surveys or studies of divorced adults didn't limit the time frame so the respondents might have divorced in the last twelve months but equally, they may have been divorced for decades. Brown and Lin measured the incidence of divorce amongst the over fifties between two specific time points, and in doing so, they were able to estimate incidence rather than prevalence. This finding is important because the rise in mid and later life divorce has been anticipated as a direct consequence of the baby boom behaviour in midlife. What Brown and Lin were able to show was that number of divorces in people over fifty was disproportionate and that in the US, in 2010, roughly 1 in 4 divorces - over 600,000 in a single year - occurred people over the age of fifty, a finding which, by itself, confirmed the need for more research into the predictors and consequences of later life divorce.

This is a quantitative study; and was the first research paper to identify the fact that the divorce rate for people over the age of fifty had doubled in two decades. In fact Brown and

Lin are credited for coining the now widely used term ‘Gray Divorce’. What struck me about this paper was the fact that the incidence of divorce was 12% higher for women aged 50 or older, than it was for men. This finding has serious implications for society because divorce splits assets, and in later life when people are beginning to retire this may increase the financial burden on the state because of a greater reliance on public services. It is also likely to have an impact on adult children.

Brown and Lin’s methodology is a little confusing because they were comparing data from two different sources - the ACS nationwide survey that began in 2000 and gathered data on demographic, economic, housing, and social characteristics of the U.S. population, and the US Vital Statistics Report which only collected data at five year intervals and discontinued data collection for marriages and divorces in 1996. The overall sample size was huge (N=2,276,936), but the authors acknowledge the study’s limitations and say that they aim to provide trend data and correlational evidence which should be interpreted with caution.

Brown and Lin’s study remains important, but it leaves many questions unanswered. The authors relate the increase in female midlife divorce to economic independence, but they don’t consider the possibility that initiator status might be not a completely reliable indicator of divorce intent. Other research shows that many women who file for divorce do so because they don’t want to be filed against (Sakraida, 2005). The authors’ suggestion that financial autonomy might actually be encouraging women to get out of unhappy marriages merited further exploration, and this prompted me to explore income as an inclusion criteria in my main study. It also confirmed to me that a more detailed qualitative and experiential investigation of the motivations of women who divorce in midlife was required.

**Montenegro, X. P. (2004). The divorce experience: A study of divorce at midlife and beyond. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute.**

Montenegro’s AARP (2004) study provides a really valuable overview of midlife divorce and generates useful insights into the specific ways in which divorce differs for older people. It examines why older people divorce, how they cope and the impact that it has on their well-being. It is also one of the only studies which looks at sexuality in mid and later life relationships after divorce. The paper also highlights the legacy effect of divorce and shows

how divorce became more common amongst the parents of baby boomer children. The study dates to 2004, so the 60-year-old participants were too old to be classified as Baby Boomers; only 30% of their parents had divorced whereas 39% of the parents 40-year-olds (Baby Boomers) had divorced. It also addresses the impact on adult children which is not something that is widely covered in academic research.

Montenegro surveyed 581 men and 566 women ages 40 to 79 who had divorced at least once during their 40s, 50s, or 60s. The majority, about 73 percent, divorced in their 40s. About one in five (22%) divorced in their 50s, while 4 percent divorced in their 60s or older. Although this was the biggest study of its kind at the time, the sample is relatively small considering that it is meant to be nationally representative. A sample of about four thousand would have given the results greater validity.

The study identified a number of issues which merit further research. For example, one assumes that older children are less affected by divorce than younger ones but in Montenegro's study 46% of participants said that their children had a negative reaction to their divorce. More than half (57%) had dependent children under 18 years old at the time they divorced and 56% of men and 36% women said that their children were either somewhat or very upset about their divorce. Around 17% of participants in the study waited five or more years to divorce and of those, 43 percent said that they stayed married because of the children. Men (58%) were also more likely than women (37%) to say that they stayed married in order to protect their children, a finding that may reflect the gender inequity that is inherent in custodial arrangements. Mothers of younger children can safely presume that they will be awarded the lion's share of custody. Although things are gradually changing men cannot assume that they will be awarded joint custody of their children and therefore, divorce risks alienating men from their children.

If men are penalised with regard to custody, women are penalised financially. The women in Montenegro's study were several times more likely to say they had to prepare financially (27% women versus 6% men). A total of 37 percent of women divorcees had been thinking about getting divorced for at least five years but had postponed it for financial reasons. This study also showed that the older a woman is, the more difficult it is for her to deal with divorce. This is largely because older women have fewer options - in terms of employment,

romance, or even socially. They are more likely to say that their “divorce was more difficult than a major illness” and they recognise that they have less chance of remarriage.

Montenegro’s study had some very interesting findings, but it only scratched the surface of the issues it raised. The issues concerning the impact on children were curious, but the findings were confounded by the fact that 57% of the participants had dependent children under the age of 18 years old at the time of their divorce. Divorce is much more likely to affect younger children, particularly if they are still living in the family home. To remove this factor so that my study could focus exclusively on the experiences of women, I decided to only recruit female participants who had children over the age of 18, who were either away at university or living independently.

**Duffy, M. E., Thomas, C., & Trayner, C. (2002). Women's reflections on divorce— 10 years later. *Health Care For Women International*, 23(6/7), 550-560. doi:10.1080/07399330290107313**

This study is very interesting because it was the final part of a longitudinal study which examined the long-term effects of divorce for women. Most longitudinal studies are relatively time limited, but divorce is a seismic life event so the ten year window that his study involved gave the participants real time to get over the trauma of divorce and build new lives for themselves. The study, which involved 95 women who had divorced a decade earlier, assessed how the women’s divorce had affected their self-esteem, control, life assessment, and how their lives had been in the ten years since the last study. The study revealed how gender roles within the marriage had an impact on how well women coped after divorce and how women who had worked tended to fare better.

In the first study, which focused on the immediate crises of adjustment to divorce, the women felt they were doing reasonably well. Ten years later, 73.7% of the women reported that their lives were better than they were 10 years previously, and 25% felt the same or worse. Fewer than half the women had remarried, and of those who did, 10 had divorced for a second time. About a quarter of the women in the study never moved on or got their lives back on track. The study identified that women with traditional sex role attitudes experienced a less positive adjustment to divorce and their commitment to the traditional

identity of wife and mother impeded their ability to adapt to the altered family configuration. Divorce impels women to become breadwinners and working outside the home and for many women this leads to an increase in self-esteem and agency, as well as easing financial anxieties. In this study income was significantly correlated with self-esteem, control, and life assessment.

This paper shows how perceptions of wellbeing and the way a woman responds to divorce is, to some degree, determined by how closely she adhered to traditional gender roles within the marriage. It also suggests that women who work while they are married may find it easier to adjust post-divorce. To extend and test these findings I decided to strategically recruit women from both demographic groups; women who had worked during their marriages, and women who had been stay at home parents, for my main study.

## Conclusion

This literature review confirms the need for a more detailed qualitative, experiential and longitudinal investigation of female divorce in midlife. IPA is the ideal research method because as Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney (2014) say “life experiences cannot be reproduced in a research laboratory”. Most existing studies of divorce are either retrospective or use historic datasets which just happen to have captured relevant data. In contrast my main study will capture the complete divorce transition in real time; something which has not been before. It is important research because the divorce rate for people over the age of fifty has doubled in a decade. This is a consequential change, and one that disproportionately affects women; the median post-divorce income change for wives is -22 per cent, whereas for husbands it is +13 per cent (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999).

Women aged between 50 and 65 were born at the tail end of the post war baby boom and many grew up believing in very traditional gender role ideologies. Duffy, Thomas & Trayner’s (2002 study of how women reflect on divorce ten years after the experience identified that how a woman responds to divorce is, to some degree, determined by how closely she adhered to traditional gender roles within the marriage and that women who work while they are married may find it easier to adjust post-divorce. To extend and test these findings I will explore differences between participants who worked during their marriages,

and those who were stay at home parents.

Employment gives women financial and psychological autonomy and Hilton & Anderson (2009) found that women with higher levels of self-worth were more likely to divorce. Brown & Lin's (2012) study of 'Gray Divorce' also related the increase in female midlife divorce to economic independence and suggested that financial autonomy might actually be encouraging women to get out of unhappy marriages. This has prompted me to use income, rather than past or present employment status, as an inclusion criteria in my main study.

Midlife is a time when women are subject to multiple stressors as they cope with the multiple demands of menopause, adolescent children, employment, and ageing parents, stressors that can exacerbate conflict in any marriage. Montenegro's (2004) study of divorce at midlife and beyond, found that divorce is much more likely to affect children who are still living in the family home. To remove this factor so that my study could focus exclusively on the experiences of women, I decided to only recruit female participants who had children over the age of 18, who were either away at university or living independently.

There is surprisingly little research into the impact of parental divorce on adult children who are not co-resident with either parent. Most of the variability in adult children's relationships with their parents after divorce seems to relate to the divorce process itself rather than the quality of the marriage (Cooney, T. M., Hutchinson, M. K., & Leather, D. M., 1995) and the most common complaints seem to be being forced to take sides (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986) or to act as mediators between their parents (Campbell, 1995; Pryor, 1999). However, adult children of divorce have a 60% higher risk of developing depression compared to those whose parents are still married (Uphold-Carrier, & Utz, 2012).

Assessing the psychological impact on women going through the divorce process will obviously be important. People who are divorced, or divorcing, have greater levels of anxiety and fear and are at higher risk of depression and suicide. There is also a higher incidence of murder, alcoholism, and accidental death in this demographic (Amato, 2010; Sakrinda, 2008). People who divorce also experience higher levels of depressive symptoms and it takes about four years for them to subside (Lin, Brown, Wright & Hammersmith., 2019). Divorce is more detrimental and lead to a slower recovery for parents than it was for couples with no children

(Tosi, Van Den Broek, 2021). Although I will be interviewing the women between six months and year post divorce, an interview at two and five years post-divorce would probably be advisable to complete the study.

I expect that identity will be a strong theme for the women in this study because midlife divorce can clearly be a point of reorganisation for who a woman is, and who she is not. Getting older also makes women more conscious of personal goals. Midlife is a 'pinnacle time' or a time for a life review and a review of marital satisfaction (Sakraida, 2005). Once the women are divorced, repartnering is also likely to feature. I am curious as to how dating apps will help, or hinder, the women in their efforts to move on.

# Chapter 3. Methodology

## Qualitative Research Methods

Psychology has only been recognised as an independent discipline for about 150 years, however psychological speculation and even empirical research can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. This is what the German psychologist Hermann von Ebbinghaus meant when, in 1908, he famously wrote that ‘psychology has a long past, but a short history’ (Brinkmann, 2015). The emergence of structured qualitative research methodologies is much more recent. In 1940, the Social Science Research Council tasked Gordon Allport with appraising how “personal documents” were being used as source materials in psychological research. Two years later Allport published a report which counted 200 to 300 psychological authors who had employed qualitative data in research, yet less than a dozen had given any account of methodological issues as sampling, observer reliability, validity, and objectivity.

At the time, Allport probably wasn’t aware of the young psychologist John C. Flanagan, but his contribution to qualitative methodology is important. Flanagan joined the US Army Air Forces in 1941, one year before Allport’s report was published. The US was on the verge of joining World War II and they only had 51,000 pilots. Flanagan’s job was to devise a set of tests that would help the US air force to identify which recruits had the qualities required to become combat pilots. In the winter of 1943, Flanagan and his team conducted the first large-scale, systematic data gathering exercise, which involved asking combat veterans to report on witnessed Officer behaviours which had helped, or hindered, on bombing missions. Several thousand combat reports were collected and analysed, and the resulting set of descriptive categories provided an objective and factual definition of what Flanagan called the “critical requirements” of effective combat leadership. By 1945 the US air force had 2.3 million pilots, and Flanagan was awarded the Legion of Merit for his contribution to the war effort. Flanagan’s ‘Critical Incident Technique’ is one of the first ever papers to document a set of well-defined procedures for the collection of empirical real-world accounts of actual situations in order to yield new, ecologically valid knowledge.



By the 1960s, psychologists such as Amedeo Giorgi, who had been trained in quantitative research methods, were acknowledging the need for rigorous qualitative research methods. At Duquesne University, Giorgi developed a set of qualitative methods for phenomenological psychology. By 1967, the publication of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory', provided a detailed guide for conducting research using grounded theory. Language is obviously crucial for all qualitative analysis and the emergence of Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell's discourse analysis (1987) provided a new analytic tool for qualitative research methods rooted in language. At the same time Sarbin (1986), Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) were developing epistemological and methodological guidelines for narrative inquiry. Finally, in 1996, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was defined as a qualitative research method in Jonathan A. Smith's position paper in the peer reviewed journal *Psychology and Health* (1996, Vol.11, pp 261-271). Since its inception, IPA has rapidly become one of the best known and most commonly used qualitative methodologies in psychology (Smith, 2011).

In a relatively short space of time, qualitative research has become a very broad church. Whilst all qualitative methods share a concern with human experience and meaning making, they differ in terms of their ontological, anthropological, epistemological assumptions, the types of research questions they address, the way they collect data, how they analyse it and the types of insights they can generate on the basis of that analyses. Despite their diversity, qualitative methods are united by the fact that they provide an alternative to the classical model of quantitative scientific research. Broadly speaking, qualitative approaches ask questions that are designed to elicit explanations. Therefore, qualitative research tends to generate data that is textual, rather than numerical, and it provides descriptions of phenomena, rather than, for example, counting their occurrences.

Most qualitative methods rely on semi-structured interviews as a way of gathering data, although written accounts, diaries, or narrative content analyses, focus groups, or naturalistic conversations can also be used. In contrast, quantitative research examines cause and effect relationships without directly engaging with the phenomenon being studied. Theoretically, this is supposed to ensure objectivity and ecological validity, but that is open to debate.

Qualitative research is primarily interested in the 'person', but it acknowledges that

individuals cannot be known through, or separated from their context. Rather than proving something that is already known, or suspected, qualitative research aims to generate new understandings of how individuals, or groups, extract, construct, present and communicate the ‘meaning’ of their experiences. To do this, qualitative researchers must get as close as possible to the phenomenon being studied. Because qualitative research is more hands on, rigour, validity and quality are dependent on the skills of the researcher. Face to face interviews mean that the interviewer is tasked with ethical responsibility for the wellbeing of the subject, whilst simultaneously attempting to create rapport and remain alert to personal subjectivity.

Although qualitative research does not make claims that can be extrapolated to populations, it’s results can increase understanding of specific or homogenous population groups. Because it prioritises human experience, health professionals were amongst the first to recognise the benefits of using scientifically valid qualitative methods in general, and IPA in particular, to learn from the experiences of their patients. In fact, by 2011, 25% of the IPA corpus that had been published in respected, peer reviewed journals was related to the experience of patient illness, and the second largest domain was mental health/clinical and counselling psychology (Smith, 2011).

In health psychology, qualitative methods have generated new and important insights into the experiences of dialysis patients, victims of cardiac arrest, or gay men with HIV. At an experiential level qualitative research has increased understanding of the experience of becoming a new mother or losing a spouse. My initial study on ‘How middle-aged women with an empty nest make sense of marital conflict?’ uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and my main study ‘How do women with an empty nest make sense of midlife divorce and does income impact experience or outcome?’ uses Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, (LIPA).

## **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was first defined as a qualitative research method in Jonathan A. Smith’s position paper in *Psychology and Health* (1996, Vol.11, pp 261-271). At the time, the opposing forces of social cognition and discourse analysis still dominated British social psychology. However Jerome Bruner, “the godfather of cognitive

psychology” (Popkewitz, 2013), had already publicly acknowledged his loss of faith in what he called “reductionist behaviourism and reductionist computationalism” (Bruner, 1992).

Bruner was not the first to decry the limitations of the ‘science’ of psychology. In 1894, Windelband had differentiated between a nomothetic approach which resulted in statements referring to “that which always is” and an idiographic approach which resulted in statements referring to “that which once was” (Windelband, 1894 quoted in Hermans, 1988). And at the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher William James had identified the fundamental significance of individual differences:

*“in every concrete individual there is a uniqueness that defies all formulation. We can feel the touch of it and recognize its taste, so to speak, relishing or disliking as the case may be, but we can give no ultimate account of it, and have, in the end simply to admire the Creator (James, 1911, p.20)*

Bruner argued that a scientific psychology which refused to accept what people ‘say’ as a basis for determining their intentional state, also failed to recognise how “common actions and common meanings are negotiated in cultural transaction” (Bruner, 1992). In contrast, Potter and Wetherell (1987) challenged the assumption that verbal reports could illuminate underlying cognitions and proposed that they were, in fact, behaviours in their own right. In ‘Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour’, they argue that what people say is largely contingent on where, when, and why, they are saying it, and so the primary concern for the discourse analyst is to find out what ‘that which is being said’ is, in effect, ‘trying to do.’

Smith recognised that IPA could potentially mediate between social cognition and discourse analysis whilst, at the same time, privileging the individual. With its theoretical roots in phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985), IPA shared a commitment to both the mind and cognition, as well as context and language. IPA also drew on theoretical ideas from hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), ideography (Allport, 1937) and engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts (Harré, Van Langenhove & Smith, 1995). Although it is a practical and structured research method, IPA has direct links to an extensive intellectual history in the social sciences.

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology, or the study of ‘phenomena’, is primarily concerned with how people perceive phenomena within certain contexts, at different times and in particular states of mind. IPA is phenomenological because it is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account, of an object, an event, or an experience but it acknowledges that it is impossible to produce an objective statement about any of those things. The philosophy of phenomenology is primarily credited to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who proposed an alternative philosophy of consciousness. Husserl considered intentionality to be the “fundamental property of consciousness” and he argued that ‘consciousness’ and the ‘object of consciousness’ are so enmeshed that there is an intentional and reciprocal relationship between the phenomena that is being seen, felt, remembered, or evaluated, and the awareness of, or attention to, that phenomena. Husserl used the example of an apple tree in bloom to distinguish the difference between object and experience. If the tree is the object of perception, looking is the act of perception and the perception itself is what the apple tree in flower means to us. The phenomenological researcher is not interested in the actual tree, but in the sense of the tree and how the individual experiences it when they perceive it.

Phenomenology then, is focused on subjective experience and the way in which people consciously interpret their own lifeworld, and actively construct meaning from experience. However, Husserl also understood that our capacity to understand the experience of a specific phenomenon well enough to be able to identify its essential features, was complicated by our tendency to assume, to predict, and to classify. In order to escape our “natural attitude”, Husserl urged researchers to adopt a phenomenological attitude by consciously and intentionally bracketing distractions, or the things we take for granted, so that, through reflection and repeated analysis, we can distil the essential essence of the experience. Husserl understood that the only objective knowledge that we can possibly have is that which is mediated through our consciousness, and because objects, and events, cannot be separated from the way in which they are experienced, in order to truly access the phenomenon, Husserl urged the researcher to “return to the things themselves”.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who was a student of Husserl's, also accepted that the person and the context could never be separated. Heidegger recognised that no 'thing' is ever revealed as any 'thing' until we encounter it, and it is therefore brought into meaningful existence (Polt, 2006). After all, if we never saw that tree in bloom, how could we be certain it exists? Heidegger described this relationship between subject and object as 'Dasein' which means 'there being' or 'being there'. Dasein describes how our nature is to "be there, always somewhere, always located and always amidst and involved with some kind of meaningful context" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). Heidegger argued that it was impossible for us to escape subjectivity and impose meaning on objects in the world, because we are, ourselves, a fundamental part of the meaningful world. Similarly, he believed that it was impossible for people to bracket themselves and their assumptions entirely, because all experience is embodied and so it is impossible to transcend ourselves completely. Although IPA researchers accept that it is not always possible to bracket assumptions entirely, IPA is phenomenological because it is committed to "exploring experience in its own terms" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). However, at the same time, IPA acknowledges that experience is an "in-relation-to" phenomenon, it is not really a property of the individual" (Smith et al., 2009).

## **Hermeneutics**

IPA is guided by phenomenological methodologies that require the researcher to describe, rather than to explain a phenomenon, and to ground everything in the data, rather than imposing theoretical frameworks to make sense of what has been uncovered. However IPA adds an additional layer of interpretation which is philosophically rooted in hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. Historically, hermeneutics has been concerned with the relationship between the context within which a text has been produced, and the context within which it is interpreted. The philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) proposed it as a way of accommodating both a grammatical, and a psychological, interpretation (Smith, 2007) of a given text. He argued that the techniques and intentions of the writer impress a particular interpretation upon a text and that interpretation subsequently becomes available to the reader. However, the reader's subsequent interpretation must also incorporate the context, the 'historical genesis', in which the writer's text was first produced. The aim for the reader then, is to understand the writer as well as the text, and in doing so, Schleiermacher believed that the interpretative process could provide the researcher with 'an understanding of the

utterer better than he understands himself (quoted in Smith, 2007).

IPA involves a detailed examination of both the lived experience and the way in which people make sense of that experience, yet at the same time, IPA acknowledges that *“investigating how events and objects are experienced and given meaning requires interpretative activity on the part of the researcher”* (Eatough, Smith & Shaw, 2008, p.8). Because the hermeneutic relationship between the ‘interpreter’ and the ‘interpreted’ is not unilateral, the researcher must be reflexive about their role in eliciting, transcribing, and interpreting the participant’s story. This engagement between the researcher making sense of the participant, and the participant making sense of their experience echoes Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutic circle’, but IPA actually proposes a double hermeneutic, since the interpretive process also involves the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their own experience.

## **Idiography**

Because IPA privileges the individual it is also theoretically informed by idiography. The word idiographic was resurrected by Gordon Allport (1937) to indicate a concern for that which is specific to the individual case. Allport argued that psychology had become too preoccupied with nomothetic, and it needed to place greater emphasis on the variables and processes that happened within the person. The classic nomothetic approach proposed that broad generalisations about all people could provide adequate explanations and predictions for the behaviour of both the group, and the individual (Levy 1970). In contrast, ideography was considered to be “antiscience” (Nunally, 1967), because it encouraged description and discouraged the search of general laws.

Allport illustrated the failure of statistical probabilities to illuminate the particular with this example:

*“Suppose we take John, a lad of 12 years, and suppose his family background is poor, his father was a criminal: his mother rejected him: his neighbourhood is marginal. Suppose that 70% of the boys having a similar background become criminals. Does this mean that John himself has a 70% chance of delinquency? Not at all. John is a unique being with a genetic inheritance all his own: his life experience is his own. His unique world contains*

*influences unknown to the statistician: perhaps an affectionate relation with a certain teacher, or a wise word once spoken by a neighbour. Such factors may be decisive and may offset all average probabilities. There is no 70 per cent chance about John. He either will or will not become delinquent. Only a complete understanding of his personality, of his present and future circumstances, will give us a basis for pure prediction”*  
(Allport, 1962, p.279)

Allport believed that "the outstanding characteristic of man is his individuality" (Allport, 1937). He recognized that idiographic research needed to consider universal norms, group norms and idiosyncratic norms, but argued that the idiosyncratic had been largely overlooked (Harré, Van Langenhove & Smith, 1995). He suggested that prediction, understanding, and control were attainable scientific goals, even in the handling of a single case. Smith too, makes an argument for the importance of the single case. He suggests that if an individual account seems so rich that it can capture the ‘essence’ of an experience in its own right, then it merits more detailed investigation.

Good IPA aims to achieve the kind of rich and in depth understanding of unique entities, events and trends that is not possible in nomothetic research, however it does so on the understanding that the personal can also shed light on the universal. Smith (2004) argues that 'the very detail of the individual can bring us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity' (Smith, 2004).

*“The particular eternally underlies the general, the general eternally has to comply with the particular” (Goethe quoted in Hermans, 1988)*

## **Meaning making in IPA**

The focus of IPA is on understanding people’s lived experiences, but it accepts that what people “say” is the route into that experience. However the “handy umbrella-word 'saying' covers a wide variety of different things” (Ryle, 1968), therefore, the IPA researcher’s understanding of what is being ‘said’, adds a necessary layer of interpretation that participants might be “unlikely, unable or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves” (Smith, 2004). In IPA research, the emphasis is on achieving a detailed understanding of how particular people, in a specific context, understand certain phenomena, but experience is, in

itself, a complex concept. The verb is defined as ‘to encounter an event’, as well as, ‘to feel an emotion, or sensation’, whereas the noun, is explained as ‘an event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone.’ Experience can explain phenomena at a micro (breathing), or macro (chronic asthma) level. Experience’ can be positive or negative. It can occur by accident or by design. It can be a one-off incident, or a daily ritual. Most experiences of ‘living’ don’t demand our focused attention, but the ones that enter our consciousness, and affect our life world, are ‘phenomena’ worthy of investigation.

A criticism that has been levelled at qualitative research in general, and IPA in particular, is the fact that the analysis of any narrative account is determined by the interpretation of the researcher (Gyollai, 2019), who may, in turn, use language to construct their own version of what has been said. All phenomenological or interpretive descriptions can be challenged and different explanations are always possible (Anderson 1991) but Smith (2009) stresses that IPA never seeks to find a single truth. Rather, it aims to provide a narrative that is acutely attentive to the words and meaning making of the participant, such that it resonates or 'strikes a chord' with the reader (Van der Zalm and Bergum 2000).

IPA integrates several mechanisms to ensure the validity of its interpretations. Being strongly connected to hermeneutics, IPA acknowledges that the participants experience is not directly accessible and so the researcher is involved in a double hermeneutic as they attempt to “*make sense of the participant making sense of their personal and social world*” (Smith 2004, p.20). The IPA researcher’s is bound by the participant’s capacity to tell their story and their own capacity to interpret it but in the pursuit of validity, Yin (1989) also advocates using an audit trail. This involves the researcher organising the data in such a way that an independent observer could follow a logical step-by-step path through a chain of evidence that starts with their initial notes, through to the proposal, the interview schedule, the audio tapes, the interview transcripts, the tables and themes, the draft reports, and the final document. The audit is, of course, hypothetical, but the discipline ensures that the researcher, and anyone else, can check the rigour of their claims.

### **Eliciting new insights: The power of IPA**

This resonance is, I feel, what defines the best IPA research. The hermeneutic relationship between the researcher interpreting the participant’s own exploration creates a dynamic that leaves both participant and researcher with novel understandings of the phenomena. One of



the best examples of this is Flowers, Smith, Sheeran and Beail's study 'Health And Romance: Understanding Unprotected Sex In Relationships Between Gay Men'. It was the first IPA paper that I ever read, and it demonstrates, unarguably, the power of this research method to reveal the hidden nuances of human behaviours. Published in 1997, the study predated anti-retroviral therapy. Aids was still a death sentence and health educators were confused by the fact that men were using condoms for casual sex yet failing to do so in committed relationships. In order to work out why this was happening, the researchers asked twenty working class gay men from a small South Yorkshire town why, in the light of such a significant health threat, they continued to engage in unprotected sex? The answer sent shivers down my spine:

*"but if we really loved somebody and that's what you wanted to do, even if you knew they were HIV, I think that would even come into the equation, if you know, if you were wanting, you know, wanting to die with somebody, or even if you loved somebody that much I suppose, wanting somebody's virus inside'em. You know they've got it then you want it as well (pause) sort of thing." (Dan, p.9)*

Dan equates unprotected sex with loving someone so much that you want to die with them. It is not an isolated sentiment. Like all good IPA, this theme is robust and well evidenced:

*"No, it just feels better. It feels nice because he's trusting me. Like my life's in his hands and his life's in my hands" (Brent, p.8)*

*"You know you're showing the partner of how much you trust them, especially if you don't use a condom." (Neil, p.8)*

This rationale of HIV as an expression of romantic commitment provided new and radical insight into the ways that gay men were beginning to construct meaning around HIV and it confirmed the importance of qualitative research when trying to understand risk from the perspective of a person, rather than a health care provider. Flowers et al.'s (1997) paper is also a good illustration of the way in which IPA's commitment to ideography can really capture the 'essence' of a complex experience. It's focus on people, and its authentic concern with how they make sense of, or derive meaning from, their life experiences, makes it a

particularly effective way in to awkward, or difficult subjects.

IPA reveals how people make sense of, and derive meaning from, specific events, or experiences by asking and answering two distinct questions. IPA's phenomenological underpinnings explore the participants concerns in terms of 'how has this person understood this phenomenon'? IPA's interpretive component contextualises the participant's claims within a psychological framework and asks, 'what does the phenomenon mean for this person in this context'? The outcome provides new insight which have been gleaned in their entirety from the participants understanding of, and engagement with, the phenomenon. IPA accepts that people are, of course, influenced by the social and political constraints of the world they live in, however, IPA maintains that it is still possible to access, distil and interpret the participant's personal perceptions in order to gain unique insights into their 'lived experience.'

IPA is an inductive approach which understands that the participants are the experts in the specific phenomena being investigated and that they have been purposely recruited for their expertise. However, the IPA researcher knows that there is no direct route to 'pure' experience, so the best we can hope for is to get "experience close rather than experience far" (Smith, 2011). Because "access to experience is both partial and complex" (Smith, 1996) there is no such thing as a genuinely first-person account. The account given is constructed between the participant and the researcher, so the initial objective is to produce an informed description which tries to get as close to the participants point of view as possible. The secondary objective is to develop a more overtly interpretive understanding. This second order account positions the participants 'sense making' activities (Smith and Osborn, 2003) within the extant literature and includes a wider social, cultural, and theoretical perspective.

IPA takes account of the fact that an individual's personal perspective is shaped by their physical presence in the world. Merleau Ponty (1908-1961) described this interdependent relationship between psychological make-up and physical presence as 'embodiment'. He argued that "*the body is no longer conceived as an object in the world, but as our means of communication with it*" (Merleau Ponty, 1962). Smith (1996) suggests that IPA acknowledges "a chain of connection between embodied experience, talk about that experience and a participant's making sense of, and emotional reaction to, that experience".

Because IPA works best when it addresses a definable experience, it has a particular interest in understanding what happens when a person's ordinary world is unexpectedly altered. This has made it a particularly useful tool in the field of health psychology and it has been used extensively to explore the meaning and impact of illness, or treatment, on quality of life for the affected individual. Life transitions, identity, and psychological distress, as well as issues to do with sex and sexuality have also become important IPA research areas (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is a versatile method that can explore experiences that are historic or current, one-off, or longitudinal, but its empathic stance towards mind and body means that IPA has proved to be particularly useful in helping to answer very particular questions such as 'How Does The Implantation Of A Ventricular Assist Device Impact Patients' Bodies And Lives'? (Chapman, Parameshwar, Jenkins, Large, and Tsui (2007), or 'Doing The Right Thing For One's Children: Deciding Whether To Take The Genetic Test For Huntington's Disease As A Moral Dilemma' (Smith, Stephenson, Jacobs, and Quarrell, 2013). IPA can also be highly effective when there is no clear research question, however it is at its best when it used to explore topics that involve 'hot-cognition' – subjects that are of existential importance to the participant (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Although most IPA studies focus on small homogenous groups, if a single account is rich enough, IPA can be generated from just one case, and certainly, within health psychology, IPA studies can parallel the traditional medical case study in providing unique insights into unusual presentations. Most IPA studies involve a small group of participants who have shared experience of a specific phenomenon, although they can also be carried out with focus groups, or through the use of written recordings such as diaries. Smith advocates small homogenous samples as a way of reducing the number of extraneous variables and concentrating the focus on the phenomena under investigation (Smith, 2009).

## **Validity and Quality in IPA**

Jonathan Smith's paper (2011) 'Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis' provides a useful table outlining the core ingredients for what makes a good IPA paper. The number one priority is a clear focus. Smith encourages

researchers resist the temptation to try and do everything, and to concentrate instead, on understanding a particular aspect of an experience.

Although IPA could probably be used to explore any human experience, it is most commonly used to examine experiences which are of existential importance to the person involved. The IPA researcher recognises that their access to the experience being investigated is mediated through the participant and that they are simultaneously involved in recalling, recounting, and making sense of what is happening to them. This describes the double hermeneutic where the researcher is actively trying to make sense of the participant actively trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith 2011).

Transparency is a key characteristic of IPA research. For an IPA study to have merit, the reader must be able to trace a clear path from transcription to interpretation and analysis must always be always grounded in evidence. The IPA researcher is required to anchor all findings firmly in the data by using quotes from all participants to illustrate and inform master themes (Smith et al., 2009). In order for a theme to have validity, it must have cross case support and it needs to be illustrated with a sufficient number of participant quotations. Extracts need to be selected to give some indication of convergence and divergence, representativeness, and variability.

In good IPA, analysis should be interpretative, not just descriptive, and the interpretative commentary should capture the similarity and difference, convergence and divergence that is the hallmark of good IPA work. In this way, IPA achieves a much more detailed and in depth understanding of a specific phenomenon than a 'standard thematic analysis' (Brocki and Wearden 2006). Smith also emphasises the importance of careful writing so that the reader is engaged by the narrative and can learn, in detail, about the participants' experience of the phenomenon being investigated.

One of the hallmarks of the best IPA is its capacity to elicit insights that seem to have disproportionate resonance. Because of their relative rarity and particular value, Smith calls these contributions "gems". In October 2011, he wrote about the power of 'the gem' in his article "We Could Be Diving For Pearls" which was published in the Qualitative Methods In Psychology Bulletin Issue. One of several examples that he cites in the article comes from his 2007 paper 'Pain As An Assault On The Self: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Of The Psychological Impact Of Chronic Benign Low Back Pain' (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The study explores the experiences of six people who have recently been referred to the same pain clinic. One of the participants, thirty-six-year-old Kevin has been suffering from chronic lower back pain for thirteen years. He recounts how pain has turned him into a “monster”,

*“The hardest part is the pain obviously, but the fact that I’m like this monster, I get mean, I do things and I think things which are mean, things which I’d never tell anyone, and I’ll not tell you so don’t ask” (Kevin, p.8)*

Kevin recognizes that it is the pain that gives him “*a nasty head*” (p.10), but he fears the consequences of his unpleasant thoughts and behaviours:

*“I need to be careful about people and a bit worried about what’s going to happen to me. Are we all going to get rounded up and taken to a camp somewhere?” (Kevin, p.11)*

Although the word ‘prison’ does not precede the ominous word ‘camp’, it is immanent. Kevin’s statement is loaded, but the ‘prison camp’ interpretation would be entirely speculative, were it not informed by our hermeneutic understanding of Kevin’s narrative as a whole. Collectively, Kevin’s contributions confirm that he believes that his pain has made him “hateful”, and that society is intolerant of “hateful” people. Although this tiny gem is a fractional element of a much larger interview, it carries inordinate weight because it illuminates a previously inaccessible understanding of the shame, stigma and fear of social judgment that is felt by people living with chronic, long-term, pain.

As phenomenologists, IPA researchers are sensitive to the need for subject matter to emerge, or to be revealed, on its own terms. It shouldn’t be extracted or arrived at as a result of the researchers own assumptions and expectations. However, IPA recognizes that we cannot escape ourselves, or the world we live in, so we can never fully escape our own preconceptions. The best we can do is to be as sensitive and responsive as we can and to balance the hermeneutics of empathy against the hermeneutics of suspicion, as we attempt to make sense of the participant’s sense making.

## **Chapter 4. Study 1**

# **How do middle aged women with an empty nest make sense of marital conflict? An interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This small study was an exploratory precursor to my longitudinal study. It explored how three married women, aged between 50 and 56, made sense of marital difficulties once their youngest child left home. The women were all openly unhappy about aspects of their marriages, but they were not at the point where they were considering divorce. The study aimed to increase understanding of whether relationship difficulties are experienced and managed differently when they are not mediated by the needs of younger children.

The study captured a particular time point when the women's child-rearing responsibilities had diminished (Degges-White & Myers, 2006) and they were experiencing the impact of the "empty-nest" for the first time. For couples who are having difficulties, the empty nest stage is one of the most vulnerable periods in the life course (Hilton & Anderson, 2009) because when attention is directed away from children and back towards the primary relationship, it can highlight any shortcomings in the marriage.

The women were also experiencing menopause, an additional developmental transition which can interfere with a woman's confidence and her sense of self. For some women, the multiple strains that accumulate in middle age can contribute to decreased relational satisfaction (Amato, 2010; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). Getting older can also make women more conscious of personal goals and more questioning of their level of marital fulfilment (Sakraida, 2005).

# Method

## Sampling

When trying to establish psychological similarities and differences within a group, it makes sense to limit the number of confounding variables, so IPA studies are conducted with small sample sizes with an emphasis on homogeneity. There is no right answer when it comes to the ideal sample size, and IPA argues that sometimes a single case is enough because the primary concern for IPA is to generate a detailed account of individual experience. Smith et al., (2009) suggest that between three to six participants is sufficient without being overwhelming. When Holland (2014) conducted an IPA study with a sample size of 13, she found herself overwhelmed with data and this resulted in a greater focus on common themes and a loss of idiographic detail. When Holland subsequently interviewed just four women, she was struck by both the quantity and the richness of the data that a smaller sample could yield (Holland & Peterson, 2014). Ideally, it is better to recruit participants who are similar in age, ethnicity, gender, level of education and socio-economic status so that significant findings can be confidently ascribed to that particular group. However, homogeneity is, to some degree, determined by the phenomenon being investigated. If, for example, a researcher is investigating the lived experience of adults suffering from a very rare disease, recruitment might be so difficult that it would be necessary to include people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities

## Recruitment

For this particular study, a homogenous sample was recruited through a request posted on the Gransnet website. Gransnet is the busiest social networking site for the over 50s and it has a dedicated relationships section where older women can get advice from a Relate relationships counsellor, so it was aligned to my purpose. Candidates were selected on the basis of age, ethnicity, duration of marriage, age of biological children, socio-economic status, and geographical proximity. Three women of white British ethnicity, aged between 50 and 56 years were eventually selected. Claudia, Lindsay, and Jane had all been married to their first husband for twenty years or more and they had co-parented biological children, the youngest of whom had recently left home. The participant group is small (N=3), but IPA studies

benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases.

## **Ethics**

The study was granted ethical approval from the School of Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London. It was agreed that the interviews would be recorded and that the recording would be destroyed after the research was completed.

## **Data Collection**

A semi structured interview schedule was devised consisting of 12 open questions (Appendix P.240 ) which the participants were free to answer in any way they wanted to. Open questions asked about the participant's marriage, their children, conflict in their relationship, aging, the self and hopes for the future. The interview schedule is a 'virtual map' (Smith et al., 2009) which shapes the interview. The early questions focus on the past and are designed to build trust between the researcher and the participant. Questions about conflict appear later on in the interview schedule when the participant is feeling more comfortable. Including a broad range of questions encourages dialogue and as the participant reflects on their own experience, the researcher can modify or return to earlier questions in order to elicit more detail or follow up on interesting revelations.

Interviews took place in the participant's homes and lasted approximately 70 minutes. Participants were given an Information Sheet (Appendix P.45) prior to commencement and each session began with an informal chat about the nature of the study. Participants were then given a Consent Form (Appendix, P.44) to sign and the subsequent interview was recorded on a Sony IC audio recorder. After each interview, participants were debriefed, and consent was rechecked.

The same interview schedule was used for each participant, but their responses were never restricted to the questions they were asked because their deviations were often more revelatory. As Smith et al. (2009, p58) point out, the 'unexpected turns are often the most valuable aspects of interviewing: on the one hand they tell us something we did not even anticipate needing to know: on the other, because they arise unprompted, they may well be of particular importance to the participant' For example, in the following extract Jane has just explained that she has started sleeping in the spare room. When pressed about why she does



this, she confesses that she has recently ended an affair:

*“Well, this was, it started around three years ago, and I’ve ended it about four months ago. I always feel like a really bad person when I say it, and I do feel like a bad <...>it’s not what I want for my life, or in my life and if Lara or Victor ever found out it would be horrific for them, and I felt horribly guilty the whole time, but it’s like one of those awful addictions isn’t it? You just sort of kept going back for more” (30.21, Jane)*

As a journalist, the interview process is something that I was relatively familiar with, however the IPA interview is different. It is less interrogative and rather than constantly trying to actively move the conversation forward, the IPA researcher tends to find that silence is a much more powerful tool. Silence creates space in the conversation. It is a ‘pause for thought’ which gives the participant and the researcher an opportunity to reflect on what has been said and what it might mean.

## **Analysis**

Analysis was conducted following IPA guidelines developed by Smith (1996) and Smith et al. (2009). IPA is inductive and participants are considered to be experts in the phenomenon being explored, therefore the analysis is interpretive, but it is firmly grounded in the data. The process began with repeated listening to the recording of the first interview and then every word, pause and hesitation was transcribed verbatim. The complete interview transcript was then copied into an A3 document, and a detailed, line-by-line annotation explored the transcript from a narrative, linguistic, or conceptual perspective. The analysis explored the things that mattered to each participant; significant people, relationships, events, life experiences and the emotions and meanings attached to them. The analysis also paid attention to evaluative language and the ways that the participants expressed themselves through metaphor, distinctive phrases, repetition, gesticulation, or long pauses. After close analysis of each account, a set of key quotes which captured the essence of the participant’s experience and maintained the integrity of the unfolding narrative were extracted for more in-depth exploration and interpretation. Where quotes benefitted from short edits this symbol <-> is inserted to mark where the redaction has been made.

Each quote and its subsequent interpretation provided both a compelling account of the participants experience and a newer and deeper analytic understanding of what it meant to the

participant. This dynamic interaction between the researcher, who making sense of the participant, who making sense of their own experience, is at the heart of good IPA.

The three texts in this small study were analysed consecutively and although the researcher was aware of each preceding analysis, all efforts were made to approach each participant with an open mind in order to capture the essential essence of their personal attitudes and experiences. Once each text had been explored, the researcher looked across the analysed transcripts to find “similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 83) a higher order cross case analysis was devised from the themes of all three participants.

## Results

Four super-ordinate themes identify a narrative arc that maps across all the women’s lives. Verbatim extracts from the original transcripts are used to support each interpretation and a full table of themes, sub themes and quotations can be found in the appendix.

### Theme 1. What’s love got to do with it?

The interviews began by asking the women to reflect on how their relationships began and how they made the decision to get married . Their responses suggested that their underlying motivations were strategic, rather than romantic and not one of the women mentioned the word ‘love’ or described themselves as having ‘fallen in love’.

All three participants relate their approach to marriage to the way that they were brought up.

Jane’s mum was “*absent, not physically absent, just mentally absent*” (4.7) and her dad was “*a bit of a cunt*” (17.7). As a result, she and her siblings became “*slightly feral*” (2.9) and did what they could to get out of the house:

*“ so it was a very unhappy house really, it was a bit, it wasn’t em, we all just used, we all escaped <...> we got boyfriends and girlfriends really early so that we could just spend our whole time with them really” (52.7. Jane)*

Jane's difficult childhood meant that she began to use sexual relationships as a way of getting away from the family home in her early teens.

Claudia's early childhood also informed her views on marriage and family

*"military brat and we moved all the time, and I really didn't want that for my kids" (24.7).*

Having been moved constantly because of her father's job in the military, Claudia was very clear that she wanted a different, more stable life for her children.

Louise's decision to marry was also motivated by a desire to escape her background.

*"At 28 it was quite exciting and diplomatic life when you are in a little one bedroomed flat in Crystal Palace and you fly out and your fiancée has a huge house with servants (29.15, Louise)*

Louise presents a Cinderella story, describing how her marriage propelled her out of a family who were *"as poor as church mice"* (8.12) into a glamorous new life:

There is a strong sense from all three women that their pasts were either unhappy, unsettled, or underprivileged, and marriage offered them all an opportunity to create a better future for themselves.

Financial stability was also an important part of the romantic package. All three women recall that their husbands seemed like a good long-term investment, both as fathers and providers.

*"Big house, servants, and I was back in London with nanny, kids, Sainsburys, nice lifestyle" (38.14, Louise)*

*"I wanted kids. I was really quite keen and em, and Nick was sort of holding back a little bit until we were a bit more financially stable," (22.2, Claudia)*

*"he seemed like a really good bet, <...> he was a good bet, he was going to be a good partner and dad I suppose" (4.15, Jane)*

Jane's parent's marriage set such a low bar that Jane views marriage as a gamble and she is, therefore, willing to settle for a man who seems like 'a good bet'.

Although love is the basis of modern Western marriage (Giddens, 1992), and is a central concept for marriage, monogamy and family (Jackson, 1993), none of the women referenced the word 'love' in their accounts. Instead, they describe a process that is strategic rather than romantic. They recall their partners as being "*a really good bet*" (5.15, Jane) or having a "*huge house with servants*" (30.15, Louise) or being a "*brilliant dad*" (37.3, Claudia).

Essentially, the women chose partners who would deliver the things that they wanted for themselves, and for the children they had yet to have.

The women recognise that their beliefs about marriage are either a mirror of, or a reaction to, inherited parental legacies:

*"My mum didn't work at all, my dad he was in the German air force, so it is very traditional where I come from (2.6 Claudia)*

*"My mum had no energy, and it was too much and I wanted to be a very hands on Mum. Get it right this time but of course it's gone completely wrong" (20.6, Jane)*

*"I think that the way I am comes from my background" (2.12, Louise)*

The stories the women talk about who they were before they married are non-agentive and marriage is an executive decision that gives them the chance to have some control over their lives.

For all three women, marriage was also a way of fulfilling more specific personal needs too. Jane, for example, recognised that fidelity was an important issue for her.

*"I do think I was looking for some stability <-> he wasn't going to go off with other women for one thing, which is, 'cos I'm horribly jealous <-> I wanted, I suppose I wanted someone who was going to stick around" (1.15, Jane)*

When Jane was a child her father had an affair and subsequently married his secretary, so she wanted a partner who would be faithful to her. There is some irony in the fact that she too started out as her husband's secretary and was subsequently unfaithful to him.

Louise was looking for a more exciting life. She married a spy who worked for MI6 and with that, came all the trappings of diplomatic life:

*“He was a spy. So that was very interesting... He was a diplomat and then we were married and that was great” (33.1) “We weren't allowed to tell anyone - MI6 - it was huge. He's a James Bond” (4.15, Louise)*

For Claudia, the English way of life represented an ideal of stability and because her own childhood was so disrupted, she was adamant that she didn't want that for her own children:

*“so I thought we should go back and get them into a nice English school and, you know, good school system, and live in one house that they grow up in, which is what we've done, and that's all been very lovely (37.7, Claudia)*

For all three women, marriage was an opportunity to fix aspects of their lives that had felt broken to them as children. For Jane and Claudia, a stable marriage would counter the instability they had experienced in their own childhoods. For Louise, marriage to a diplomat offered a glamorous counterpoint to her impoverished childhood.

## **Theme 2. Motherhood as a trump card**

All three women bore the brunt of domestic responsibility in the early years, with varying degrees of resentment. Claudia wanted to be a full time Mum, but...

*“He was earning the money I was at home looking after the baby. <...> It really, really lowered my horizons. I remember sort of thinking “what, what can I do now? (20.8 Jane)*

Jane felt limited by the experience of being stuck at home with a baby while her husband went out and worked. Her husband was earning money while her horizons were now lowered

to such an extent that she couldn't see the way forward.

Louise continued to work in her dental practice, but she railed against the inequity of being stuck in London holding the babies while her husband continued to enjoy diplomatic privileges in whatever country he was stationed in at the time:

*“he didn't have any responsibilities at all, gets up, goes to work, dinner, drinks, cocktail parties, whatever, comes back to his big house and whatever. And I'm back in London. No screaming kids, no tantrums, no nappy changing” (41.37, Louise)*

Louise has always felt conflicted by her husband's enthusiasm for her professional independence. She believes that the only reason her husband values her professional autonomy is because it means that she makes fewer demands on him:

*“He loves the fact that I'm successful, that I'm professional, that I'm totally financially independent from him. He hates it if I cry, or if I need anything from him” (57.10, Louise)*

Despite wanting to be mothers and being determined to do a better job than their own parents had done, none of the women fully appreciated the day-to-day drudgery involved in mothering.

Even so, motherhood validates the women, and they take credit for creating the family and this gives them both purpose and status:

*“the family thing is still core to everyone, but then I'm the one who's created it. I'm the only one to blame for it”. (5. 8, Louise)*

There is absolute authority in the way that Louise asserts ownership over the family that she has created.

*“but I sort of thought you know; I'm running quite a good ship here and its nice”. (13.7. Claudia)*

Similarly, Claudia is Captain of the ship and that is a nice feeling.

The women regard their connection to their children as an instinct that is unique to them as mothers and maternal allegiance serves to emphasise the ‘otherness’ of husbands and fathers:

*“he can’t read her at all, he’s terrible at reading her <->because I am, we are, because I know her so well, like when you know daughters, you know all you have to do is see them slightly turn their body and you think “oh ok, I know what’s going on here” (43.17, Jane)*

Jane can intuit her daughter’s emotional state from the way she moves, whereas her husband can’t understand her at all. When she says ‘I am, we are’ she is almost saying that she and her daughter are one.

Louise, in particular, seems to have created an exclusive coalition with her son and this gives her an illusory sense of stability, however the scenario she describes here sounds unboundaried, and divisive:

*“I’m close to them all, but Jack particularly, the eldest one, we’ll go out and have a dinner. We’ll get pissed and he said to me “Mum, our family unit is brilliant and it’s all because of you, but I want you to be happy. Whatever makes you happy, its fine with me. I love Dad, Mum, but whatever makes you happy its fine with me.” (11.18, Louise)*

One of the benefits of consistent maternal investment is that children become close allies who support the mothers emotionally and side with them when their marriages become difficult.

*“sometimes, she says this stuff that I’d really like to say at times but wouldn’t dare.”  
(Jane, 47.17)*

Sometimes Jane’s daughter becomes a mouthpiece for the things that her mother cannot say.

Motherhood gives the women a powerful role and makes them the central force within the family. The women control the family dynamic and use their children’s loyalty to them as an insurance policy.

*“The trump card is the family thing, (8.15, Louise) and you know, the kids are, you know,*

*the kids are brilliant with him and they, but I know that if he did it again, or, or something happened, I know where their loyalties lie” (42.5, Louise).*

Louise is particularly explicit about her ownership of the children and their loyalty to her. She talks about them being a ‘trump card’, as if she is anticipating using them to win a poker game.

Claudia positions herself as “mission control”, the central pivot around which the rest of the family revolves:

*“I do the house and the social side you know organize friends and stuff you know there are lots of jokes, you know “Nick have you checked with mission control” before he says to a friend yeah we can meet up” (32.5. Claudia)*

Despite recognising that her daughter and husband would have liked it, Jane exercised her control over the size and shape of her family by making a unilateral decision not to have another child:

*“I wasn’t bothered about having one child, that was fine, but I think Lara would have liked a little brother or sister and Victor would have liked one” (26.6, Jane)*

In fact, when Jane and her husband failed to conceive a second child, she made a unilateral decision that she was not:

*“gonna go down any sort of routes and I’m not going to start taking any hormones” (9.6. Jane).*

All three women have adhered to traditional gender roles within the family and have placed greater emphasis on their identity as mothers, than as working women. However, the maternal role is finite and when their children grow up and leave home, the women are forced to reconsider their lives and their relationships:

*“the idea of her going filled me with so much horror and, like empty nest fear, and that that’s why I started, that’s why I did the A levels and did that awful year of dental nursing*



*to get to, to this course, 'cos I had to have something to aim for" (49.16, Jane)*

Apprehension about her daughter's departure to university propelled Jane into a new career as a dental nurse.

Claudia is also considering a new career as a *"a fitness instructor for the elderly, " 29.10, Claudia)* but she is still struggling to overcome the impact of her newly emptied nest.

*"before I guess it's all, you know, so full of life, like your house is full of life when your kids are there (23.12) and you just think, it's all changed around me and I'm still and I'm just a bit lifeless (49.14, Claudia)*

Claudia describes herself as being in a state of inertia. It is as if everything around her is in motion, but in the absence of the children that she gave life to, she herself is lifeless.

### **Theme 3. Into the sexual void**

This theme explores the difficult issue of sexlessness, which emerged as a problem for all three participants during interviews.

Jane and her husband have not had sex for five years. Victor is twelve years older than her, and he would like to have sex, but Jane does not find him physically attractive::

*"Well, Victor and I haven't had sex for five years. No, we, it is, he still finds me very attractive, but I don't find him attractive <..> I just can't do the sex thing." ( 28.12, Jane)*

Jane actively avoids sex:

*"strategies like, if I brush my teeth for like, half an hour, and then just put my head around and hope he will be asleep" (12.14, Jane).*

Jane doesn't seem to make the connection between the fact that while she has been avoiding sex with her husband, she has also been having an affair. In fact she negates her infidelity by describing herself as a *"gorilla on steroids."* (27.22) and entirely rejecting her sexual self:

*“I don’t like myself when I am with him. I don’t like the person who I am when I am doing that” (48.21. Jane)*

Louise’s husband also had an affair during their marriage and although they have tried to put it behind them, they have been unable to reconcile sexually. They have not had sex for twelve years:

*“The physical side never really came back (27.3) our relationship has never recovered really from that, in the sense that, we’re not, we’re not lovers. Nothing. There is nothing. (35.5) I don’t have a, I don’t have a sex life I don’t have that” (51.7, Louise)*

Claudia’s husband has lost his libido and seems to be suffering from erectile difficulties. He no longer wants to have sex with Claudia, and she feels that it is because he no longer finds her attractive. She blames the menopause and the indignities of side effects such as vaginal dryness, which she believes are a turn off:

*“maybe I’m too honest about, you know, menopause, and what it does to me, and then obviously, you know, if you get stuff like vaginal dryness and stuff, then he is aware, you know, he can’t em, he is aware of that and I just wonder whether, whether he wants to or not, whether that has an impact you know.” (14.17, Claudia)*

If not having sex is a problem, talking about seems to be an even bigger one. Louise and Claudia have tried to talk to their husbands about sex with little success:

*“He just refuses to speak and says, “so all you want is sex and then you’ll shut up”. It’s very demeaning.” (4.15, Louise)*

*“he’s completely blocking the conversation, “oh you are just firing questions at me” and “I don’t wanna” and its literally like that (...) he is pretty rubbish at talking about sex, (33.17, Claudia)*

In contrast, Jane is the one who wants to avoid talking about sex in her marriage:

*“every time we tried to talk about it, because he tried to bring it up every time, I would just, you know, prefer to chew my own foot off, rather than have that conversation”*  
(23.14, Jane)

Jane and her husband have discussed the idea of having open relationships outside the marriage but neither partner was willing to admit that they wanted to do so openly, even though Jane was having an affair at the time:

*“because we had that conversation again where he said, “do you want to have an open relationship” and I had, I think, been with this guy for about a year at this stage and I just thought “Oooo God” and knew that he wanted the answer to be “no” so I said, “no no no of course not, of course not””* (36.22, Jane)

Claudia believes that simply getting her husband to talk about sex would help:

*“I guess I sort of think if he talked about it, then that would be the magic bullet”* (18.18 Claudia)

Louise asks her husband why he doesn't walk away from the marriage, but the question she really seems to want him to answer is *“what is it that makes you want to stay?”*:

*“I still go on to him, “Look why don't you just walk away?” “What is it?” I said. “You know, this marriage” I sometimes when I've had a few glasses of wine I say, “this marriage is lonely for me”* (12.6. Louise)

Sexlessness and lack of communication create doubt and all three women harbour concerns about betrayal and infidelity. Claudia worries that her husband is less attracted to her because she is ageing, and she fears that he might be unfaithful:

*“I just wonder whether he sometimes looks at me and he thinks “who is this old woman?”* (32.13)

*“and I, I just always think I wonder if men think that ‘cos you know, that’s, you know, they tend to go for the younger model and you just <...>I guess I worry that em, that maybe what’s happening to me is, you, is a bit of a turn off, I guess” (7.17, Claudia)*

Louise is still not certain of her husband’s fidelity:

*“And I keep thinking “Men like sex. Where is he getting it? Is it just him?” and I don’t know...” (42.9, Louise)*

Jane too, has reservations about whether or not her husband’s libido will remain in abeyance. However, it is unclear whether she is concerned in case he might want to resurrect their sex life, or whether she is concerned about potential infidelity:

*“he’s sort of said, he’s over the sex thing now he’s in his sixties, although, so you know, but men can go on forever can’t they?” (6.23, Jane)*

The silence and secrecy surrounding sex, or rather, sexlessness, in the women’s marriages make it a disproportionately loaded issue, and they construct elaborate belief systems about what would be required to fix their marriages. Louise idealises sex as the one thing that would make her happy:

*“I think if we had that extra normal thing in life that every other couple appears to have, I wouldn’t want to go anywhere. I would be really happy because it would feel complete (30.11, Louise)*

Claudia clings to the belief believes that getting her husband to talk about sex would be a “magic bullet”(19.18) yet even as she itemizes physical dysfunctions: “libido” and “testosterone” and “vaginal dryness”, what she really seems to want is emotional reassurance:

*“I just want to hear more about how he feels about, you know, what’s happening to him and what’s happening to me” (14.16 Claudia)*

The uncertainty that surrounds the sexual connection, or its absence, creates space for doubt, and trust is an issue for all the women. Claudia worries about her age and fears being traded in for a “*younger model*”(9.17). Louise’s fears are more concrete because they are based on experience:

*“Maybe he’s seeing somebody else. That’s what I think. I think he is seeing somebody else. (14.11, Louise).*

#### **Theme 4. Stuckness**

This theme encapsulates the dilemma that the women currently find themselves in. The women are processing the implications of their newly emptied nests and assessing the impact that this will have on their already strained marital relationships. Unease within the marriage causes them to explore alternatives, but age and infertility are perceived as significant barriers to the possibility of finding a new relationship. However, sexlessness and lack of communication are barriers to happiness within the marriage. This leaves the women feeling completely stuck.

The women recognise that the children leaving has turned the spotlight back on to the marital relationship. Without the children as an anchor, their marital difficulties are more difficult to ignore, and this forces them to think about what the futures holds:

*“It gets more intense for you as a couple when the kids have gone.” (25.17, Claudia)*

*“I had to have, I sort of thought I can’t bear it if she goes and it’s just me and him in the house. It’s going to be horrendous. It’s going to be the end of us” (1.17, Jane)*

*“Where am I going? What am I going to do when they’ve gone? Do I want to be more part, or not?” (42.16, Louise )*

The idea of togetherness now poses a challenge, so the women are forced to consider the alternatives.

Jane envisages a realistic possibility where she moves into a cottage that they own which is

close to her Mum and her sister:

*“We have a, we’ve got a little cottage down on the seaside in Kent and every time we go there, ‘cos my sister lives down there and my mum lives down there now, and when we go down there now, I just sort of envisage myself in that cottage, just me and the dog, yeah, sort of, yeah, wouldn’t it be lovely?” (33.19, Jane)*

Louise also thinks about an idealized version of aloneness:

*“I could have a lovely apartment in town. I’d have my job and my lovely friends, and I’d be all right with that” (38.24, Louise )*

Claudia’s sense of aloneness is almost spectral. She describes her increasing sense of societal invisibility and wonders if, post menopause, her husband might have stopped seeing her too:

*“usually, it kind of coincides with becoming ‘the invisible woman’ as they all, they call you, when people don’t notice you anymore because you are, yeah, you are not in your prime, em, and I guess, I think, when, if you sort of, if you then suspect that that might be happening with your husband as well, I guess that’s, that’s really painful.” (2.20, Claudia)*

Having allowed themselves to explore the idea of moving away from the marriage, ‘alone’ ness is rejected because the reality of being alone, is being ‘lonely’:

*“recently when Victor has been away I’ve really missed him and really felt lonely, before Lara came back, so I was really sort of pacing round the house thinking “I don’t like this. I don’t like being on my own” ( 40.19, Jane)*

Ultimately, the marriage is perceived to be a safer bet, because even though the children are not at home, that shared investment is an insurance policy.

When Louise contemplates how difficult it would be to find another relationship that would offer her the security that she currently has, she dismisses the idea:

*“I don’t hate what I’ve got so it’s difficult (47.13). I kind of feel safe within that environment because I’ve got the kids with him and when I look at the step-parenting thing that friends have, it is a disaster.” (9.15, Louise )*

Jane believes that time, effort, shared histories, mutual friends and material possessions, investments that cannot be quantified, let alone extracted from the relationship, will be enough to keep her marriage together, even though her husband is living in a state of enforced celibacy:

*“like all married couples, you’re just very enmeshed aren’t you? All of your families are together and once you’ve got a child it’s that, and all of your long term friends and we have a, we do lots of stuff together <...> so we’ve got a lot of that in common and we do lots together and we have lots of good friends and we see them a lot” (32.16, Jane)*

Claudia simply cannot countenance the possibility that the difficulties she and her husband are currently having could mean the end of their sexual relationship:

*“I would never, with us, think this, this could break us, or this would end our sexual relationship.” (11.13, Claudia)*

When they contemplate alternatives, anxiety about the risks involved and how much they stand to lose makes them retreat back to the perceived safety of the marriage. However, the unresolved sexual issues are still a barrier, and so they envisage alternative relationship constructs that might enable them to live both in and out of the marriage simultaneously.

Jane thinks of ways in which she and her husband could live separately, yet remain together:

*“independence yeah, and yet I still want him in my life <...> I always think that the way Helena Bonham Carter lived with the film director where they had their own houses, but they had a separate house with a door in between, that’s my idea of absolute heaven” (1.20, Jane).*

Louise wonders if an affair might fill the emptiness she feels whilst allowing her to hang on to the security that she gets from the marriage:

*“I mean, I could very easily have an affair. I mean, I could because he doesn’t question where I am. I’m busy. He’s busy. He never asks me where I’ve been. (Louise) 1.6. I, I, have, I did meet someone who I’m really fond of, but I can’t go there because I’m not giving up what I’ve got.” (9.15, Louise )*

Claudia’s strategy is denial. If they don’t talk about their sexual problems it is easier to pretend that they don’t exist:

*“I mean I’m, I really I don’t wanna, I hate just talking about it because it makes it, it sort of em, it em, in a way it sort of, it makes it, it makes it real, and I don’t want to, you know, I’m, I’m still trying to fight it all” (28.12, Claudia)*

Ruminating makes the women go around in circles. They recognise that their relationships are dysfunctional, yet they find it impossible to change them from within, or to dissolve them and get out. This leaves them in a constant state of uncertainty, but instead of serving as a catalyst, the ambiguity surrounding the future leaves these women, literally, petrified, unable to move, unable to make a decision, unable to discuss problems, or seek solutions:

*“I’m, I don’t, I’m not sure, I’m, I have, I feel, I’m worried <...> These are all things that are going on in my head anyway.” (10.20, Claudia)*

*“What to do? Do you branch out with something completely new, or do you stick with what you’ve got and make it work?” (9. 21, Louise )*

*“ I had the chance to leave, but I didn’t ‘cos I didn’t want to hurt him and also, I suppose, I was being (11.19, Jane).*

## **Study 1. Discussion**

This study illuminates a very specific time point in the lives of three middle-aged women who are contemplating the current state of their marriages against the backdrop of their recently emptied nests. The interviews began by asking the women to reflect on how their



relationships began. The women's responses suggest that their underlying motivations for marriage were strategic, rather than romantic and not one of the women mentioned the word 'love' or described themselves as having 'fallen in love'.

In Carter's (2013) qualitative study of the language women use when they talk about their relationships, she too found that participants defaulted to talking about practicalities rather than emotions. It is conceivable that for the women in this study, the psychological effort required to reconcile their newly emptied nests with their ongoing marital difficulties, has skewed the women's capacity to recount historic feelings of love and affection. However, when Louise contemplates what might happen if she moves on from her marriage, she talks about the possibility of "*falling madly in love*" as an opportunity to be free. Similarly, when Jane recalls her three-year affair she admits, "*you can't get enough of someone telling you that they love you*". For both women, falling in love is presented as a non-agentic experience: a force beyond their control and therefore, not something that they can control, or be held accountable for.

People understand their past and present in terms of what they believe to be true about themselves (Campbell et al., 2003, Diehl et al., 2006) and they construct narratives about their personal histories as a way of finding meaning in their experiences. However, the remembered self is an edit, a reordering of experience, which is often coloured by the intensity of the ending, or the outcome (Kahneman, 2012). Disclosure can cause people to selectively present the positive and to de-emphasise negative aspects the self (Pasupathi, 2007). It can also be an opportunity to construct attributions that absolve or diminish responsibility.

Human beings are 'sense-making creatures' (Smith et. Al, 2009) and IPA recognises that participants are experts on their own experiences and can offer researchers an understanding of their experiences through telling their own stories, in their own words, and in as much detail as possible (Reid, Flowers, Larkin, 2005). The act of remembering and recounting clearly helps the women to make sense of, and find meaning in their past experiences (McLean, 2005: Pasupathi, 2007). By framing their motivation to marry as either escape, redress, or in Louise's case, a non-agentic fairy-tale, the women are able to construct meaningful accounts that help to explain how they got to where they are now.

The drive to marry is stronger in women than it is in men (Blakemore, 2005) and for all three participants, getting married was synonymous with having children. Indeed, for Jane, pregnancy was actually the catalyst for commitment. Family values, beliefs, behaviours, skills, and parenting styles are transmitted from one generation to the next (Belsky et al., 2012, Beaton, Doherty, & Rueter, 2003) and whether they were positive or negative, all three participants recognize that their own experiences of childhood have had a direct influence on how they mother.

Contrary to popular assumptions, motherhood is not a universally enriching experience and in the early years, the pressure of childcare and the mundanity of domestic duties have a negative impact on marital quality (Kurdek, 1999, Orbuch, 1996). All three women describe how caring for small children created feelings of vulnerability and isolation. Jane, who had “*never ever relied on anyone for anything*” (8.5 Jane) found it particularly difficult to relinquish her successful career in advertising and she hated the loneliness of being confined to the home and the monotony of mother and toddler groups.

Even Claudia, who wanted to be a stay-at-home mum, recognizes that her marriage really suffered in the early years when her husband was working in Europe during the week. She realises now that when she was stuck at home with three children under the age of five her marriage was really “*on the edge there*” (7.8. Claudia).

Jane and Claudia resumed work once their children were at school, but “*motherhood is costly to women’s careers*” (Kahn, García-Manglano, & Bianchi, 2014), and as is common with mothers who return to the workplace, they settled for dull jobs that were less well paid, so that they could have flexible working hours to accommodate childcare. Though it is not something that they considered at the time, this sacrifice would subsequently have a significant impact on how they experience the empty nest.

Still, motherhood gives the women’s lives real meaning. In fact, Claudia describes it as her “*purpose in life*” (17.1, Claudia). It gives them power too. They are in charge of everything in the domestic realm and they determine the timing and number of children in the family (Testa, Cavalli, & Rosina, 2014) too. In fact, when Jane and her husband failed to conceive a

second child, she made a unilateral decision that she was not “*gonna go down any sort of routes and I’m not going to start taking any hormones*” (9.6. Jane).

One of the benefits of consistent maternal investment is that children often side with mothers when their marriages become difficult, however this can create an imbalance in the parental relationship and in the longer term, relationships that violate generational boundaries and exclude one parent, end up weakening the parental and spousal relationship (Hiester & Egeland, 1993). Functional family systems rely on a system of healthy boundaries, which differentiate internal relational subsystems according to a generational hierarchy (Kerig, 2005, Minuchin, 1974). Within this system, adults ordinarily get their needs met within the spousal subsystem, while children’s needs are met within the parent-child subsystem. In families where the spousal subsystem has been disrupted, parents may violate the generational boundary and depend on their children to meet their emotional needs (Shaffer, & Egeland, 2011).

Motherhood provides the women with a *raison d’etre*. Their parenting role validates them, makes them feel needed and useful, as well as providing feelings of closeness and easy communication. However, the intensity of their involvement with their children only amplifies the sense of loss that they experience when their children leave home. Letting go of their maternal identity forces them to find new ways to define who they are within the existing marital structure, but they are not prepared for the feelings of fear, redundancy, and powerlessness that they experience when they contemplate their ongoing marital difficulties.

One of the key determinants of a woman’s response to the empty nest is her level of involvement in the maternal role (Black & Hill, 1984) and women who develop alternative roles for themselves experience less stress during the empty nest transition. Jane recognised that her daughter’s departure for university would be difficult, so two years earlier she had gone back into education and completed her A levels so that she could train to become a dental hygiene therapist. Jane feels that she is moving towards greater independence, and this gives her a sense of agency.

Claudia believes that she would have found the transition easier if she had put more into her career and she wonders why women are informed about the challenges of parenthood, yet no one prepares them for the feelings of loss that occur when the last child leaves home. This

observation merits further consideration, because although the women in this study have a relatively good grasp of the physical signs and symptoms of menopause, they are all, without exception, struggling to process the coincident disturbances of menopause, marital difficulties, and an empty nest.

Midlife is a period that is commonly associated with increased levels of introspection (Degges-White & Myers, 2006) and it can lead men and women to review the quality of important relationships (Sakraida, 2005). For many couples the empty nest can be a time of renewal as they gain more time to devote to their relationship (Umberson et al., 2005) and after the preoccupations of child rearing, it can present the first real opportunity for autonomy and personal growth (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). However, any relationship transition that disrupts routine has the potential to change the way people evaluate interpersonal circumstances (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010), so becoming an empty nester can be a turning point in a marriage (Helms-Erickson 2001). It can help spouses feel more intensely in love, or it can bring to light underlying contempt (Nagy & Theiss, 2013) and become a “trigger event” which forces a personal and marital re-evaluation (Black & Hill, 1984).

Oliver (1982) argued that “*the problem is not the empty nest, the problem is the empty woman*” but for the women in this study, the ‘*empty bed*’ is an equally challenging issue. The finding that all three women are living in sexless marriages was unexpected and demands further investigation. Quantitative research would shed light on prevalence, whilst qualitative study would enable us to understand the ‘cause and effect’ relationship between sexlessness and marital distress.

We know that sexual activity slows over time in most relationships (Edwards & Booth, 1994). Even so, relationship quality is so highly correlated with sexual frequency that it is often used as a barometer of relational satisfaction (Sprecher, 2002). Clinical literature estimates that positive intimate functioning contributes approximately 15% to 20% to a marriage, whereas problematic intimacy holds much more weight, approximately 50% to 75% (McCarthy & Thestrup, 2008).

Sex represents “a fundamental way married people can show their love and care for one another” (Elliott & Umberson, 2008) and both men and women cite intimacy and sexual

gratification as one of the most important aspects romantic partnerships (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994). Sexually satisfied couples are more likely to stay together (Yeh et al., 2006). In contrast, being in an unhappy relationship, having plans to leave, or infidelity, are all correlated with lower levels of sexual interaction (Sprecher, 2002).

Because sex is not something that people talk openly about, people really don't know what normal looks like. The unchallenged assumption that everyone else is at it puts a lot of pressure on people, but in a large scale Australian study which involved telephone interviews with 10,173 men and 9,134 women aged 16 to 59 years, 24.9% of men and 54.8% women said they had no interest in having sex (Richters, Grulich, deVisser, Smith & Rissel, 2007)

A sexless marriage is generally defined as one where sex occurs less than ten times a year and people who live in sexless marriages are more likely to have considered divorce than those in sexually active marriages (Donnelly, 1993). Although most sexual interactions involve a degree of bargaining over 'what, when, and where' (Sprecher, 1998), when these negotiations break down or one person withdraws from the sexual relationship, the other partner is forced into a state of involuntary celibacy.

In sexless, or low sex relationships, the partner who refuses to have sex often has more power and control in the relationship. They get to decide whether or not sex takes place, and the less powerful partner has no choice but to agree with them. Withholding sex, therefore, can be a way of controlling a partner. It can also be a calculated strategy designed to force the other partner to find alternative sexual partners, or end the relationship and in so doing, take the blame for destroying the marriage (Donnelly, 2008).

Sex is the central difficulty identified by all three women, but the inability to talk about sex seems to be an even bigger issue. Intimate communication is critical to sexual function and overall relationship quality (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Kelly, Strassberg, & Turner, 2006) and the reverse is also true. Poor communication skills are related to low levels of sexual satisfaction and low marital quality (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

For the women in this study, sex is more than a barrier to communication. It is the elephant in the bedroom. Louise's husband "*just refuses to speak*" (4.15, Louise) about the fact that they have not had sex for twelve years. In fact, he demeans her for even mentioning the subject.

When Claudia tries to talk to her husband he ends up “*completely blocking the conversation* (33.17, *Claudia*) and she doesn’t press the issue because she is so worried about turning him off and making herself less attractive to him.

Continual rejection is demoralising, and it has a negative effect on self-esteem (Donnelly, 2008). For women in particular, sexual rejection is a highly gendered phenomenon because it is not consistent with conventional expectations that men should ‘desire’ and women should ‘be desired’. For a woman to accept that her husband ‘does not want to have sex’, she must accept that he ‘does not want to have sex with her’, and that constitutes a threat to her ego, her sense of self, and indeed, her capacity to stay in the marriage. In order to remain in a sexless relationship, various coping strategies are employed (Donnelly, 2008). Louise relies on her children and her friends to support her. Claudia has sought help through the church and attended a marriage guidance course with her husband.

All three women are conscious of how much they have invested in their marriages, but they are equally cognisant of the ongoing dissatisfaction that they feel. They ruminate on the possibilities of starting again, but a quick cost benefit analysis boomerang them back into the marriage. Despite the fact that they are employed, solvent and now, to all intents and purposes, child free, there is a sense that they are waiting for someone else to make a decision about whether they should go back into their marriages or come out of them altogether. They exist in a kind of twilight zone, half in and half out of their marriages, not happy enough to engage, not unhappy enough to leave.

The pervading sense of ‘stuckness’ that emanates from all three women’s stories captures the essence of a difficult to define psychological struggle. Their ‘limbo’ state is compounded by a sense of isolation: they are too embarrassed to talk to friends and lines of communication with their husbands have shut down. What is clear is that the absence of an authentic sexual connection, and by association, genuine emotional intimacy, distorts their perspective and makes it difficult for them to evaluate what they actually have within their marriages.

Rusbult & Steiner’s (1983) investment model explains relational satisfaction as a product of high rewards, low costs, and a low comparison level. Greater satisfaction increases levels of commitment, but so does the perception that there are no adequate alternatives. When the

women examine the alternatives, they are all conscious of the fact their age is a disadvantage. Throughout history women have been valued in terms of their sexual attractiveness, whereas men have been valued in relation to their employment status (Maguire, 1995). Although men are seen as more attractive and desirable as they age, women are generally perceived as less attractive (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). In a society that privileges youth, older women are marginalised, and physical signs of ageing and menopause can damage the self-esteem and social confidence of many middle-aged women (Bogolub, 1991).

When Claudia talks about becoming the “*invisible woman*” (3.20), she is correct. Studies of film, television and advertising consistently find that older women are grossly under represented (Kessler, Rakoczy, & Staudinger, 2004). This ‘invisibility’ has a direct influence on explicit and implicit attitudes and beliefs about female ageing. Claudia is very conscious of this. She admits that she is “*worried about, you know, levels of attraction and stuff,*” (40.11 Claudia) with her husband, but she also talks more generally about how “*people don’t notice you anymore because you are, yeah, you are not in your prime*” (4.20 Claudia).

Intrinsic and extrinsic investments can increase commitment by making it more costly to exit the marriage and Jane seems to believe that time, effort, shared histories, mutual friends and material possessions, investments that cannot be quantified, let alone extracted from the relationship, will be enough to keep her husband in a state of enforced celibacy:

*“Like all married couples, you’re just very enmeshed aren’t you? All of your families are together and once you’ve got a child it’s that, and all of your long-term friends and we have a, we do lots of stuff together <...> so we’ve got a lot of that in common and we do lots together and we have lots of good friends and we see them a lot”* (32.16, Jane)

Although the women believe that they are actively trying to think about their options, the more they ruminate, the more immobilized by uncertainty they become. Constant rumination increases marital disaffection, and as the women continually weigh up what they have and what they have lost, they keep their marriages in an unstable state (Kayser, 1993; Kayser & Rao, 2006). Marital dissatisfaction can be a relatively transitory state, but disaffection describes a gradual erosion of emotional attachment and loss of affection, to the point where a partner becomes indifferent to their spouse.

Kayser and Rao (2006) identified three key stages in the breakdown of a relationship. One of the characteristics of stage one is the way that couples experience self-blame and disillusion.

For example, in this study Claudia blames herself for the fact that her husband won't talk to her:

*"I'm too much of a bulldozer and, em, so I haven't quite found the right tone yet" (24.20, Claudia).*

Early-stage disaffection is also characterized by a shift in perception, so that qualities that might once have been viewed as positive are switched to become negatives. For example, Jane revises her opinion of the twelve-year age gap between her and her husband. When she was younger it gave him seniority and presumably, financial security, but now that she is in her fifties, she admits that when they are:

*"Having arguments, I say really helpful things like "you stole my youth" (14.2, Jane)*

In stage 2 of Kayser & Rao's (2006) disaffection model, anger and hurt replace disillusion and disappointment. At this stage individuals may still have some positive feelings for their spouse, but these are constantly challenged by negative thoughts and experiences, and this leaves them questioning the viability of their marriage. They engage in a cost-benefit analyses to assess whether they would be better off apart, but this process requires them to assess barriers to separation. For the majority of younger women, finance, housing, and the wellbeing of children are the biggest obstacles to leaving. For the women in this study, the primary barrier is fear: of loneliness, invisibility, ageing and infertility.

Louise is aware that no relationship comes with a guarantee but because she is no longer fertile, she feels that she would not be able to cement a new relationship by having children:

*"You know, you go off with someone who you fall madly in love with, and you haven't got longevity with, but the sex is good, and you're having fun.... actually, ten years later what's it gonna be like? Will you still be best friends? Will you still have kids that you can share? Because it's not going to be quite the same" (10.9, Louise)*



This relationship between loss of fertility and relational insecurity after the empty nest is one that would be worth exploring in greater depth.

Stage Three is defined by apathy and indifference as feelings are “worn away” and any repair attempts seem to be “too late”. At some point the relationship is deemed beyond recovery, but the decision to end the marriage is still very difficult and couples feel grief and sense of loss for the marriage. Couples who get to this point and cannot split because of finances, children or socio-cultural barriers, experience “*ambiguous loss*” (Boss, 1999), where they remain living under the same roof, but the emotional connection between them is dead.

The three women in this study have not reached the third stage of Kayser & Rao’s (2006) disaffection model, however, two of the participants have been questioning the stability of their marriages for more than a decade now, and neither one of them has sought professional help. Repairing a relationship is not a unilateral process and when communication breaks down it can be exceptionally difficult to achieve a cooperative commitment to counselling because the motivation and buy-in of both partners is required (Fleming & Cordova, 2012). Since men are particularly reluctant to seek help for marital difficulties (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) and they usually only do so when they believe a relationship is going to end in divorce (Eubanks & Córdova, 2009), a comparative study exploring how men experience mid-life marital difficulties would provide a useful extension to this study.

Most people suffering from marital difficulties do not seek professional help. Johnson et al., (2002) found that only 19% of currently married couples had ever participated in marital therapy and only 37% of divorcees had sought counselling before the collapse of their marriages. Couples experiencing sexual difficulties are particularly reticent about seeking help. Moreira et al., (2005) examined the help-seeking behaviours of men and women dealing with sexual problems from 29 different countries and found that 78% had not sought help from health professionals. On average, married couples wait 6 years after serious interpersonal problems develop before they seek therapy (Notarius & Buongiorno, 1992) and by then it is often too late. Counselling has been shown to help couples avoid divorce but the primary reason given by couples who divorce without seeking professional help is that they thought it was too late for counselling to make a difference (Wolcott, 1986).

This study highlights the failure of current marriage guidance counselling services to present as resources for marital support, rather than guides to marital dissolution. Barriers to support seeking such as the reluctance to share personal information could be overcome more easily if there was a concerted effort to destigmatise relationship education and all couples were encouraged to have annual relationship MOT's. Family breakdown has been estimated to cost the British taxpayer approximately £46 billion a year (Relationships Foundation, 2014), yet counselling services are not free, and the cost of relationship support is prohibitive for some couples (Hill, 2012).

Although this study is limited by the small sample size, the findings highlight important areas of further research. The study was further limited by the fact that all the participants were white British and of a similar socio economic and educational status, so comparative work with different ethnicities and socio-economic groups would be required. The study aimed to adhere to the core principles for good IPA research by being sensitive to context, coherent and rigorous (Yardley, 2000, 2008). It conformed to IPA methodology by being transparently idiographic in the way that it presents both the participants voice and the researcher's interpretations, and the researcher was mindful to ground all interpretation in the data.

## Chapter 5. Study 2

### How do women experience midlife divorce? A Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA)

This study builds on the findings of Study 1 which explored how three married women, aged between 50 and 56, made sense of marital difficulties once their youngest child left home. The women in the first study were not happily married but nor were they at the point where they were considering divorce. They were, in effect, still wives, but they were no longer mothers, and the study explores their relationship dissatisfaction through this lens. Study 1 established that the empty nest stage is a very vulnerable period in a marriage because without the distraction, or support of children, shortcomings in the marriage are much harder for women to ignore. Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment model recognises that divorce is not a single event, but a series of transitions which can, over a period of months and years, create additional stress. Study 1 shows that the psychological transition out of a marriage begins long, long, before the implementation of a divorce.

Study 2 is a logical progression from Study 1 in that it follows the experiences of eight women who have moved from marital dissatisfaction to divorce. The study is timely because ONS data shows a 28% drop in the overall divorce rate between 2005 and 2015, but in the same period, the number of women aged 65+ who got divorced increased by 38% (ONS, 2017). Divorce has significant consequences for women at any age, but women who divorce in midlife are more likely to be financially disadvantaged and less likely to repartner. Because the financial implications of midlife divorce can be so profound for women who have been absent from the job market whilst working and who have no pensions, Study 2 also compares the experiences and outcomes achieved by two groups: women with a high income and women with low, or no, income.

Although there is a wealth of quantitative research about divorce, the experiential corpus is extremely limited. This study is important because it investigates the emotional, relational, and financial consequences for middle-aged women who chose to make, or more commonly,

are forced into making, an enormous life transition. The study explores the experience of marital breakdown as well as the psychological, emotional, physical, legal, and financial separations that occur during a midlife divorce and understands these experiences from a phenomenological and interpretative perspective.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is commonly used to explore experiences that are existentially important to the participant, however, the way people respond to major transitions, or life changing events, naturally changes over time. Most studies of divorce capture a single time point, but with a major life transition such as divorce, this can be particularly problematic. If the study is conducted at the time of the divorce, the interviews capture a great deal of hot cognition, but not much else. If a study is conducted years after the divorce has taken place, it fails to capture the emotional intensity of the immediate experience.

Capturing change over time is particularly pertinent to understanding the experience of divorce because the process involves two discrete legal stages. The first stage is the issuing of the Decree Nisi which signifies that the divorce is in motion. The second stage is the issuing of the Decree Absolute which indicates that the divorce is complete. In order to understand the full emotional trajectory of the divorce experience, it was necessary to design a study that could follow the participants journey and explore the many revisions and rationalisations that occurred as they moved through the stages of the legal divorce process. In recent years, longitudinal IPA (LIPA) has emerged as way of capturing dynamic change in order to achieve a better understanding of response trajectories. In LIPA studies, change, or indeed stability, over time is designed into the research process and is a key focus during the analysis process.

## **Methodology (LIPA)**

My research set out to explore the female experience of midlife divorce and having used IPA previously, longitudinal IPA or LIPA was an obvious methodology for me to pursue. Although IPA is now one of the most popular and well evidenced Qualitative research methods, LIPA is still considered to be in its infancy (Farr & Nizza, 2019). However, since 2013, longitudinal qualitative research in general and LIPA in particular has increased

exponentially. In 2019, Farr & Nizza conducted a review of existing LIPA studies which was published in the 16<sup>th</sup> volume of the Journal Qualitative Research in Psychology and found 66 LIPA papers, 75% of which had been published since 2013 (Farr & Nizza, 2019). The majority of the papers (53%) were concerned with themes around patient illness (18), reproduction (10) and psychological distress (&), subjects which have always been a feature of the IPA corpus. However, LIPA is also being used in the creative arts in the fields of music, fashion, and theatre, as well as in sports and education. Not everyone gets it right. Farr and Nizza concluded that 30% of the entire corpus failed to show any connection between time points, or evidence of change over time, which renders the longitudinal study design pointless.

In 2013, Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis published a paper on ‘Developing longitudinal qualitative designs’ in the journal ‘BMC Medical Research Methodology’ describing their experience of a large scale six-year qualitative research programme with cancer patients. They provided a list of recommendations to assist longitudinal researchers. Issues around ethics and researcher wellbeing were particular to their study of end of life, but more general concerns around the timing of interviews and the management of large and complex datasets are extremely pertinent to the LIPA researcher. One of the main problems that they identified in existing longitudinal research was the fact that, rather than focusing on change over time, longitudinal qualitative studies which reported cross-sectional data had a tendency to provide descriptions or snapshots of individual time points. To be valuable, Calman’s team advise longitudinal qualitative researchers *“to ground the interviews in an exploration of processes and changes which look both backwards and forwards in time”* (Calman et al., 2013)

LIPA provides an opportunity to illuminate the meaning of an experience and how that meaning, and its causes, consequences and continuities can change over time. As such, it is an ideal method for exploring life transitions, pathways, interventions, historical events, or any experience where temporal change, or adaptation, are integral to the experience (McCoy 2017). LIPA is concerned with exploring the lived experience of individuals in a specific context and within a longitudinal framework. LIPA’s inductive and idiographic mode of enquiry reveals individual trajectories that show how the participants’ experience dynamically evolves within and between study time-points. LIPA takes an idiographic, phenomenological stance that allows for a nuanced, detailed explication of participants’ experiences, but as the participant moves through the experience, the researcher moves with

them, making sense of them making sense of how they are experiencing the present moment. When the different 'presents' are subsequently knitted together, the researcher has captured a complete transition which provides a new understanding of the participants subjective experience of change across time. From the initial causes to the final consequences, LIPA records key changes and critical moments to provide unique insights into how and why experiences change over time.

In her analysis of the use of qualitative longitudinal research in evaluations, Jane Lewis (2007) identifies four different types of change that researchers must be attuned to. The most obvious type of change is narrative change. This describes how participants stories about their experiences and their emotions unfold over time. The second type of change is reinterpretation. This describes how participants may change their perspective on a particular issue. Something that seems very important at one point may merit less emphasis at another. The third type of change which Lewis identifies is change that occurs within the researcher as they learn more about the participants behaviours, stances, and experiences. The final change is, of course, no change. The absence of change, or continuity, may be a positive or a negative outcome, depending on the particular experience.

When participants are moving backwards in time to relay historic events or experiences it can be very difficult to track the precise point of change. Where possible, in my study, I have confined myself to accounts that are spoken in the present tense. This gives the narratives greater clarity and makes it very easy to pinpoint the change that has occurred.

Farr and Nizza (2019) found that the most meaningful studies were designed to collect sufficient data at key time points in order to effectively capture the dynamic under investigation. Decisions around when, and how often, to collect data were generally driven by the research question, and the longer the study, the greater the number of data collection points. Prospective designs which collect data before and after a life changing event such as childbirth are an effective way of capturing the anticipation before an event and retrospection or reflection afterwards. Longitudinal study designs assume a certain degree of linearity, but individual trajectories are not necessarily linear. In health research for example, Calman et al (2013) note the different conceptualisations of 'clock time and embodied time' for cancer patients, so from a purely practical perspective, flexibility is essential. A researcher who is aiming to capture the experience of treatment within three months of a new diagnosis, may

find that nothing has happened by the time of the interview. It is generally better to use the research question and the existing literature to work out key points where change might occur and to then build flexibility into the study design.

One of the other challenges with longitudinal study designs is finding ways to manage and present large data sets in a way that shows how specific aspects of the participants' experience have evolved and changed between the time-points. Farr & Nizza (2019) identified two core methods for structuring themes. The first could be described as 'themes across time' and involves the progress of a single theme through each time point of the complete study. This method was used by 39% of the LIPA corpus. The second could be described as 'themes within time' and involves the development of a set of themes that relate to a single time point. This method was used by 21% of the corpus of the LIPA corpus. The 'themes spanning time' method uses a case-by-case approach which can help to maximise depth whereas the 'themes within time' approach may be better with larger participant groups as it allows more themes to be discussed.

In what is probably the first ever study in the LIPA corpus, Jonathan Smith's 1994 paper: 'Reconstructing selves: An analysis of discrepancies between women's contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of the transition to motherhood' explores the accounts of four women who were interviewed at four different time points as they made the transition into and beyond motherhood. The study compares the women's accounts of the experience of pregnancy in real time, to their retrospective accounts of the experience once they have become mothers. The study privileges the dynamic role that memory plays in the construction of identity and captures an important shift from 'real time' negativity to post-partum positivity. Once their babies are born the four women's reconstruct feelings of anxiety and uncertainty during pregnancy as feelings of excitement and anticipation. Smith's study is a fascinating example of how, if IPA goes deep, LIPA goes both long and deep. Interviewing the same four women at a single time point would never have succeeded in capturing their complex and antithetical emotional trajectory to motherhood, and of course, in doing so, Smith inadvertently identifies the only reason that the human race has survived to date.

IPA positions the participant's narrative within a wider social, cultural, and theoretical context (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). This is uniquely relevant to my work because

women who were born between 1946 and 1964 have the most complex marital biographies of any other group in the population (Kreider, 2011). In the last sixty years, contraception, unilateral divorce, feminism, equal rights, and the emergence of a more individualistic view of marriage and family life have combined to create a generation of women who often believe themselves to be simultaneously at odds with, yet trapped by, traditional gender role ideologies.

Phenomenological exploration is concerned with “how things appear, or are covered up” (Moran, 2000) and this is also germane to the female experience of mid-life divorce. Divorce is a life-event which legally demands that the individuals involved account for why a marriage has failed before a divorce will be granted, therefore, women’s meaning making when they reflect on divorce has to be considered within that context. The UK retains a ‘fault’ based divorce system and the adversarial nature of the process forces those involved to create an explanation, or ‘narrative’, that will persuade lawyers and eventually, the court, that a divorce should be granted. This story is also disseminated to children, family, and friends as a way to justify, excuse, or defend, the decision to end the marriage. Atkinson et al. (2003) caution against the performative nature of interviews saying that “*People do things with words, and they do things with narratives. They use biographical accounts to perform social actions. Through them they construct their own lives and those of others*”. In the context of divorce, the IPA researcher’s understanding of what is being ‘said’ about an experience adds a valuable layer of interpretation that the participant might be “unlikely, unable or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves” (Smith, 2004).

Divorce is an emotional experience and as Smith and Eatough (2006) point out “*People ‘do’ emotion in just the same way they ‘do’ anything else. They give emotional performances that tell us not about their emotional experience, but about the discursive skills and rules of emotion that they have acquired through language.*” However, although the IPA researcher acknowledges the action-oriented nature of talk, it also accepts that when people talk about their lives, they are making meaning from their lived experience. The LIPA researcher understands that meaning making is not stable and interpretations can be reinterpreted over time.

LIPA is designed to capture transitions so that researchers get a better understanding of the



psychological ‘before and after’ of major experiences. At its most basic this might break down into three distinct stages: anticipation, experience, and reflection. However, the methodology is much more sensitive than that and this study shows how LIPA also provides a unique opportunity to understand how the meaning of what is being said changes over time as people adapt, adjust, or accept their new reality. The three-time point design of this study allows us to track how the women’s accounts of the failure of their marriages move from an initial position of distress and indignance through to a position of greater honesty, authenticity, and accountability.

LIPA is the only research method that has the power to capture change over time in such an experiential way. Although there is no direct route into someone else’s experience, LIPA’s focus on experience and its combination of both empathic and interrogative hermeneutics, coupled with a commitment to capturing longitudinal change, stability, or growth, make it an ideal methodology for a researcher who is attempting to get the heart of a hugely complex legal, emotional, and psychological transition.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

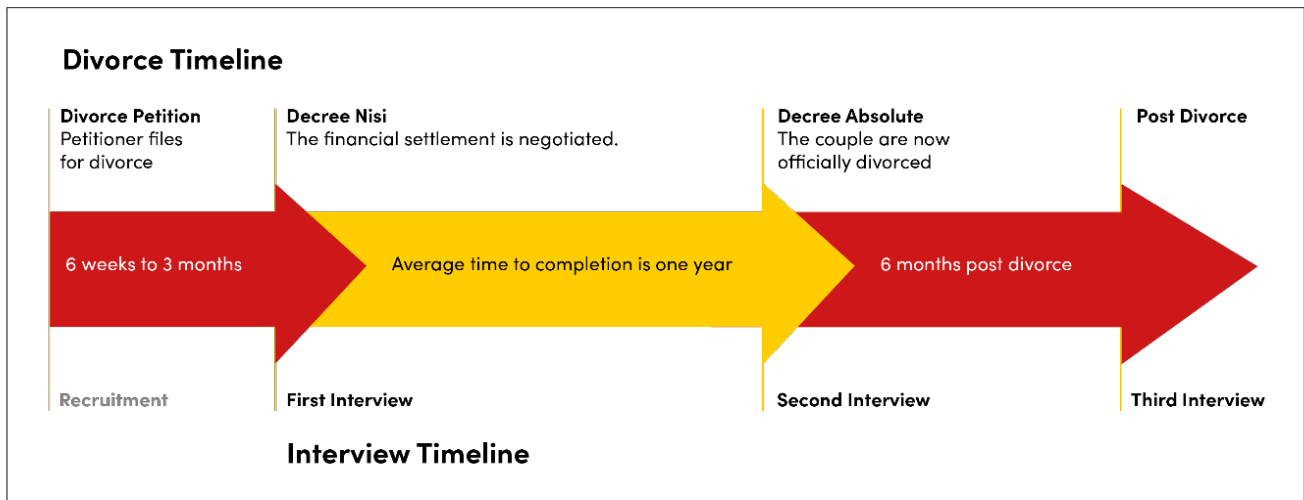
In LIPA, data is collected for multiple cases across multiple time-points, so the volume of data requires a very clear design strategy in order to extract meaningful results. One of the biggest challenges with LIPA is designing a study that captures change at key time points. Decisions on timing and frequency of data collection tend to be determined by the research question and that was certainly the case for this study.

Divorce is a process that has several clearly defined stages. The divorce process starts with one party (the petitioner) sending their Petition to the court. Once the petition has been sent to the court, copies are sent to the other party (the respondent). Generally speaking, it takes two to three weeks for the court to issue the divorce papers and send them out. Once the respondent receives the divorce papers, they must respond by filling in a form called an ‘Acknowledgement of service’ and returning it to the Court within seven days. This form confirms whether or not the respondent agrees to the petition and states their position regarding any claim for costs and the arrangements as set out for the children, if applicable.

When the acknowledgment of service has been returned to the Court it is sent to the petitioner, who can then apply for Decree Nisi. This is the procedure by which the District Judge is asked to consider the petition and other papers and decide whether or not the petitioner is entitled to a divorce. If the District Judge is satisfied that the petitioner is entitled to a divorce, they will issue a Certificate confirming the time, date, and place when Decree Nisi will be pronounced. When the couple get their Decree Nisi they are still technical married, but they have begun the divorce process. This was an obvious point at which to conduct first interviews.

The structure of the divorce process also provided an obvious second time point for data collection. Forty-three days, or six weeks and one day, from the date that Decree Nisi is pronounced, the petitioner can apply for the Decree Absolute, the court document that officially ends the marriage. For my study, Decree Absolute was a natural point at which to conduct the second interviews. Because the legal transitions are well defined and segment into two specific time points, theoretically, it should be easy to design a study that captures the experience of midlife divorce. However, the way that people progress through those transitions varies wildly. The average divorce takes 58 weeks (MoJ, 2019), but solicitors advise clients not to apply for Absolute until all the finances have been settled and the consent order has been approved by the court. Research by Aviva (2018) suggests that money matters take an average of 14.5 months to settle after a split. Although the average is roughly one year, some couples get stuck and are still battling over the finances after six years. Even if I found the perfect homogenous group of participants and began the study at Decree Nisi, there was no guarantee that the group would complete their divorces within the required time frame. The only way to mitigate that risk was to accommodate a degree of attrition at the time of the second interview (Decree Absolute). In order to make provision for the probability that a number of my participants would not complete within the required time frame, I over recruited by 50% to account for attrition at the second time point.

Because divorce is such an emotional process, it was important to add in a third time point when the dust had settled on the divorce and the participants had begun the process of putting their marriages behind them and beginning to build a new life for themselves. The third interviews took place roughly six months after the women had received their Decree Absolute.



*Box 1. The divorce timeline*

## Recruitment

In IPA, “purposive homogeneity” refers to a shared perspective on the phenomenon of interest. For example, a researcher might explore the question “how do people make sense of the experience of having a heart attack?” by conducting interviews with people who have had a heart attack. In this context, socio-demographic homogeneity would not be critical because the phenomenon of interest is the experience of cardiac arrest, treatment within the NHS and subsequent recovery. For my study, socio-demographic homogeneity was more important because culture influences divorce decisions (Furtado et al., 2011). Culture influences who, and how, people marry, and it also affects how, why, and when people divorce.

Limiting my participants to a homogenous sample of white British women avoided the potential problems presented by cultural differences, or language barriers, and to maintain consistency with my initial study of three white middle-aged British females, the participants for my second study were selected to conform to the same sampling constraints. The population of the UK is 82% white, so I was also giving myself the best chance of finding participants (UK Census, 2021). Recruiting participants for this study was never going to be easy. In order to find a homogenous sample for a longitudinal study of female midlife divorce, I needed to locate a group of women who were in the right age group and at exactly the same stage in the divorce process. They also needed to be coming out of a first marriage that had lasted more than twenty years and to have children over the age of 18.

### Who Can Participate?

- Women aged 50-65
- Who have adult children, or who's youngest child is over the age of 18
- Who have received their Decree Nisi, but NOT their Decree Absolute.

*Box 2. Recruitment criteria for participants taken from recruitment flyer (appendix, P.256)*

If I was recruiting for a study which was exploring the experience of heart attacks, or childbirth, I could have gone to a cardiac clinic, or an ante-natal unit, but there is no easy way to locate a group of people who are divorcing. In the absence of a central source, I had to find alternative ways of connecting to women. I spread the word about the study by publishing flyers which specified the selection criteria (Appendix P.250) on divorce support groups that I found through Facebook and the Wikivorce website. There was so much interest in the study that I rapidly realised that I needed a way to filter out women who didn't fit the criteria. I created a simple questionnaire using Survey Monkey (Appendix P. 251) which applicants filled in and returned. I then made posts on Facebook and Wikivorce with a link to the survey and asked women who were interested in taking part in the study to fill it in.

As the responses began arriving, I would read through them hoping that each one was a match, and then sigh with disappointment when I realised that the applicant didn't have Decree Nisi yet, was coming out of a second marriage, or was childless. A total of 82 women filled in the survey, but only twelve women matched all the criteria for the study. The time constraints of the PhD meant that I needed the women to get to their Decree Absolute within about a year of our first interview, so that there would be enough time for the final post-divorce interview six months later.

### Inclusion Criteria

When I first began thinking about this project the government had withdrawn legal aid for divorce and introduced compulsory 'Mediation information and assessment meetings' (MIAM) for couples who wanted to get divorce. The decision was made in response to National Audit Office figures on legally aided mediation which found that the average time for a mediated case to be completed was 110 days, compared to 435 days for court cases on

similar issues. Inevitably, shorter time frames meant less cost. The average cost of mediation for a legal aid client was found to be £535 compared to £2,823 for cases going to court (NAO 2007). After an initial compulsory MIAM session, couples then had the option of conducting their divorce negotiations with the help of a mediator, or alternatively, opting to use individual solicitors.

Mediation didn't take off as the government had hoped. By 2013, only 17,000 couples in England and Wales out of a total of 118,140 had used mediation services during their divorce (MOJ, 2014). With such a low take up, I was aware that the majority of participants would end up following a legal path and my study would be unbalanced, but I still believed that a comparative study of a smaller number of women who used mediation as a route to divorce would be a worthwhile investigation. After just one interview, I realised why the take up for mediation was so low. I'll let Angela explain:

*“The mediators were in my view were completely and utterly useless. This was in a mediation service that I had found had advertised locally in London, where I live. They were registered with National Family Mediation, but they were independents. They were really appallingly awful” (Angela, high Income, T1, P7, L51)*

Angela's experience was echoed by several other women that I spoke to. When I began to explore why it was so unsuccessful, I soon learned that like so many well-intentioned policies, the governments enthusiasm for mediation was not backed up by investment in adequate training for mediators. When you consider the emotional and financial issues at stake in divorce mediation, it is absurd that it takes just eight days to qualify as a mediator with the Family Mediators Association. Angela's description of the ineptitude of the two female mediators that she and her husband were dealing with is almost comical:

*“I felt there were not great skills in terms of managing this very, very difficult situation. They were also not dealing with the practicalities very well. They've got a flip chart up on a piece of, up on a wall and it kept falling down and it was, it was... then we couldn't see it properly because it was too small. Just the whole thing, and it was like, we were wondering, why isn't she just doing it on a piece of paper, you know. It was just, the whole thing it was just amateur” (Angela, high Income, T1, P7, L16)*

One of my participants, Tessa, had a very good experience with mediation, but the crucial difference is that she used a qualified lawyer, who was also a mediator. Although the upfront cost was expensive - £500 per hour – the overall cost of the divorce was significantly cheaper. Tessa was in a position to make that upfront investment, but many of my other participants were not. Interviewing Tessa made it clear that income was actually a more important inclusion criteria than mediation. Having discussed the issue with my supervisor Jonathan Smith, I changed track. Fortunately, I had included questions on income in my survey, so shifting the focus was relatively simple. At the time, the average pay for a woman aged 50 to 65 in the UK was 25k a year so that made a natural threshold for women to qualify for a high-income category. Low income was any amount below that. In the final cohort, I had a neat split of four women who met the criteria for high-income, and four women who were very clearly in the low-income group.

## Interview Schedule

A semi structured interview schedule was devised consisting of three sets of twelve open questions, one for each of the three time points.

### **1. Decree Nisi. Interview Schedule Time 1**

How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Divorce And Does A Woman's Income Impact The Experience, Or The Outcome?: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

#### **Questions about the marriage**

Tell me about how you met your husband  
When did you decide to get married?

#### **Questions about children**

How did you decide to have children?  
What impact did having children have on your relationship?

#### **Questions about conflict**

What went wrong in the marriage?  
Who made the decision to end the marriage?  
If you could go back in time what would you do differently?  
How did deciding (or not deciding) to end the marriage impact how you felt?

#### **Questions about the route to divorce?**

What was the experience of divorce like for you personally?  
How do you feel about the route you took to divorce?  
Do you think that it was the best route for you?

#### **Questions about age**

How did being older impact your experience of divorce?  
Did having an empty nest affect the divorce outcome?  
Have your children been supportive?

#### **Questions about expectations for the future**

How did the divorce meet your expectations in terms of financial settlements, housing, or pensions?  
How do you feel about the future?  
Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Box 3. Interview Schedule 1 which occurred once participants had initiated divorce and received Decree Nisi*

## **2. Decree Absolute. Schedule Time 2**

How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Divorce And Does A Woman's Income Impact The Experience, Or The Outcome?: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

### **The Divorce**

How did deciding or not deciding to end the marriage impact how you felt? What has the experience of divorce and like for you personally?

How do you feel about the route you took to divorce?

What do you think it could be done to improve the experience of divorce? How did you make the decision to go to court if applicable?

### **The Outcome**

How did the divorce meet your expectations in terms of financial settlement, housing or pensions? If you could go back in time what would you do differently?

### **Impact on Relationships**

How has the divorce affected your relationship with your children?

How has to divorce affected your relationship with your extended family? How has the divorce affected you as a person?

How do you feel about the future? Do you feel you have moved on?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Box 4. Interview Schedule 2 which took place once the divorce was finalised and Decree Absolute was received*

## **3. Three months post-divorce. Interview Schedule Time 3**

How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Divorce And Does A Woman's Income Impact The Experience, Or The Outcome?: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

### **The Experience**

How are you feeling now?

How does it feel to be divorced?

How has your life changed since the divorce?

Is there anything you miss about your marriage?

### **The Divorce**

How do you feel about the divorce process?

If you could go back in time what would you do differently? How do think the divorce process could be improved?

### **Relationships**

Have you met anyone else/Would you like to meet someone new? Does being older impact how you feel about the future?

Is your ex in a relationship?

How have your children coped with everything?

### **Settlement**

Has your ex-husband met his obligations in terms of financial settlements, housing or pensions? Do you feel that the outcome was fair?

### **The Future**

How do you feel about the future?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Box 5. Interview Schedule 3 which occurred six months post-divorce*



Participants were given an Information Sheet to the commencement of the interview. The information sheet explained the purpose of the study and made it clear to the participants that their interviews would be recorded and that the data would then be transcribed and anonymised at which point the recordings would be erased. The women were also given a Consent Form to sign which confirmed that they understood and agreed with the information that they had been given. All the interviews were recorded on a voice recording app on an iPhone X and after each interview, participants were debriefed, and consent was rechecked.

<p><b>DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON</b></p> <p><b>INFORMATION SHEET FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Marital Breakdown, And Does A Legal Or Mediated Path To Divorce Impact Experience, Or Outcome: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</b></p> <p>Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. A member of the research team can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.</p> <p>The purpose of this study is to explore how middle-aged women make sense of midlife marital breakdown, and considers whether taking a legal or mediated route to divorce impacts the experience or the outcome. The study will also consider the merits and challenges of taking a mediated or a legal route to divorce and will evaluate both experience and outcome. The research is important because between 1991 and 2011, there was a 73% increase in the number of UK divorces awarded to people over the age of sixty. This unprecedented escalation demands more research so that we can identify potential causes and predictors of mid life divorce. It will also help to clarify how marital breakdown is experienced and managed when the needs of younger children do not need to be given priority, an aspect that is particularly pertinent to women.</p> <p>You have been chosen to take part because you are a female, aged between 55 and 65, have adult children and are going through a divorce. If you take part in the study you will be required to spend about one hour answering questions about your experiences on two separate occasions. The interviews will be tape recorded and then transcribed and anonymised, at which point the original interview will be erased. Your name and that of other people you mention will be replaced with pseudonyms. The interview will take place in your home or a café, somewhere quiet and comfortable that is convenient for you.</p> <p>The benefits of taking part in this study are that you will be adding to psychological research into the experience of divorce for women with adult children. The disadvantages are that you may find it difficult to reflect on a difficult experience. Please note that the researcher is not in a position to give advice or relationship counselling.</p> <p>The results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences, or written up in journals, but any published data will be totally anonymous and there will be no means of identifying you, or any of the participants involved. The audio recordings that will be made during the interview will be transcribed, coded and then destroyed.</p> <p>You have a right to ask any questions regarding the study and even after you consent to taking part, you have a right to withdraw at any time during the interview process and up to 2 weeks after the interview.</p> <p>The project has received ethical approval from the Department of Psychological Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Birkbeck University of London</p> <p>Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)</p> <p>Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: <a href="mailto:suzigodson@mac.com">suzigodson@mac.com</a> Telephone: 07767815835 Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: <a href="mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk">ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk</a></p>	<p><b>DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON</b></p> <p><b>CONSENT FORM FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Marriage: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</b></p> <p>I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.</p> <p>I understand that I will remain anonymous and that all the information given will be used for this study only.</p> <p>I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the study at any time during the interview and for up to two weeks afterwards without giving any reason I also understand I can decline to answer particular questions.</p> <p>I understand that audio recordings will be made during the interview and then transcribed. I understand that the transcript will be coded so that I remain anonymous and the original audio recordings will be destroyed.</p> <p>I understand that all information given will be kept confidential and stored in a password-protected computer or in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher Suzi Godson and the supervisor, Professor Jonathan A. Smith, will have access to the data.</p> <p>I understand that the results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences or written up in journals. However I also understand that published data will be totally anonymous</p> <p>I confirm that I am over 16 years of age</p> <p><b>There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one retained by the researcher for records.</b></p> <p>Name (participant): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Name (researcher): _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)</p> <p>Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: <a href="mailto:suzigodson@mac.com">suzigodson@mac.com</a> Telephone: 07767815835 Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: <a href="mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk">ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk</a></p>
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*Box 6. Information Sheet (left) and Consent Form (Right)*

## The Participants

Divorce is not a linear process and somewhat inevitably, some of the women got stuck along the way. I conducted first interviews with twelve women but by the time of the second interview, four of the original twelve participants were still caught up in financial wrangling. The study proceeded with the eight women who had completed their divorces and received their Decree Absolute within the required time frame. The eight remaining participants

divided neatly into two groups according to income. Four were in the high-income group and four were in the low income group. Through the analysis and the results you will learn about their experience of divorce, but the following brief summaries are a useful introduction to their marital histories and their motivations for marriage.

## High Income Group

### Tessa

Tessa is 58 years old and has been married to her husband for 25 years. They have three sons; the youngest is nineteen. Tessa is a successful civil servant, but her husband has always earned a lot more money than she has. This has created a power imbalance in the relationship. Throughout the marriage Tessa worked full time, but she was also responsible for all the domestic chores and raising their three children. Tessa also managed her husband's diary and she felt, to some degree, that without her, he would never have been as successful as he was. Tessa feels that she was taken for granted and cites numerous examples of her husband's insensitivity, for example, despite promising to do so, her husband never put her name on the deeds of their home. Before she instigated the divorce, Tessa's friend died in an accident and she took some time off work. During that period she decided to end the marriage. She used lawyer mediators in order to keep everything as amicable as possible and her focus was on getting everything sorted as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Tessa knew that her husband would not be willing to sell the house, so Tessa agreed to move into her own much smaller house to ensure that their adult sons could maintain a primary residence at their father's house and experience minimal disruption.

### Valerie

Valerie is 55 years old and has been married for thirty five years. She has two sons and a daughter, all of whom are adults. Valerie married when she was just twenty years old and as her husband was relatively wealthy, she never needed to work. Instead, she did what her mother and her grandmother did before her and stayed home to raise her three children. When her children were in their teens, she began an affair with a family friend. It went on for ten years before her husband found an email chain that revealed everything. He forgave her and they soldiered on, but the marriage never really recovered. Valerie realised that she was due

to inherit some money and she promised herself that she would use it to leave her husband. However, when the time came, she was worried that the inheritance would not be enough for her to sustain the lifestyle she was accustomed to. A fluke financial windfall put paid to those concerns. She hid the money and waited five years until the moment was right for her to for divorce. Her money eventually had to be declared, but during the legal process, it was revealed that her husband was massively in debt and the lifestyle they had been leading was achieved by moving borrowing around. Because Valerie isn't really qualified to do anything and she has not had a job since before she got married, she is in an exceptionally vulnerable financial position. If she doesn't get a good divorce settlement she has no way of supporting herself and because her children are adults, she is not entitled to child support ,or preferential treatment in terms of a budget for housing allocation

## **Rachel**

Rachel is 60 and has been married for twenty five years. She has two adult children a son and a daughter. When Rachel met her husband to be Robert, she was thirty-five and desperate to have a child. In fact, she feels that her biological clock drove all her decision making and she was pregnant within six weeks of the wedding. Rachel's father was a dark illiterate hard working Greek. Her husband was the blonde, educated son of a self-made millionaire, who could not hold down a job. Rachel had an important job and during the entire marriage, she was the primary earner, however she had very little agency within her marriage. Her relationship with her husband was turbulent from the start and she spent years battling emotional and financial abuse. During the marriage her husband had a long standing affair and Rachel realises she should have left then. She stayed with him because he had never worked and so she knew she would be treated as the man in the relationship and she would be forced to sell the family home. When Rachel was recovering from lung cancer, Robert's father told him that he was going to transfer £800,000 of shares into his name. Robert immediately filed for divorce so that those assets would not be included in any settlement calculations. Her ex-husband's family also subsidised his divorce costs, whereas Rachel has been forced to do most of her own representation because she could not afford a lawyer.

## **Angela**

Angela is fifty seven and has been with her partner for twenty years, although they only got married in 2014. She has one son, Freddy. Angela was thirty-three when she got pregnant and

although she knew she wanted to have a baby, she says that she didn't get pregnant on purpose. Instead, she says that subconsciously, she must have known that her boyfriend would make a good father. Her ex-husband was very supportive, but the relationship was complicated by her depression and anxiety. As their son Freddy got older, he became increasingly disruptive and difficult to manage, and that caused a lot of conflict within the family. As soon as Freddy turned eighteen he moved out of the family home, and a few weeks later, Angela's husband also left. Angela blames herself and feels that if she and her husband had the right counselling, the marriage might have survived. After the split her husband wavered several times and might have come back if they had sought help sooner. Angela initiated the divorce process but she does not want to divorce, and if her husband agreed to try again, she would definitely be up for it. She thinks the marriage would work now because she has become 'more the sort of person that her husband would have liked'.

## **Low Income Group**

### **Lindsay**

Lindsay is 60 years old and was married to Frank for 42 years. She has one adult daughter, Tina. Lindsay had a very difficult childhood. Her mother was a gambling addict and she was neglected to such a degree that she and her foster sister were almost taken into care. Lindsay left school with no qualifications and married Frank when she was just 18, despite the fact that he had been both unfaithful and violent to her while they were dating. Lindsay thinks that she married Frank because she was worried that no one else would have her. For Lindsay, marriage was a way of escaping from her dysfunctional family and it was also an opportunity for reinvention. Lindsay wanted to create a family of her own and give her children all the things that she had never had as a child. During the marriage Frank continued to be sporadically violent and emotionally abusive to both Lindsay and Tina, but she never told anyone about it. When Frank suddenly abandoned Lindsay for another woman, Lindsay's world stopped. She became suicidal and lost two stone in weight but she is now having counselling and is taking anti-depressants.

### **Mandy**

Mandy is fifty five years old and has been married to her husband for thirty five years. She has an adult son and daughter. Mandy had a very troubled childhood. Her mother worked to

support the family, leaving Mandy and her sisters at home with their alcoholic father, who sexually abused all three of his daughters. Mandy met her husband-to-be when she was 15. He was a lodger in her parents' house and the decision to marry was strongly motivated by a desire to escape from her father. Mandy had ambitions of being a vet, or an artist. Instead, she married when she was 20 and became a housewife. Although her husband worked for a big company, money was always very tight and there were no luxuries. When Mandy's two children were still toddlers, she discovered that her husband was being blackmailed by a man who had caught him exposing himself to children at a playground. Mandy never told anyone what had happened, and because she kept her husband's secret for 35 years, she firmly believed that her husband would never leave her. When Mandy found divorce papers in the kitchen cabinet in 2019, she filed for divorce before her husband could. Though she initiated proceedings she never actually wanted a divorce and would have preferred to remain married, despite the dysfunctional nature of the relationship.

## **Eva**

Eva is sixty and has been married for thirty years. She has two adult sons. . Eva is convinced that her ex-husband is autistic and at least one of her two sons is on the spectrum. Eva frames her decision to marry in terms of social and gender norms. When she was a teenager in the late seventies, getting married and having kids what girls aspired to. She didn't know that living alone, or staying single, was even an option for women. Her husband moved out seven years ago after he had an affair with his son's school careers advisors. When Eva looks back, she feels that she was depressed during the marriage and that she never felt quite good enough. She feels that her husband was not good for her confidence and his autistic tendencies meant that he could not show empathy. Eva was recently diagnosed with a rare form of terminal cancer. Her diagnosis preoccupies her more than her divorce and she acutely aware of the time she has left. The rarity of her condition makes her feel that at least one aspect of her ordinary life is extraordinary. Eva and her husband remained separated for seven years before he finally asked for a divorce. The lengthy split should have made the process less emotional, but instead, it has dragged up a lot of old feelings and unresolved issues.

## **Lisa**

Lisa is fifty five and has been married for twenty-five years. She has a grown up daughter and a son at university. Lisa met her husband when she was 15. She followed him around like a puppy and put up with being cheated on and dumped repeatedly until finally, at the age of 26, she married him. As a young woman, Lisa was so desperately lacking in confidence that she was grateful that anyone would want to be with her. One day, out of the blue, her husband telephoned her and told her that he was having an affair. They continued to live in the same house, but one day Lisa came back and found her husband in bed with his lover in her daughter's bed. Although her solicitor advised her against moving out of the family home, she could not tolerate the situation any longer. She rented a flat with financial help from her parents and her job in Tesco meant she had a small amount of money to live on. She thought the situation was temporary and the divorce would be over in six months, but her husband had a brain hemorrhage during legal proceedings and so Lisa's divorce took four years to resolve. She has had counselling and is on anti-depressants.

## **The Interviews**

The semi-structured interview process is important because it gives participants freedom to freely explore their own experiences. This enables the researcher to completely enter the life world of the participant and helps to liberate the researcher from the burden of prior assumptions about expected outcomes (Farr, 1982). The same interview schedule was used for each participant, but the participants responses were never guided, or restricted, because their deviations were often more revelatory. For example, in the following extract Tessa is asked what impact having children had on her relationship with her husband. The question elicits a different, more personal insight:

*R: When you look back, can you think about what impact, if any, having children had on your relationship?*

*P "I think if we were comparing, who was impacted more it was clearly going to be me, I mean clearly, You know, yeah, His job has always been more important than my job, And yet he didn't want me to give up work, He's never wanted me to give up work, partly I think, because that made me dependent on him, I think actually mainly, It wasn't to do*

*with my emotional wellbeing and working and continuing to have a demanding, and rewarding career, It's more about 'Oh my God if she gives up work then she'll never go back to work and I'll have to look after her', I honestly I think that's right"*  
(Tessa, High income, T1, P3, L6)

Because the interviews were timed to three specific stages of the divorce process, the questions on each schedule related, in part, to recent events, however each schedule was designed to look backwards, at what had happened prior to the current time point, to explore feelings in the present moment and also to look forward to what was now expected. Each of the three interviews included questions about the marriage as whole (Past): questions about the divorce experience and how they are feeling right now (present) and questions about their hopes and expectations for the future (future).

The interviews took place in a number of different venues. The first interviews were particularly tricky because some of the women were still living in the same home as their husbands and so it was not possible to do the interviews there. The women were located all over the UK, so I travelled the country meeting participants in coffee shops, restaurants, and offices. On more than one occasion interviews were conducted in the participants car as the agreed venue was too noisy. Because the car is a quiet, safe, and very personal space, it actually proved to be an excellent place to conduct the interviews.

Because qualitative research in general and IPA in particular is very 'hands on', rigour, validity and quality are dependent on the skills of the researcher. Face to face interviews mean that the interviewer is tasked with ethical responsibility for the wellbeing of the subject, whilst simultaneously attempting to create rapport and remain alert to personal subjectivity. In LIPA, multiple interviews with the same participant can create a strong bond between the participant and the researcher. Because the priority for the researcher is to remain inductive, there is a tension between the desire to be supportive and the need for a degree of distance. The researcher must be alert to their level of familiarity with the subject and reflexivity is fundamentally important to rigour. This complex interaction between the 'interpreter' and the 'interpreted' is what makes LIPA so rewarding, but it is also one of its greatest challenges.

In this study for example, several participants revealed that they felt suicidal. Although Lindsay made an attempt on her life prior to the study, all the women who were distressed

were being cared for by their GP, were on antidepressants and were also receiving counselling. I kept a diary to alleviate the emotional burden on me and shared specific concerns with my supervisor. After one worrying interview I telephoned the participant to check on their wellbeing and she reassured me that she was fine.

For several participants, the opportunity to talk to a neutral third party through the course of the divorce process seemed to be beneficial. There is evidence to suggest that qualitative longitudinal research has therapeutic potential for participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006, Peel et al., 2006) and that proved to be the case in this study too:

*“It’s been a pleasure. I’ve really enjoyed it it’s been really nice kind of meeting up and just sort of you know talking about myself ha ha. It’s it’s it’s been totally painless and no, really been quite helpful in a way. It’s quite a thought provoking, you know, sort of makes you sort of think about stuff and a bit sort of a way but not too much though, so it’s not intrusive, it’s just the questions you’ve asked have been entirely kind of reasonable and you know anyone who really wants to, I guess, could have stuck entirely to the point, not like me, and answer questions in a very sort of impassive sort of you know detached way so not intrusive questions” (Tessa High income, T3, P45, L54)*

## **The Analysis Process**

Analysis was conducted following Smith’s guidelines for IPA (Smith, 2009), Nizza, Farr & Smith’s (2021) guidance on markers of high quality in IPA, and Farr & Nizza’s guidelines for LIPA (Farr & Nizza, 2019). IPA accepts that people are inherently self-reflective and when faced with difficult life events, they automatically attempt to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith, 2018), however the essence of IPA is its analytic focus. The analytic process is a dialogue between the participant’s account of their experience and the researcher’s psychological knowledge about what it might mean for that person to have those concerns, in that context (Smith et al., 2009).

I avoided the temptation to begin the analyses process until I had all three interviews for each woman. I wanted to be able to capture the women’s experiential transitions and to access how the meaning of specific events, experiences or emotions changed and evolved over time. The analysis was conducted on a case-by-case basis and each individual transcript was analysed



line by line and important issues or good potential quotes were noted in the margins.

Obviously, as I worked through the participants, I was aware of each preceding analysis, but I did my best to approach each participant with an open mind, in order to capture the essential essence of their personal attitudes and unique experiences of the divorce process.

## **Transcription**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim soon after they were conducted while the experience was still fresh in my mind. The transcription process followed the methods described in for Study1 (P.58.) The transcription process is painstaking and time consuming, but the benefit of transcribing each and every word is that it embeds the narrative so firmly in the researcher's brain that it speeds up the process of referring back to the master text to find things later on. Listening to the recorded interviews while reading the transcript enabled me to clarify words, or sentences, that were unclear and to note the emotional resonance of voice tone or responses such as crying. I was also able to slow down the speed of the audio so that I didn't miss non-verbal communication such as long pauses Jonathan Smith believes that "Transcription is itself a form of interpretative activity" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 74) and for me certainly, converting the women's spoken words into text deepened my engagement with the participant. Sometimes, as I transcribed, I became so deeply involved with the narrative that I noticed my facial expressions mirroring the participant's emotional state.

## **Anonymisation**

During the transcription process, all the participants were given pseudonyms. This point marked a psychological shift into a new, more analytical realm. The interviewee who sniveled into a handkerchief, sitting in a Ford Fiesta in the rain, suddenly morphs into a narrative representation. Their bodily characteristics which were so real during the interview, are no longer a feature, and this eliminates a certain amount of noise from the process of analysis. For me, giving the women a pseudonym created a little distance and that made it easier for me to make sense of the woman as she made sense of her essential experience. The process helped me to escape my "natural attitude" and adopt a phenomenological attitude, so that I was better able to distil the essential essence of their experience.

## **Immersion**

The first step in the analytic process involves immersing oneself in the original data. This meant that once the three transcripts for an individual were complete, I engaged in several more rounds of reading and re-reading. Although I waited to complete all the interviews before beginning the analysis process, each interview was tackled separately so that I could completely commit myself to understanding that woman's experience at that particular time point. In reading the transcripts certain obvious points jumped out at me but I resisted the temptation to begin annotation until I had a much better understanding of the nuance in the text. That was a good strategy because often it became clear that the very obvious transitions were less significant than more subtle psychological shifts.

## **Formatting**

Once the transcription process was complete the interviews were transferred into an A3 format with columns either side of the central text. With so much data, it was vital that annotation was extremely precise, so quotes could be quickly located once they were separated from the original transcript. Each line of text was numbered so that all quotes could be easily accessed through a combination code using both page and line numbers. The two columns to the left of the text were assigned to descriptive and linguistic notation. The two columns on the right were assigned to conceptual observations and emerging themes.

## **Initial Notation**

Line by line analysis is a very structured way of unpacking the meaning of what is being said. It draws attention to the very specific ways that individual participants use language to make sense of themselves and their experiences. My initial notes were often focused on describing the content of what the participants were saying and the subject of that particular piece of conversation. With so much data, it was helpful to simply pull out key points in a different colour.

In Box 7, the blue text in the original transcript identifies the central conflict that Valerie is describing. Valerie talks about how her husband's temper made life very difficult, but it wasn't constant, and she didn't feel that she was in danger, so the fear went in and out of her mind. Although she and her husband still had lots of good times together, she never knew

how long it would last before he lost his temper again. She describes fantasising about leaving him but then deciding that she was not desperate enough to go. She is immobilised by her situation and can't decide what she needs to do.

High Income Group: Valerie Time 1. Decree Nisi						
	Descriptive	Linguistic	Original Transcript	Conceptual	Emerging Themes	
57			57 P. Well I wasn't contemplating anything. I just knew that, I re-	57	57	
58	She fantasises		58 member thinking fleetingly how nice it would be if I could actually	58	58	
59	about leaving		59 take my half and leave him.	59	59	
60			60	60	60	
61			61 But then it went in my brain as much as out of it again. It	61	61	
62			62 wasn't happening. I wasn't in danger, I wasn't desperate. I was	62	62	
63	Resignation:	resigned x 2	63 resigned. Yeah. I was resigned but I was still, we still had a good	63	63	
64	that was her lot		64 time. We still had good lots of good times.	64	64	
65	Still had lots		65	65	65	
66	of good times		66 I never knew how long they were going to last until the temper	66	66	
67	but there was		67 would come back and I'd do something, or not, even not do	67	67	
68	uncertainty,		68 anything and he was ruled by insecurities, ruled by insecurities	68	68	
69	I never knew		69 and lying and.	69	69	
70	how long they		70	70	70	
71	were going to		71 OK. So we moved and then we moved to a lovely much bigger	71	71	
72	last		72 house in High Barnet in Arkley. And I thought maybe he would	72	72	
73			73 relax a bit.	73	73	
74	he was ruled by		74	74	74	
75	insecurities and		75 You know a lot of our friends are pretty wealthy. And he was	75	75	
76	lying		76 always trying to keep up with them. It was always a big thing for	76	76	
			him, not really for me. We all like nice things. But it was, he was			
			always trying to make out we were this, and he was that, and we			

Box 7. Initial exploratory noting for Valerie at Time 1

The linguistic column explored how the participants used language and this provided very useful insight into the individual characters of the participants. Some of the women used language in a precise or restrained way; others were much more dramatic. Because the women in this study were from all over the UK, they often used colloquialisms and unusual expressions that were unique to where they lived. All the women played with tense, metaphor, repetition, analogies, key word strings, pauses and hesitations to make sense of complex ideas, opinions, or concerns. In this example from Valerie, she uses the word resigned twice, in quick succession.



Analysing exploratory comments to identify emergent themes involves working with discrete sections of the transcript, so the original ‘whole’ becomes a set of parts. Although this fragmentation takes the researcher further away from the participant, the end result is a more concise version of what is being expressed. Whereas the initial notation feels loose and observational, the emergent themes are more concrete. They capture a specific aspect of the participants experience which simultaneously integrates the researchers understanding of it. By marrying the participant’s experience with the analyst’s interpretation, the emergent themes speak to the psychological essence of the experience.

In the example illustrated in Box 8, we can see how a specific theme emerges from the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual understanding of Valerie’s transcript. Valerie describes how she was half in and half out of her marriage for years. She fantasised about leaving, but she wasn’t desperate enough to do it. Her husband was volatile, but she wasn’t in danger. They lived in a big house, they had wealthy friends and they still had good times. In contrast, divorce was an unknown quantity. Valerie is immobilised by the ‘push’ of her unhappiness, and the ‘pull’ of her need for security and the conceptual interpretation of this is the emergent theme; ‘The Not Bad Enough Marriage’.

High Income Group: Valerie Time 1. Decree Nisi								
	Descriptive	Linguistic	Original Transcript		Conceptual		Emerging Themes	
57				57		57		
58	She fantasises about leaving	58 My half -	58 P. Well I wasn't contemplating anything. I just knew that, I re-	58		58	<b>The 'not bad enough' marriage</b>	
59		59 already thinking	59 member thinking fleetingly how nice it would be if I could actually	59		59		
60		60 in terms of	60 take my half and leave him.	60		60		
61	Resignation: that was her lot	61 financial settle-	61 But then it went in my brain as much as out of it again. It	61	The marriage is not bad enough for her to leave.	61	Toxic and abusive but they still have good times (Valerie, T1, P5, L61)	
62		62 ments	62 wasn't happening. I wasn't in danger, I wasn't desperate. I was	62				62
63		63 resigned x 2	63 resigned. Yeah. I was resigned but I was still, we still had a good	63				63
64	Still had lots of good times but there was uncertainty.		64 time. We still had good lots of good times.	64	She sets the bar pretty low. It seems like her benchmark for leaving is physical violence and desperation. Good times. Bad times.	64	She is conflicted to the point of immobilisation	
65			65 I never knew how long they were going to last until the temper	65				65
66			66 would come back and I'd do something, or not, even not do	66				66
67	he was ruled by insecurities and lying		67 anything and he was ruled by insecurities, ruled by insecurities and lying and.	67	thinks moving house might make him relax	67	It (leaving) wasn't happening. I wasn't in danger, I wasn't desperate. I was resigned. Yeah. I was still, we still had a good time. We still had good lots of good times. (Valerie, T1, P5, L60)	
68			68 OK. So we moved and then we moved to a lovely much bigger	68				68
69			69 house in High Barnet in Arkley. And I thought maybe he would	69				69
70			70 relax a bit.	70		70		
71			71 You know a lot of our friends are pretty wealthy. And he was	71		71		
72			72 always trying to keep up with them. It was always a big thing for	72		72		
73			73 him, not really for me. We all like nice things. But it was, he was	73		73		
74			74 always trying to make out we were this, and he was that, and we	74		74		
75			75 were the other, and these were good friends, I always wondered	75		75		
76			76 why he had to. I mean that was just h	76		76		

Box 8. Emergent themes. In this image, the theme of ‘The not bad enough marriage’ is emerging for Valerie.

At the end of the analysis process, the fourth column of each transcript was populated with countless themes which were then transferred to a new A4 document with supporting quotes which were tagged with the participant's pseudonym, income group, interview point, page number and line number. Initially, the themes and supporting quotes were transferred chronologically in the order that they appeared in the transcript, but once they were in a separate document, the links between themes became easier to see. I saved the document with the original themes and supporting quotes as a master template and began copying sections that seemed to relate to each other into a separate document. Where quotes benefitted from short edits, this symbol <-> is inserted to mark where the redaction has been made. This process of clustering emergent themes allowed me to see clear connections and points of convergence and divergence within the emergent themes.

For Valerie at Time 1, I ended up with four pages of emergent themes which were loosely gathered together under very general headings. In this example themes around the tactics Valerie used to remain in the marriage are grouped as 'Maintenance Strategies: Ways to stay Married'. The emergent themes are a very accurate distillation of Valerie's much larger narrative and they capture the extent to which Valerie actively tried to keep the marriage going. From ignoring obvious red flags, to sweeping issues under the carpet, to having a long-term affair with a neighbour who was also married, and equally unwilling to leave his family, Valerie effectively immobilised herself. The complete tables for Valerie are in the Appendix on pages 254 to 262.

A longitudinal IPA Study exploring how women make sense of the experience of divorce in midlife?	
Valerie. Time 1 Themes. High Income Group. Decree Nisi	
<b>Maintenance Strategies: Ways To Stay Married</b>	
<b>Knowingly ignoring red flags</b>	<p>I loved him. I knew I did want to marry him I just wasn't too sure of it then and I knew that I would probably lose him if I didn't. (Valerie, T1, P2, L8)</p> <p>I mean in hindsight the warning signs were all there but I was in love. I was very, very young and I loved him. I wanted to be with him I wanted to be with him. I wanted to be with him even though I saw the danger. &lt;-&gt;The temper the temper and the. If I didn't go along with what he said. The not talking to me and ignoring me for a day or two and. The criticisms and those kind of things. (Valerie, T1, P2, L15)</p>
<b>Bottling things up, to keep the peace.</b>	<p>Things had always been bottled up. I guess. Every time I tried to talk to him he'd scream at me and say I'm not talking about this I don't want a row. I don't want a row. So it would be bottled up and unresolved. (Valerie, T1, P5, L2)</p> <p>They were swept under the carpet. Things were never really resolved between me and David. I don't think, I think that was a great... I just let it go I let it go because otherwise it was taken out on me, it was taken out on the children as in, we'd have a weekend plan to do something with the kids. And then he'd get in a temper and he'd say Right that's it we're not going out on Sunday that's it. And you can and then the abusive language would come, kind of thing. And I wanted to take my kids out and I didn't want to be screamed. So yes I spent a lot of those formative years letting things go. (Valerie, T1, P4, L53)</p>
<b>Having an affair, in order to stay married</b>	<p>it was such an equal relationship. We were both in the same boat. &lt;-&gt; He was also married with children. (Valerie, T1, P8, L17)</p> <p>There was no way I was going to leave my family or break up my kids for him, and vice versa. And it went on, and it went on, and it went on. (Valerie, T1, P6, L32)</p> <p>Because we couldn't live without each other, in the context of that affair. I still wasn't leaving my husband for him and vice versa. I don't know, take that with what you, I don't know. I don't know what a psychiatrist would say about it. I just don't know. (Valerie, T1, P8, L55 )</p>
<b>The not bad enough marriage</b>	<p>I just remember thinking &lt;-&gt; how nice it would be if I had enough money, you know, to sort of, leave him. But it wasn't money that was the issue. It was, but obviously my kids were young and that was always the priority. I wasn't going to break up my family. (Valerie, T1, P5, L21)</p> <p>I remember thinking fleetingly how nice it would be if I could actually take my half and leave him. But then it went in my brain, as much as out of it again. It wasn't happening. I wasn't in danger, I wasn't desperate. I was resigned. Yeah. I was resigned but I was still, we still had a good time. I never knew how long they were going to last until the temper would come back and I'd do something, or not, even not do anything and he was ruled by insecurities, ruled by insecurities and lying</p>
<b>Hiding it on the outside. Being eaten away by it on the inside.</b>	<p>We had a good summer holiday actually and the kids, we hid it. We hid it. We hid it as much as we thought we had hidden it. Who knows. These things you know, they say they eat away. They eat away. (Valerie, T1, P10, L3)</p> <p>I think the humiliation of everybody finding out, you know, I'd had an affair. I cheated on him for 10 years. Thats quite humiliating for him. I think he wanted to keep that all from his parents, from other people, and you know, so he never told anyone. (Valerie, T1, P7, L7)</p>

Box 9 Emergent themes for Valerie grouped under the heading “ Maintenance Strategies; Ways to stay married.

Extracting the emergent themes and transferring them into a smaller format allowed me to weed out instances of repetition or crossover. At this stage, themes that didn't fit, or that felt like outliers were dropped, but for Valerie at Time 1 alone, I still had four pages of emergent themes. IPA is concerned with how people make sense of events, experiences or transitions that have experiential or existential significance. Because these experiences often involve major transitions or life changing circumstances, IPA tends to generate very strong data.

However, with interviews at three time points, it was imperative to let go of data that didn't contribute to the shared story of change, no matter how exciting or meaningful that data was in its own right. After some ruthless pruning I cut the data in half. Even so, I knew that 12 emergent themes was too many, but at this stage I needed to see what would happen at subsequent time points before I made final decisions about what data I could afford to lose.

A longitudinal IPA Study exploring how women make sense of the experience of divorce in middle?		A longitudinal IPA Study exploring how women make sense of the experience of divorce in middle?	
Valerie. Time 1 Themes. High Income Group		Valerie. Time 1 Themes. High Income Group	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The not bad enough marriage: she wanted to leave but she was worried about her kids and the financial consequences</li> <li>Winning the lottery when her kids were older gave her the courage to divorce</li> <li>Financial fear: Her husband has lied about his finances</li> <li>Uncertainty: She can't afford to take him to court</li> <li>Her future feels very uncertain</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Her health is a problem</li> <li>She doesn't want to lean on her children</li> <li>Her friends are not being supportive</li> <li>She has no qualifications and doesn't want to get a job because it might impact the settlement</li> <li>She is petrified about money</li> <li>She believes she would not have had an affair if her husband had been nicer</li> <li>Her lover will not leave his wife</li> </ul>	
She married too young	I feel, I feel, I got married too young. That I do feel. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P20, L13)	Her health is a problem	I have arthritis in my ankles that's a problem. I mean I don't want to be poor. So money is a huge consideration. Huge. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L39)
The not bad enough marriage	I just remember thinking <=> how nice it would be if I had enough money, you know, to sort of, leave him. But it wasn't money that was the issue. It was, but obviously my kids were young and that was always the priority. I wasn't going to break up my family. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P5, L21)	She is afraid of being a burden on her children	I'm worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I'm very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I'm not terribly successful as they are that you know. I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we're very close to that. It's all based on fear (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L63)
Money matters: Winning the lottery gave her the confidence to file for divorce	I'm afraid money is a huge consideration in my wanting to leave and my situation now. The money gave me the freedom, it gave me the freedom to have the power over him in that I wasn't going to be controlled by him and the money. When I left it gave me the power to be on top of finances, know I was going to be okay. Therefore I could finally leave him. So it does come down to money. Aside from when my kids were younger and not wanting to break that down, it has come down to money. Unfortunately. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P24, L18)	her friends don't want to listen	I talk to my friends but they don't really want to hear that much. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L3)
Financial stress: Her husband has lied about his financial situation	my husbands done me up like a kipper with the finances. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P14, L9)	She has no qualifications and no experience	I've got no qualifications <=> I've not worked for 30 years. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)
	I'm very scared now. You know I am scared now. I wouldn't have been scared had I not been lied to about the money. The money has taken on a whole new difference to me <=> Because of the financial situation I'm now terrified. And I didn't think I was going to be. With all of the of the good fortune that I'd had, in inheriting half of it from my mother and winning, winning that money, <=> I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now, I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L55)	But she doesn't want to work because it might negatively impact her settlement	I'm not getting a job until the divorce comes through <=> cos there's no way that I'm having a job of mine taken into a divorce settlement. <=> even if I was lucky enough to be offered a job now I certainly don't want it to be part of the divorce. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L25)
Fear of what is coming: The decree absolute feels like an accident waiting to happen because she is running out of money	I feel like I can see, see this collision coming. And it's just getting nearer and nearer. <=> I think it has to be resolved within the next year because I can carry on this overdraft facility till next November. And I'm and obviously this is guaranteed against my investment. So I'm not, I'm not at the dangerous stage that I don't have any money at all and how am I possibly going to pay off this off without a job (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L41)	She is petrified about money	With all of the of the good fortune that I'd had, in inheriting half of it from my mother and winning, winning that money, albeit David was going to get it off me in different ways. I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L59)
		She blames her husband for being so abusive that she was driven into the arms of her next door neighbour	I'm very angry with him that he's lied and out me in this uncertain position. That's where my anger comes. I'm angry at him for putting me in the position that he destroyed all our love. I know I had an affair. He's angry at me for cheating because I cheated on him for 10 years allegedly. I understand that. But as far as his future relationships are concerned, that's not part of my anger. My anger is because of what he's done to me. And because I was in the position that I allowed an affair to happen, and because he was so controlling and mentally abusive and financially abusive. I am angry at him. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L17)
Uncertainty: She feels like she is in limbo because her future is now so uncertain	I'm in limbo. I need to know what's going to happen even though I'm terrified of what that might be and that I don't know what to say. The expectations are that I'm going to have to sell this flat because I can't, I won't be able to afford to live here and have a life. That's what my expectations are. But I'm desperately hoping against everything that that doesn't happen. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L46)	Her lover will not leave his wife	he doesn't want to leave his wife. Whereas I wanted to, his life with Lucy was not so horrendous as mine was with David. Therefore he didn't want to leave his wife. I know he loves me. You know, really, I love him but maybe just not enough. Yeah maybe not enough. <=> Then we missed each other so much we started again in May. And I decided I don't have to look at it like that. Yeah I can look at it from, well I'll see him where, see him when we both can. And if I meet someone that I really kind of, you know, maybe there's something there. Then I would never see. It's just a different way of looking at it. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P19, L1)

Box 10. Two pages of emergent themes for Valerie at Time 1 with a brief summary at the top.

When the analysis for Time 1 felt robust, I moved on to the data for Time 2 and repeated the step by step process that I have outlined for Time 1. I began with exploratory notation which was descriptive, linguistic and conceptual until I was able to extract a set of emergent themes. These themes were then clustered and re-clustered, until I had identified a set of super-ordinate themes which felt like an accurate reflection of the participant's experience at that time point. Once Time 2 was complete, I moved on to Time 3 and repeated the same process.



## Chronology

The prospective design of this study meant that the interviews occurred at three different time points. The first interviews were conducted just after the women had received their Decree Nisi. They were at the very beginning of a daunting legal process and the process of transcribing those first interviews provided an obvious window into the women's psychological state. During the transcription process I realised that chronology was going to be problematic because at the time of the first interviews the women were still legally married, and they were, understandably, still making sense of how they had ended up in the situation they now found themselves in. Although I was focusing on the divorce process, it was important for the participants to be able to recount the entire history of their marriages.

The initial interviews were the longest and the most emotional because the women were cramming thirty years of history into a single conversation but most of the events and experiences they were referring to had happened in the past.

The fact that the women were all following a roughly similar trajectory through the same experience meant that there were some predictable patterns to the shape of the subsequent interviews. At Time 2, the women were very much more focused on the legal process, the financial settlement, and the outcome of the divorce. Many of them had been negotiating for over a year and had been completely pre-occupied by the legal process. These interviews were often shorter in length and although the women were universally relieved at finally having closure, they were exhausted and unable to think about the future.

By Time 3, the women were just beginning to emerge from the fog of the divorce process and there was a sense that they were finally beginning to look forwards rather than backwards. These interviews occurred roughly six months after the women received their Decree Absolute and in these conversations the women flipped between historic events and related emotions, and their current circumstances and state of mind. One of the problems with this was that it made accurate sequencing much more difficult. Early experiments with sequencing revealed that it was not possible to clearly capture change in a participant's emotional state using quotes that mixed tenses. In order to ensure that the study accurately captured how the women were in the here and now it was necessary to impose some grammatical discipline on the analysis.

In this quote, for example, Valerie talks about her emotional state in the past tense. She switches briefly to the present tense and then reverts to the past tense.

*“I was shocked and filled with this terrible fear of, oh my God, what am I going to do kind of thing. I realise hearts won’t bleed when they see where I’m living, but everything’s relative you know, to your life and everything, it’s a question of being able to afford to stay, you know, how did it go, it was very, I was very anxious (Valerie, High Income, T2, P22. L30)*

In contrast, here Valerie is talking about her emotional state in the present tense. The immediacy of her words makes this quote so much more resonant.

*“I’m worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I’m very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I’m not terribly successful as they are that you know. I get very, very bad days when I’m in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I’ve left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we’re very close to that. It’s all based on fear” (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L63)*

The decision to use quotes which were only spoken in the present tense meant losing a lot of interesting data, but ultimately it became a useful filter and the resulting analysis provided a more accurate reflection of the woman’s psychological state at that time point.

## **Change over time**

Each interview was analysed in its own right with no consideration given to the findings in the previous interviews. Once I had a complete set of emergent themes, I began looking for patterns of distinct change in a single phenomenon that appeared in each of the three time points for that person. This process meant finding meaningful themes and quotes that were obviously connected and could demonstrate temporal change or illustrate the participant’s progression through the divorce process. At this point, emergent themes such as “The not bad enough marriage” (Valerie) had to be abandoned because they were only relevant at a single time point.

Identifying obvious associations between specific issues that were discussed across the three time points was an exciting process. It provided unarguable evidence of psychological change and confirmed the unique value of longitudinal investigation.

If we look at Valerie, we can see that at Time 1, one of her emerging themes was the fact that she had no academic qualifications and she had not had a job for thirty years:

*“I’ve got no qualifications <-> I’ve not worked for 30 years”.*  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)

At Time 2, Valerie returns to this theme and a transformation has taken place. In the twelve months since our first interview, she has started her own business and it has been really successful. Her confidence has grown immensely as a result:

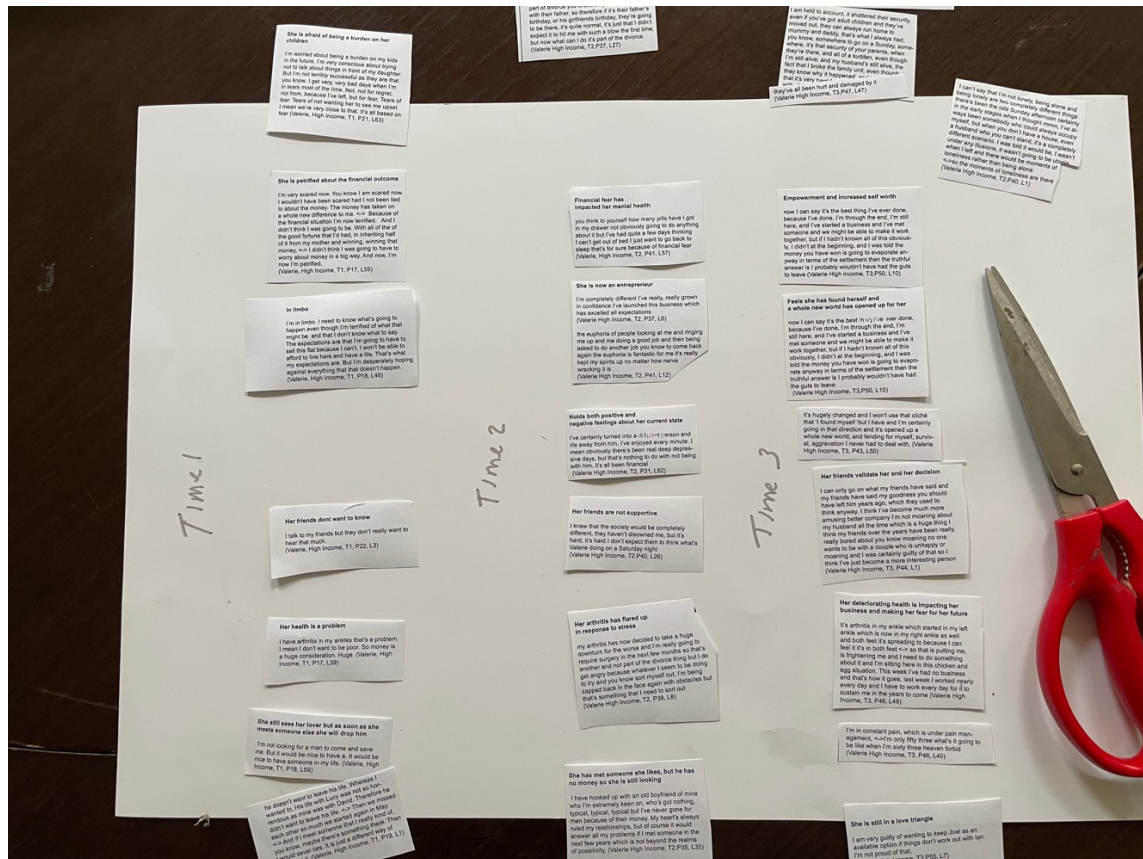
*“I’m completely different I’ve really, really grown in confidence I’ve launched this business which has excelled all expectations”*  
(Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)

By Time 3, Valerie is emphatic that leaving her marriage is the best thing she has ever done. She has survived the divorce, started a business, and met a new partner. Valerie is not, however, a victim of hindsight bias. She knows that if she had realised how hard the divorce would be, and how much money she would lose, she probably wouldn’t have had the guts to leave:

*“now I can say it’s the best thing I’ve ever done, because I’ve done, I’m through the end, I’m still here, and I’ve started a business and I’ve met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but if I hadn’t known all of this obviously, I didn’t at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn’t have had the guts to leave”* (Valerie, High Income, T3,P50, L10)

Watching the transitions emerge across the three time points was powerful. The process involved looking for direct relationships between the issues the participants were discussing across different time points. Although most of my work was done on a computer, I used a

much more old-fashioned method to find these transitions. I printed out all the quotes for each time point on A4 sheets and cut them up. On a large table I laid them out and moved them around until I could start to see associations emerging. I found it much easier to identify what was changing by being able to see everything at once. This just wasn't possible on a computer screen.



Box 11. Searching for change over time with themes for Valerie across three time points.

In Box 11, you can see how being able to freely move the blocks around is a more efficient way of following a theme laterally through the three time points. The blocks at the top tell a story of agency and show how Valeri became stronger and more confident through the course of the divorce. At Time 1 she is terrified. She feels powerless to do anything to stop the car crash that is hurtling towards her. At Time 2 Valerie is divorced and she is more confident. Having had to battle through the divorce process has made her stronger. By the third interview, Valerie is still facing lots of challenges but she doesn't doubt herself in the way that she used to and she is doing things she never thought she would be able to do. In Box 12, you can see how this theme has been isolated from the rest of the dataset and now forms a standalone theme which is confirmed across each of the three time points.

**From passive to agentic. Valerie, High Income.**

Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
<p><b>I'm in limbo.</b> I need to know what's going to happen even though I'm terrified of what that might be and that I don't know what to say. (Valerie, High Income T1, P18, L46)</p> <p>I can't plan anything. <b>I can't do anything.</b> (Valerie, High Income T1, P21, L12)</p> <p><b>I'm waiting for this car crash to happen.</b> Yeah I feel like I can see, see this collision coming. And it's just getting nearer and nearer. Yeah. (Valerie, High Income T1, P21, L41)</p>	<p><b>I've found the confidence</b> who'd have thought I could tackle obstacles that have been thrown my way (Valerie High Income T2, P38, L50)</p>	<p>facing lots of challenges, and being continually outside my comfort zone which I never was and, I used to think I can't do that, I don't know about this, and I couldn't possibly do that, and all of those things I do, I don't think to myself, I do think I can't do it, I don't have a lot of choice sometimes, and I just have to go ahead and ring this person and make that uncomfortable phone call, and hang on the phone for hours, and deal with aggravation, <b>and doing these things I never thought I'd be able to do,</b> (Valerie High Income T3,P43, L58)</p>

Box 12. Change over three timepoints for a single theme for Valerie

### Superordinate themes

Producing a set of super-ordinate themes that had a very clear and defined relationship to each other, in the present tense, across the three time points, created a much more manageable dataset and made it easier to see how a single phenomenon changed over time. The process of refining related emergent themes so that they demonstrated an obvious change in the same phenomenon introduced the issue of valence. Linking the emergent themes demonstrated that change had happened, but I also needed to show whether that change had been positive or negative?

In the example we have just seen, Valerie transitions went from a negative position (*"I've got no qualifications"* Valerie) to a very positive one (*"I've started a business"* Valerie). Other transitions went from positive to negative, or they did not change between Time 1 and Time 2 but change occurred at Time 3. When you are looking for longitudinal change it might sound counterintuitive to focus on phenomena that remain stable, but it can be just as revealing.

In Box 13, you can see Valerie's final superordinate themes, divided according to the direction of the valence. Four are positive, two are negative and one is neutral. The super-ordinate theme that does not change is one of the most interesting because it relates to the fact that Valerie had a long term affair when she was married, and just six months post-divorce she is already juggling a new boyfriend and an old affair.

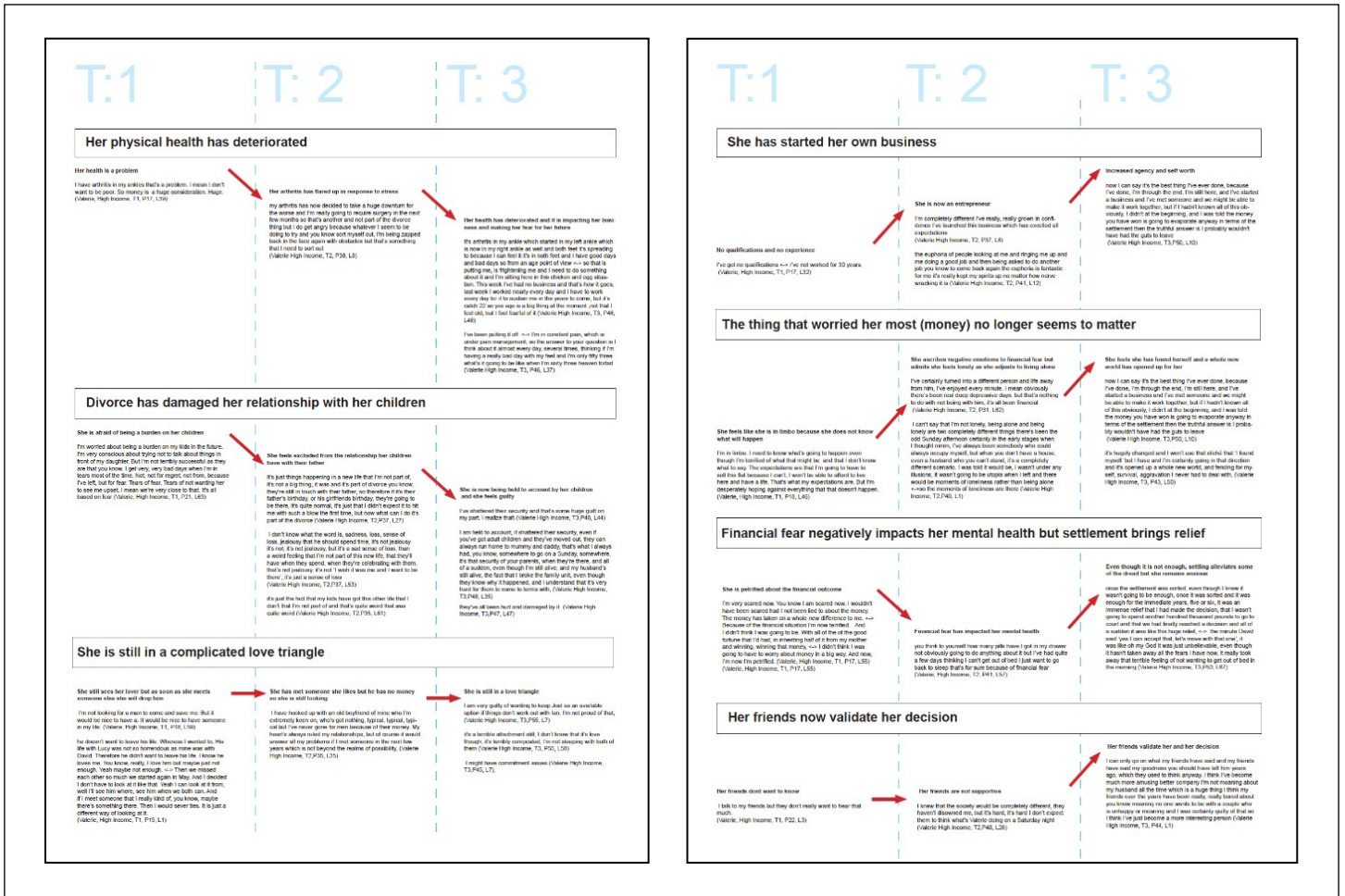
<b>Valerie: Super-Ordinate Themes</b>	
<b>Positive Valence</b>	<b>Negative/Neutral valence</b>
<b>From unemployment to empowerment</b>	<b>Health: From minor problem to major concern</b>
<b>From passivity to agency</b>	<b>From protecting the family to destroying it</b>
<b>From anxiety to relief</b>	<b>From love triangle to love triangle (No change)</b>
<b>From social isolation to social validation</b>	

*Box 13. Final superordinate themes for Valerie by positive, negative, or neutral valence*

## **Visualising change over time**

With so much data, LIPA researchers have to think carefully about presenting findings in a way that clearly expresses the dynamics of temporal change for their participants. Clear labelling makes it easier to see the trajectory of change over time and provides a transparent evidence base for claims. I began experimenting with ways of visualising these dynamic patterns. My initial attempts simply used red arrows to indicate the trajectory of change. I found it helpful to be able to ‘see’ what was going on for the participant and I felt that visualising the direction of emotional travel made the data more immediately accessible.

In this diagram you can see how some aspects of Valerie’s life improved through the course of the three interviews, whereas other aspects of her life became more difficult.



Box 14. Early attempts to visualise positive and negative change over time

These early versions ignored a key element that I had been using to distinguish between the three interviews. For organisational purposes, I had been using colour coding to distinguish between my first, second and third interviews. The first interview was given a red panel. The second interview was given a blue panel and the final interview was given a green panel.

These colour labels were assigned to all the interviews simply because there was so much data for each participant and the colour blocks provided a visual short cut which helped me to see which interview I was in. Colour coding the longitudinal data subsequently provided a novel way of visualising the direction of change over time in the final analysis.

By staggering the coloured panels as steps up or steps down it was possible to illustrate the emotional trajectory of change through the three time points in a simple and accessible way. The blocks step up for positive change, down for negative change and remain level when there is no change. This simple visual key to temporal change is an easy way to communicate whether a theme's trajectory has been positive, negative, or stable over time and it may be a useful addition to future LIPA studies.

Positive Change Valerie: High Income		TIME 3	Negative/No Change Valerie: High Income	
<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>	<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>
<b>From unemployment to empowerment</b>	<b>She is now an entrepreneur</b>	<b>Empowerment and increased self worth</b>	<b>From minor problem to major concern</b>	<b>Her arthritis has flared up in response to stress</b>
No qualifications and no experience I've got no qualifications <-> I've not worked for 30 years. (Valerie: High Income, T1, P17, L32)	I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence. I've launched this business which has exceeded all expectations (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6) the euphoria of people looking at me and ringing me up and me doing a good job and then being asked to do another job, you know to come back again the euphoria is fantastic for me it's really kept my spirits up no matter how nerve wracking it is (Valerie High Income, T2, P41, L12)	now I can say it's the best thing I've ever done, because I've done, I'm through the end, I'm still here, and I've started a business and I've met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but I haven't known all of this obviously, I didn't at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn't have had the guts to leave (Valerie High Income, T3, P50, L10)	Her health is a problem I have arthritis in my ankles that's a problem. I mean I don't want to be poor. So money is a huge consideration. Huge. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)	my arthritis has now decided to take a huge downturn for the worse and I'm really going to require surgery in the next few months so that's another and not part of the divorce thing but I do get angry because whatever I seem to be doing to try and you know sort myself out, I'm being zapped back in the face again with obstacles but that's something that I need to sort out (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L8)
<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>	<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>
<b>From passivity to agency</b>	<b>Holds both positive and negative feelings about her current state</b>	<b>Feels she has found herself</b>	<b>From protecting the family to destroying it</b>	<b>She feels excluded from the relationship her children have with their father</b>
In limbo I'm in limbo. I need to know what's going to happen even though I'm terrified of what that might be and that I don't know what to say. The expectations are that I'm going to have to sell this flat because I can't, I won't be able to afford to live here and have a life. That's what my expectations are. But I'm desperately hoping against everything that that doesn't happen. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L48)	I've certainly turned into a different person and I've away from him, I've enjoyed every minute, I mean obviously there's been real deep depressive days, but that's nothing to do with not being with him, it's all been financial (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L82)	it's hugely changed and I won't use that cliché that I found myself but I have and I'm certainly going in that direction and it's opened up a whole new world, and finding for myself, survival, aggravation I never had to deal with. (Valerie High Income, T3, P43, L50)	She is afraid of being a burden on her children I'm worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I'm very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I'm not terribly successful as they are that you know, I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we're very close to that. It's all based on fear (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L63)	It's just things happening in a new life that I'm not part of. It's not a big thing. It was and it's part of divorce you know, they're still in touch with their father, so therefore if it's their father's birthday or his girlfriend's birthday, they're going to be there, it's quite normal. It's just that I didn't expect to be hit me with such a blow the first time, but now what can I do it's part of the divorce (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L27)
<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>	<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>
<b>From anxiety to relief</b>	<b>Financial fear has lessened her mental health</b>	<b>Settlement brings immense relief</b>	<b>From love triangle to love triangle</b>	<b>She is still in a love triangle</b>
She is petrified about the financial outcome I'm very scared now. You know I am scared now. I wouldn't have been scared had I not been told to about the money. The money has taken on a whole new difference to me. <-> Because of the financial situation I'm now terrified. And I didn't think I was going to be. With all of the of the good fortune that I had, in inheriting half off from my mother and winning, winning that money. <-> I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now, I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L55)	Financial fear has impacted her mental health you think to yourself how many pills have I got in my drawer not obviously going to do anything about it but I've had quite a few days thinking I can't get out of bed I just want to go back to sleep that's for sure because of financial fear (Valerie, High Income, T2, P41, L57)	once the settlement was sorted, even though I know it wasn't going to be enough, once it was sorted and it was enough for the immediate years, five or six. It was an immense relief that I had made the decision, that I wasn't going to spend another hundred thousand pounds to go to court and that we had finally reached a decision and all of a sudden it was like this huge relief. <-> the minute David said yes I can accept that, let's move with that one, it was like oh my God it was just unbelievable, even though it hasn't taken away all the fears I have now, it really took away that terrible feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning. (Valerie High Income, T3, P53, L87)	She still sees her lover but as soon as she meets someone else she will drop him I'm not looking for a man to come and save me. But it would be nice to have a. It would be nice to have someone in my life. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L59)	She has met someone she likes, but he has no money she is still looking I have hooked up with an old boyfriend of mine who I'm extremely keen on, who's got nothing, typical, typical but I've never gone for him because of their money. My heart's always ruled my relationships, but of course it would answer all my problems if I met someone in the next few years which is not beyond the realms of possibility. (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L35)
<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>	<b>TIME 1</b>	<b>TIME 2</b>
<b>From social isolation to social validation</b>	<b>Her friends are not supportive</b>	<b>I can only go on what my friends have said and my friends have said my goodness you should have left ten years ago, which they used to think anyway. I think I've become much more amusing better company I'm not moaning about my husband all the time which is a huge thing I think my friends over the years have been really really bored about you know moaning no one wants to be with a couple who is unhappy or moaning and I was certainly guilty of that so I think I've just become a more interesting person (Valerie High Income, T3, P44, L1)</b>	<b>From love triangle to love triangle</b>	<b>She is still in a love triangle</b>
Her friends don't want to know I talk to my friends but they don't really want to hear that much. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L3)	I know that the society would be completely different, they haven't disowned me, but it's hard, it's hard I don't expect them to think what's Valerie doing on a Saturday Night (Valerie High Income, T2, P40, L26)		He doesn't want to leave his life. Whereas I wanted to, his life with Lucy was not so honourous as mine was with David. Therefore he didn't want to leave his life. <-> There was missed each other so much we started again in May <-> And if I meet someone that I really kind of you know, maybe there's something there. Then I would sever ties. It's just a different way of looking at it (Valerie, High Income, T1, P19, L1)	I am very guilty of wanting to keep Joel as an available option if things don't work out with him. I'm not proud of that. (Valerie High Income, T3, P55, L7)

Box 15. Superordinate themes for Valerie across three time points with positive, negative, and neutral valence

## Patterns across cases

The analysis process involved moving from the descriptive to the interpretative, and from the particular to the shared, as emergent themes revealed convergence and divergence across the participant group. Where participants accounts were universally synchronous, I could assume commonality, but divergent accounts of the same phenomenon were equally important and ensured that the experience of the entire participant group was considered in context.

For a theme to be supported according to IPA sampling criteria, evidence from half a participant group of eight or more must be presented. In this study, most themes in this study were supported by at least six, and often seven of the eight participants. By the time I was looking across cases I had created very structured sets of themes that were easy to view across the three time points for each woman and the valence was obvious because of the step up, step down colour coding that I had developed. My initial cross case table provides a very simple breakdown of colour coded key themes for the two groups, and shows whether the change over time was positive, negative, or neutral. The headings are abbreviated but at this stage I was seeing clear changes across the group with regard to agency, emotional state, identity, financial security, relationships status and relationship with adult children. Each of



those themes was assigned a colour and dropped into a table which indicated whether it was positive or negative, for that particular woman, at that specific time point.

High Income				Low Income			
Tessa	Valerie	Angelo	Rachel	Lisa	Lindsay	Eva	Mandy
<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>	<b>Positive Change</b>
Positive change in agency From powerless to outspoken	Positive change in agency From passivity to agency From unemployment to empowerment	Positive change in Agency From filing to active self-help	Positive change in Agency From persecuted to creative	Positive change in agency From insecure to in control	Positive change in agency From isolation to opportunity From onerous to agency	Positive change in agency From passive to active	Positive change in agency From passive to active From protecting him to protecting herself and kids
Positive change in emotional state From deception to honesty	Positive change in emotional state From self-doubt to relief From social isolation to social validation	Positive change in emotional state From self-doubt to relief From self-doubt to self-esteem (Controlling) From crisis management to ongoing support From hiding to letting go	Positive change in emotional state From anger to relief From victim to survivor	Positive change in emotional state From financial to new partnership From unwilling to uncompromising	Positive change in emotional state From suicidal to seeing From sick to well	Positive change in emotional state From insecure to secure	Positive change in emotional state From weak to strong
Positive changes in financial security From financially insecure to financially secure							
Positive change in Relationship status From single to co-habiting							
<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>	<b>Negative/No Change</b>
Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From angry parent to parent at fault From avoiding the pain to hiding the truth	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From protecting the family to destroying it	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From fragile to broken Her relationship with her son	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From support to lack of support	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From victimhood to alienation From concern to disdain	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From guilt to regret	Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From enmeshed to incohesive	
Negative changes in emotional state: From certainty to regret From clarity to confusion	Negative changes in emotional state: Health: From minor problem to major concern	Negative changes in emotional state: From lack of confidence to lack of confidence From optimism to pessimism	Negative changes in emotional state: From bitter to horrible From trapped to immobilized	Negative changes in emotional state: From optimism to cynicism Mental health: From depressed to uncontrolled	Negative changes in emotional state: From anger to impotence From abandoned to invisible	Negative changes in emotional state: From anxiety to uncertainty From dominant emotions to active distress From getting what she wanted to having what she had	Negative changes in emotional state: From avoidance to preoccupation From pessimism to suspicion
		Negative changes in Identity From a role she loved to a label she hates					Negative changes in Identity From a clearly defined role to a search for a new identity From reluctance to denial
	No change in relationship status From new couple to love triangle				Negative changes in Financial security From waiting for nothing to hearing every time		
						Divorce Process From protection to aggravation	

Box 16. Cross case super ordinate themes showing positive and negative change across two income groups

Working through each of the tree time points for each individual woman allowed me to see an overall change, but it was only when I began to look laterally at longitudinal change in specific sentiments, or experiences, that the magic of LIPA as a research method really revealed itself. Although each case had been analysed individually and the themes extracted were unique to that participant, the parallels in the psychological and relational outcomes for the changes in the women were unarguable. Using my colour coded step up step down format, I was then able to present my final cross case themes for both income groups in a very clear and accessible way.

## From Self-Doubt to Self-Esteem: High Income

### Valerie

#### TIME 1

Valerie has not had a job since before she got married so she is in a very vulnerable position:

"I've got no qualifications <-> I've not worked for 30 years". (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)

#### TIME 2

She has launched a business and her confidence has increased

"I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence, I've launched this business which has exceeded all expectations" (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)

#### TIME 3

Now she looks back and knows it was the right thing to do but realises that she wouldn't have had the guts to do it if she had known how hard it would be.

now I can say it's the best thing I've ever done, because I've done, I'm through the end, I'm still here, and I've started a business and I've met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but if I hadn't known all of this obviously, I didn't at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn't have had the guts to leave. (Valerie High Income T2, P50, L10)

### Tessa

#### TIME 1

Tessa feels that she has had enough of doing all the work and getting none of the power

"actually I feel as if I've been doing two full time jobs for 25 years, <-> I've been making 80 percent of the effort and getting 20 percent of the power. And that's what this is all about. That's what this is all about, I've just had enough of putting all the effort in and getting none of the power" (Tessa, High Income, T1, P1, L57)

#### TIME 2

She has moved on

"the point is I have moved on, Because I moved, and because that's a final, literally closing the door, I feel that, that, kind, I'm now thinking ahead, in terms of, what's next for me, And the answer is well I can do any job I like, I can move abroad if I want to, I can let my house out and I can, I can go, you know I could, I could save some money and take a year off. You know, I could do an extra bathroom, I could have a lodger. You know, I could do something at the City Lit or something at Birkbeck, I can do whatever I want, full of opportunity, (Tessa, High Income, T2, P27, L1)

#### TIME 3

She feels she is now in control of her life.

I feel much ... <-> I feel much less, I feel in control of my house, in control of my bills, in control of my finances, and my future in that sense, my pension, and everything else, you know, I feel that I, you know that I'm not worried about my financial future, which I, which I was, and I'm I so that feels good. (Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L46)

### Angela

#### TIME 1

She would definitely go back to him if he wanted her even if he said now, even though we are waiting for our Absolute now, um if, if, if, even now if he said that he would like to try again I would be up for that, definitely, because now, I feel now, as if I'm much more the sort of partner he would have liked actually, and also, um, I feel I understand what went wrong um, (Angela, High Income T1, P8, L19)

#### TIME 2

She is beginning to accept that he is not coming back He's not coming back so I've just got to accept it (Angela, High Income T2, P16, L53)

#### TIME 3

She has moved on and is no longer talking about her ex husband all the time in therapy

Yeah definitely I've definitely moved on. <-> I might think, talk about him in my counselling from time to time if I'm reflecting back, but on a day to day basis, yeah I would say I'm thinking about him less and less. (Angela, High Income T3, P32, L54)

### Rachel

#### TIME 1

She cannot get past the injustice of it all "I go up and down. It's the thought of facing the court (cries again) <-> And the viciousness of it. I've got, He wants maintenance, you know. You answer him. It's crazy. He's a fine figure of a man, it's just crazy, he's sitting at home". (Rachel, High Income, T1, P27, L21)

#### TIME 2

She is becoming more confident and recognises that she is actually very tough

I'm actually, I'm really, I've got a brilliant. I mean I'm tough and I've got a brilliant temperament you know. (Rachel, High Income, T2, P21, L41)

#### TIME 3

She is beginning to envisage a different kind of future

I have started mosaic classes and I have absolutely unbelievably taken to it like fish to water. First time I did it I couldn't believe it and I'm going to have a studio and I'm going to do portraits of women (Rachel, High Income, T3, P40, L60)

## Box 17. Positive change over three time points for a single super-ordinate theme for the high income group

## From Self-Doubt to Self-Esteem: Low Income

### Lisa

#### TIME 1

She is, or was, a very nervous person I mean I'm very, I'm quite, I am, or I was, I'm not so much now, but I was a very like nervous person, (Lisa, Low Income, T1, P2, L52)

#### TIME 2

She has always felt insecure and that she is not good enough I always had insecurities and never maybe felt, <-> Yeah I think I've I always felt not good enough but I don't know why but I should I don't know why but yeah I kind have always felt that I'm not good enough (Lisa Low Income, T2, P38, L25)

#### TIME 3

She is now happy with her life and feels that she is stronger and more capable

I'm happy with, you know, my life as it is at the moment, I'm happy with it. I know I couldn't, I wouldn't go back, partly because I wouldn't be the same, I wouldn't be, I'd be a different person going back and I don't think he'd like. It's made me stronger which I suppose is a, em and I've, cos to live on my own, I never thought I'd be able to live on my own. God I was such a wimp. (Lisa Low Income, T1, P16, L26)  
I'm just kind of I'm happy where I am and yeah it's just you know this is what life is at the moment and it's good (Lisa Low Income, T3, P39, L18)

### Eva

#### TIME 1

She had a very traditional idea about what her life would be I think I've been brought up on this, oh you have to find your handsome Prince and marry them to be happy. (Eva T1, P11, L56)

#### TIME 2

She now realises that she is a stronger and more resilient that she thought.

It's made me realize I'm much more resilient and tough than I thought I was. I don't think you know how tough you are until you've been tested do you and God knows I've been tested. It's made me realize I can be quite independent. I shouldn't be such a door mat I'm a nice person, I should stop feeling guilty and beating myself up about everything which is what I did all the way through marriage I thought everything was my fault and actually wasn't so that's better I've learned to be a bit kinder to myself I think and I just think I'm a stronger person I'm in a better place much better place much better place than I was. (Eva, Low Income, T2, P36, L49)

#### TIME 3

She is happy and feels liberated and free to focus on herself

I'm generally fairly happy now. I wake up in the morning and I feel good and I've got the bed to myself and I can please myself and do what I want. I don't have to worry about anyone else and what they think, or whether they're feeling okay or not. I don't have to give a toss about any of that, which is lovely. Life is much more free and liberating and I don't have to pretend to be interested in any job because I'm not interested in his boring bloody job. <-> so I just feel I know my mother's died I don't feel I've got responsibilities anymore I'm just worried about me and that's just quite nice really (Eva, Low Income, T2, P31, L24)

### Lindsay

#### TIME 1

She had no qualifications I haven't got any qualifications <-> so that was a big regret for me. Real big regret. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P7, L12)

#### TIME 2

An opportunity for self improvement

I have thought about going back to college and doing O level, is it an O level <-> so I've thought about going to, I like English, I used to love English, and English literature at school, so I thought well I'll do that one (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P43, L30)

#### TIME 3

Free education offers her a lifeline

I would like to go and get the (CSE) qualification but I can't, if I do English or Maths or both. I can do that for free cause the government pay for you for do that. So I'm going to do that when I can enroll for that.

### Mandy

#### TIME 1

Knowing he would have to pay her legal costs was a boost for her he had to pay the divorce cost which to me was a gain, a mega goal, because normally they split the cost and you pay your own costs, but for me, at least I have got something a little bit more of what I classed as fairness, (Mandy T1, P12, L48)

#### TIME 2

Money was always tight but now she is a millionaire

I've always had to worry because anything we've wanted we can't afford we cannot afford it, so my whole 35 years of my life has been no we can't have that because I can't afford it. (Mandy T2, P33, L33)  
I ended up with one point three million (Mandy T2, P32, L24)

#### TIME 3

Money gives her the freedom to live like a normal person

I'm very happy that I can look after my children and I'm not going to be worrying about money at all yeah I'm very happy that I can have a new kitchen and I can have a new car and I know it sounds stupid but I can live like a normal person (Mandy T3, P51, L51)  
I gave Tash a healthy amount towards her house and I will do the same for Toby when the pension money comes through (Mandy T3, P48, L40)

## Box 18. Positive change over three time points for a single super ordinate theme for the low income group

The examples in Box 17 and Box 18 show how the women in both the high income and the low income group moved from a state of self-doubt, to a state of self-esteem by the time their divorces had concluded. This is the first theme that I explore in my results as it applies to all eight women in the study.

# Chapter 6: Results and Theme 1

The results of the analysis break down into four clearly defined themes.

## Theme 1.

**'From Anxiety To Relief'** explores the rollercoaster of negative and positive emotions that the women experience across the three time points of the divorce.

## Theme 2.

**'From Self-Doubt To Self-Esteem'** explores the impact of midlife divorce on female agency. At time 1, in Theme 1, the women feel that marriage has disempowered them and left them in a very vulnerable position. By the third interview, a change has occurred, and the women are significantly more confident and agentic.

## Theme 3.

**'Repartnering: From Unattainable To Undesirable'** explores how the women move from wanting a new relationship to valuing their independence more than anything a relationship might offer them.

## Theme 4.

**'Maternal Role: From Privileged To Peripheral'** examines the way the women's relationships with their adult children change through the course of the divorce process.

Because this study is designed to capture change, the three time points are not given equal weighting and the second interview is either collapsed into Time 1 or into Time 3, as appropriate. This structure makes the change process that has occurred within each theme more distinct.

# Theme 1. From Anxiety To Relief

This chapter explores the emotional impact of midlife divorce. At Time 1, the women are angry and distressed. They are worried about money and fearful of the future. By the third interview, the women are relieved that the process is over and five of them have had counselling as way of coping with the trauma of marital breakdown and divorce.

## Times 1 & 2: Decree Nisi and Decree Absolute

### Divorce is a major stressor

At Times 1 and 2, there is so much hot cognition that it is often difficult to make sense of the women's immediate emotional state:

**Valerie** is very angry with her ex-husband, but she can't quite articulate why:

*"I'm angry with him. But that's got nothing to do with him finding somebody new. That's got nothing to do with relationships. I'm very angry with him that he's lied and put me in this uncertain position. That's where my anger comes. I'm angry at him for putting me in the position that he destroyed all our love" (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L16)*

Her rationale is muddled because she actually initiated the divorce after a ten-year affair, but she blames her husband for everything, nonetheless. Valerie refuses to be accountable, and she accuses her soon to be ex-husband of effectively putting her in that position.

**Tessa** is also angry at her husband because she feels that divorce has not affected her husband's life in any way, whereas her life has changed unrecognisably:

*"Oh I have my angry moments, My, my my, my, my, moments when I just think, Actually the anger At the moment it's about the fact That he basically is Having no change at all in his life, I mean absolutely none, He's keeping the dogs, the kids, the house, the house in France, the car, You know, everything, plus, the washing machine, I mean plus, plus the bed, plus you know I'm going to buy beds, washing machines, all sorts of stuff which I already have, I'm, I'm angry about the house in France, I'm angry about the fact that none of the contents of the house in France have been valued, So although I can go and*

*take stuff, You know, there's 25 years of investment in towels and sheets and crockery in the kitchen equipment and furniture, I'll never see anything any of that, And he still earns twice what I earn, And he probably will inherit more money from his mother".*

*(Tessa, High Income, T1, P11, L51)*

Although Tessa instigated the divorce, and decided the living arrangements, she recites a shopping list of items that her husband will retain - the house, the kids, the dog, their home in France and his big salary - as a way of emphasising this perceived injustice. At the end of a 25-year marriage it seems odd to talk about having made years of investment in sheets and towels. It is as if splitting 'chattels' becomes a proxy for splitting the family.

**Angela** is angry about the fact that being older makes it much more difficult for her to rebuild her life:

*"I think I've been particularly angry about the whole thing because I'm older"*

*(Angela, T1, P11, L9)*

At time 2 her feelings have not changed:

*"I might look together, and I am quite together, but I am really, really increasingly angry about it". (Angela, T2, P16, L8)*

She is conscious of the enormous gulf between the way she looks on the outside and the turmoil that she feels inside.

**Eva** feels emotionally volatile. She veers between being very angry and upset, to being happy about tiny things. Conscious that her emotions are extreme, she tries to hide them:

*"I get very angry, upset or very happy about very tiny things um and I know it's not irrational that's the wrong word, it's a bit overreacting, but I feel I'm aware of this and it doesn't really interfere with my life, because I tend to not show it to everybody all the time, but yes, I am emotional." (Eva, Low Income, T1, P14, 28)*

## **Betrayal and infidelity exacerbate anxiety**

**Lindsay** is so angry that her narrative reverberates. She is so furious with Frank that she

wants to hurt him, but she cannot vent her anger because she has not seen him since the day he walked out on her.

*“I feel like how dare you, how dare you just get up and walk out with no explanation, no nothing. It’s, I feel really angry” (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P8, L2)*

Lindsay expresses this frustration more explicitly than many of the other participants, but with the exception of Tessa, it is a feeling shared by all the women. Regardless of how bad the marriage was, the fact that one person can unilaterally make a decision to walk away, leaving their partner of several decades alone, hurt, and angry, feels like a grievous injustice.

**Rachel** runs through a list of the painful emotions she has experienced in response to the end of her marriage:

*“Shame. Humiliation. Loneliness. Amazing loneliness. Abandonment. You name it. I mean... he wiped the floor with me. There’s no doubt”. (Rachel, High Income, T1, P13, L52)*

Rachel’s husband filed for divorce as soon as he found out he was going to inherit a lot of money from his father. That money will not be included in the financial divorce and she is bitter about the fact that by never holding down a job during their marriage, her husband now has the ‘legal’ upper hand. She feels the system has allowed him to ‘wipe the floor’ with her as if she were a cleaning rag.

At Time 2 **Lindsay** is also bitter about the injustice of her situation:

*“Why, when I haven’t the. I’m not the one who’s had the affair. This is something I’ll never, never, ever understand or get in me brain. I think there isn’t a day that goes by that doesn’t think about that. I don’t think I’ll ever have a closure and it dri... it does, sometimes it drives me bonkers thinking about it. I can wake up thinking about it. I wake up nearly every morning, well I do every morning thinking, what am I doing here. Why am I in this situation? What happened? You know.” (Lindsay T2, P32, L12)*

To ‘never, never, ever’ understand what has happened implies a refusal to do so and there ‘isn’t a day that goes by’ when she doesn’t think about it. Constant rumination on the

unfairness drives her bonkers. She describes the disorienting experience of waking up in a life that she doesn't recognise each and every morning. Like an amnesiac, she starts her day by asking herself 'what am I doing here?'

Lindsay is bitter because her husband left her for someone else. **Eva** feels bitter for the same reason:

*"It's fucking unfair that I've got this thing that's nothing do with me <-> I've got this shitty disease and my ex has buggered off with this new woman and they're going off on holiday together so yes I do feel bloody annoyed, not only is he going off on holiday with her, but he's rubbing my nose in it" (Eva, Low Income, T2, P46, L8)*

Eva is angry about her cancer and resents the fact that she gets a 'shitty disease' while her ex-husband gets a new girlfriend and a holiday in the sun. She is 'bloody annoyed' about the cancer is in her blood which will eventually terminate her life. In contrast her now ex-husband has a bright shiny future with his new partner. There is an uneasy physicality to the expression 'rubbing my nose in it', as if her ex-husband is roughly pressing her face into his good fortune.

**Valerie** is also bitter because her husband has already met and moved in with another woman:

*"I'm angry and resentful, so what I'm about to say, <->but the fact is he's moved in with someone who's quite well off, that's fine, that's not the issue here, the issue is, it might be a little bit" (Valerie, High Income, T2, P29, L44)*

To add insult to injury, the woman her husband has moved in with is independently wealthy so her husband does not have to worry about money, whereas it keeps her awake at night.

## **Divorce impacts the women's mental and physical health**

A number of the women feel so bad they have contemplated suicide. Worrying about money has made **Valerie** physically and emotionally fragile. Unable to sleep or eat, she has



contemplated taking an overdose:

*“I was feeling desperately suicide’s a strong word I was never at that stage, but you do start to think along those lines sometimes, but I’d had those pills for a while <-> you think to yourself how many pills have I got in my drawer, not obviously going to do anything about it, but I’ve had quite a few days thinking, I can’t get out of bed I just want to go back to sleep, that’s for sure because of financial fear” (Valerie, High Income, T2, P41, L57)*

Rationally, she doesn’t believe that she would resort to suicide, but knowing that she has the pills and that it is an option is a way of coping with the fear.

**Rachel** is so distressed by her divorce that she has also thought about killing herself just to make the pain stop:

*“I’m not going to do anything, but I have thought of killing myself. I’m not. I’m not. Because my children. I love my children to bits. But just to make it stop you know”.*  
*(Rachel, High Income, T1, P21, L35)*

Like Valerie, Rachel is at pains to confirm that she would not actually do it because she loves her children too much, but she is clearly struggling to cope. In contrast to Valerie who uses the word ‘suicide’, Rachel uses the much more violent expression ‘killing myself’.

**Lindsay** is so distressed and desperate that she too, has thought of killing herself as a way to stop the pain. She has been having counselling to help her cope, but she is still having suicidal thoughts:

*“this counselling I’ve had, is to, the times when I feel desperate when I have the bad thoughts is what do I do then. And what I can do to stop those thoughts. But I’ve told her it never stops the thoughts because I still think, I still think about killing myself.” (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P23, L58)*

*“I still think about killing myself”.* (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P23, 60)

Like Rachel, Lindsay talks about killing herself, rather than suicide. It is a more violent but also a more agentic way of describing the ultimate means of putting an end to extreme pain.

Lindsay still doesn't see the point of her life and like Valerie and Eva, she is tormented by the fact that her husband is now living happily with another woman and does not appear to have suffered in any way:

*"I will say, I haven't told Tina, but I have thought to meself a couple of times I might as well just be dead, I might as well just kill meself <-> Some days I just think what what's the point, I have got this and I have got the house and I think there's Frank with his happy life and I've had it all taken away you know" (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P52, L5)*

Lindsay has never had much self-worth, and now that Frank has gone, she genuinely believes that she 'might as well just be dead'.

**Lisa's** mental health has suffered too. She has been prescribed both antidepressants and sleeping tablets by her GP at Time 1:

*"I went to the doctors this time. I just said, I said 'I just want you to give me something that will block everything out, I don't want to have to think about anything. I don't want to, I don't want to think or, I just wanna be in cloud cuckoo land', and I think part of me, was, for like a little while, and that's just how I wanted to be. I didn't want to think about anything. I just wanted to be like you know, like, taken away. But I am gradually trying to em, come off, to come off the, the tablets now, <-> I've cut them down because I'd increased them again. But all they do is mask it. They don't, they don't solve it. But they just, you know, they just mask it a bit, don't they? But they don't solve the problem. <-> I've had days where, you know, some days I've just been a bit, but, on the settee like all day and my friend's horrified because I say, "I didn't even get dressed" and she'd say, "what do you mean?" and I'd say, "what's the point?"*  
*(Lisa, Low Income T1, P17, L23)*

The medication has helped Lisa to block everything out, but she is trying to wean herself off them. She repeats the fact that the tablets 'only mask the problem, they don't solve' it like a mantra. Even so, she still has days when she doesn't see the point in even getting dressed.

**Tessa** feels anxious and overwhelmed:

*"I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed. So there are moments when I just, I actually do go, and*

*having had the builders in for, it must be nearly two months now. <-> Yeah yeah. Yeah. They say its divorce, moving house, and a death of a relative. Well, I'm nearly there. Right. Yeah. And I feel occasionally just more than slightly anxious but I mean that's a thing with me. So, but um the option of not having a duvet day because of the builders has been really tricky and I would not normally ever take one, but not having the option of having one has been really kind of my God, I've got no safe space which has been really tricky to deal with." (Tessa High Income, T2, P22, L49)*

A lot has happened in the last year. She has experienced bereavement and divorce, and she has also moved to a new house. She is to the kind of woman to dwell on emotion, but here, she admits that she feels '*occasionally just more than slightly anxious*'. Tessa works in a high-powered job and right now, she would like to have the option of crawling under a duvet for the day, but because her house is full of builders, she has no 'safe space' for herself.

**Lindsay** ruminates constantly. Here, she rattles through all the things that go through her head when she cannot sleep:

*"you go from being in a marriage, and admittedly your instincts were telling you something was wrong, and then all of a sudden, it's all gone. I feel like. I don't know what, very emotion possible you go through everything. Everything. You blame yourself, you blame, other people you blame. You know, if you'd done this, or if you hadn't done that, and you go through all of that, and it's in your head constantly, from the minute you get up in the morning to the minute you go to bed, and then you can't sleep, and I have sleeping tablets and I still don't sleep. I still am awake at 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning. Which isn't doing any good, doesn't do anybody any good." (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P14, L65)*

Lindsay wonders whether the outcome would have been different if she had done this, or not done that. Although she takes sleeping tablets every night this constant questioning means she is still waking up at 2am every morning

**Valerie's** health has been affected by the stress of the divorce:

*"I was diagnosed with arthritis in my ankle 10 years ago, actually it was the year my husband found out about the affair, typical, and it's been livable up till now, and it's gradually got worse, but certainly in the last 3 months it's really got worse" (Valerie,*

*High Income, T1, P38, L32)*

Her painful arthritis seems to be a metaphor for her painful marriage. She was first diagnosed when her husband first found out about her affair but, like the marriage, it was 'livable' then. Now that the divorce is in motion it has flared up and is much, much worse.

Valerie is frustrated by the fact that every time she tries to sort herself out, some other aspect of her life becomes more complicated:

*"my arthritis has now decided to take a huge downturn for the worse and I'm really going to require surgery in the next few months so that's another and not part of the divorce thing, but I do get angry because whatever I seem to be doing to try and you know sort myself out, I'm being zapped back in the face again with obstacles" (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L8)*

**Angela** feels vulnerable, even though her financial settlement has been negotiated and she is in a relatively good position:

*"loss of confidence, I feel more vulnerable, it's a struggle. I'm much more worried about the future, even though I'm in a good position". (Angela, T2, P21, L42)*

**Mandy** is still waiting for her husband to say sorry and despite everything, if he could just bring himself to utter those two words Mandy would go back to him:

*"I'm still waiting for him to say, "I'm sorry" and if he said to me "I'm sorry" tomorrow, I would have him back, which is mad, but yeah" (Mandy T1, P8, L51)*

Mandy realises that her behaviour is 'mad', but she hates living alone, and she feels very isolated. However difficult her husband was, his presence in the house meant that Mandy always had someone to talk to:

*"you know, you come home and there is nobody to talk to, so yeah, you end up not really, and even if you've gone out and you've had a nice time, as you're coming towards home, you're getting more and more upset, because, you know, you're going home and there's nobody to tell" (Mandy Low Income, T1, P14, L36)*

She describes the emotional transition from having a 'nice time' to the impending distress of 'coming towards home' where the only thing waiting for her is loneliness. Mandy never wanted to divorce and she is the least independent of the eight women in the study so she finds it very difficult to envisage a different, better future for herself.

A number of the women explicate concerns for the future. **Mandy** is not at all optimistic about what lies ahead for her. She spends her days working and her nights alone and she cannot ever see that changing:

*"I, I cannot see a life, I can't see a life, I can't see a different life. <-> you know, I go to work, I work hard, I come home, I have a bath, I watch the telly, play with the dog, go to bed and I can't see that ever being any different", (Mandy Low Income, T1, P14, L3)*

She feels immobilised by her situation. She repeats the same routine day in, day out. It isn't living but she 'can't see a life' for herself.

**Valerie** has really bad days when she cries most of the time because she so afraid:

*"I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear." (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L64)*

Ultimately, **Valerie** is scared because she does not know what her future holds:

*"I don't know what the future's going to hold, you know"*  
*(Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L26)*

Crippled by uncertainty, none of the women can't imagine the life that lies ahead. The only exception is **Eva**. She has a much greater degree of certainty about what lies ahead for her, so when she says the future is unknown it is almost wishful thinking:

*"Well the future is unknown and not just the cancer but the fact that you know my brothers died, all of this, I tend to think it's all a bit grim from now on, because either I'm going to die, or my mother's going to die, one of those two things will happen, and I will have to deal with all of that, and I'd like to say that there are things to look forward too, but I don't, I can't see what the things to look forward too are, really and you know it's not just*

*having cancer, you know, I'm getting older, so my knees are going, and I haven't got the energy I used to have, um, I can't see anything now", (Eva Low Income, T1, P15, L20)*

**Eva** genuinely doesn't have much to look forward too. She feels physically debilitated and inevitably, this leaves her feeling depressed:

*"Sometimes I feel very depressed about it all" (Eva, Low Income, T2, P31, 33)*

### **Financial fear exacerbates anxiety**

Regardless of income or employment, all the women worry about the financial impact of getting divorced. The divorce process, by necessity, forces the women to think about their futures and that increases their anxiety.

**Rachel**, who has a full time job and is the main bread winner in her household is more distressed about finances than the women in the low income group:

*"my husband had thirty years of me going out to work, building a small pension, taking my parents money, providing a home, educating the children, bringing the shopping home, doing everything that it was possible to do, and as soon as his inheritance came, he went off, <-> Getting half of everything. Being able to milk it to stop working, to take half of my pension, to beggar me, they beggared me, they wanted to beggar me for the whole of the rest of my life, and he's going to walk around, please, I mean it's just, he has two children. I mean I'm looking after the, I'm, the one that they come to is me and he's taken away the ability for me to help them (Rachel, High Income, T2, P30, L26)*

Rachel is angry about the unfairness of the legal outcome. Rachel's words tumble out as she describes how much she has contributed to the marriage. Having always been the main breadwinner in the family, and after years of supporting her husband while he did nothing, he filed for divorce as soon as he was told that he was going to be inheriting a large amount of money. Rachel is angry that her ex-husband, who never worked, has been able to 'milk' the legal system and make a 'beggar' out of her. She talks about 'the children' coming to her for help as if they are dependents, but they are in fact adults.

**Valerie**, who has always been relatively wealthy is equally distressed about money:

*“all of a sudden everything’s changed and so I’m very, very angry financially, if the finances so, I’m scared you know, I’m alright at the moment, but about the distant future”*  
(Valerie High Income, T2, P29, L53)

*“this is not with the regret of leaving the marriage, it is regret of the fear of the financial future”* (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L42)

Valerie has not really processed the legal outcome of her divorce, so she feels that the change in her circumstances has happened ‘all of a sudden’. She acknowledges that she is financially stable right now, but she is very scared about what will happen to her in the distant future. Valerie is struggling to adapt to her situation and the existential dread that she feels is a response to a major life transition which threatens personal security.

**Angela** is worried about the fact that she has had to take out a mortgage:

*“I am having to get a mortgage, it’s not a big mortgage, but I’m still going to have debt which means I have to keep working for the next ten years”.* (Angela, High Income, T2, P20, L47)

She doesn’t have enough money to buy a flat outright so she has to borrow money from the bank. This means that she is going to have to carry on working for another ten years to pay off the debt. She is also anxious about job security as it would not be easy for her to get another job if she was laid off:

**Lindsay** grew up in poverty, so she is desperately afraid of having no money:

*“I used to think we can have quite a nice retirement. You know we’ll be okay. I’d always had a fear of having no money because I grew up in poverty really. I did. I had coats on the bed. So, I’d always had this fear of having nothing.”* (Lindsay, Low income, T1, P37, L12)

Because she had nothing as a child, the fact that she and Frank were comfortably off was incredibly important to her. Divorce means losing the future she had mapped out for herself and Frank. She uses the plural ‘we’ to describe the nice retirement she hoped to have and the singular ‘I’ to describe her deep-rooted fear of having nothing, again.

**Lindsay** can barely articulate how scared she is about finances:

*“having to sort finances out. I was terrified. When I went in Nat West I couldn’t stop crying. I bet the girl thought I was bonkers. Just couldn’t stop crying. could hardly get a word out. And I was ashamed about that, how can you even. I just think. You know. Why is somebody. Why would you do that to somebody.” (Lindsay, Low income, T1, P27, L15)*

Her husband managed all their money when they were married, so when he left, Lindsay didn’t know what to do. She was so terrified when she went to the bank that she couldn’t speak because she was crying so much. As she recounts her shame and distress her sentences fracture as if she is reliving the experience.

Lindsay feels as if she has no control over the divorce. In contrast, **Tessa** has managed her divorce very efficiently, however her husband was unhappy about having to share his pension which was much bigger than hers:

*“Well, the lawyers are motivated by defending their client’s position. My lawyers were make making you know basically saying to me you know come on, you know, buck up you’ve got to basically press a lot harder on his pension. You know you’ve got to go for parity of income. Nothing else is fair. Which involved me having some very difficult conversation, conversations which we should have had during our financial mediation, I should have been. I should have been more aware that he was going to kick up about, kick off about his pension” (Tessa, High Income, T1, P11, L60)*

There is a notable lack of emotion as Tessa describes the details of her financial divorce and she uses legal jargon ‘parity of income’ to explain how her lawyers persuaded her to press her husband for a bigger share of his pension. She now feels that she was naïve to think that her ex-husband would be willing to share his pension.

**Valerie** and her husband were relatively wealthy, but the divorce reveals that the lifestyle they were leading was largely funded by borrowing that she knew nothing about:

*“I’m very scared now. You know I am scared now. I wouldn’t have been scared had I not been lied to about the money. The money has taken on a whole new difference to me. <-> Because of the financial situation I’m now terrified. And I didn’t think I was going to be. <-> I didn’t think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now, I’m*



*now I'm petrified."* (Valerie, *High Income*, T1, P17, L55)

Valerie is now petrified about how this will impact her settlement. For Valerie 'the money' is and always has been her central focus. She only decided to divorce because she won the lottery and so she thought wouldn't have to worry about money, but now she is completely preoccupied with it. Valerie repeats the word scared three times in the first sentence and then escalates it to terrified. By the final sentence she has dialed her emotional state up to petrified.

Valerie is not the woman to uncover spousal deceit during the divorce process. **Eva** has recently discovered that her husband had two pensions and savings that he had been hiding from her:

*"he has disclosed all his assets now, which he hadn't done, which is quite interesting because he's got 2 more pensions that he hadn't told me about, and he's got more money in his savings than he has told <-> with his girlfriend <-> I've got this cancer thing. I might be dead in 5 years. I might not be<-> I'm really annoyed now <-> I told my friend the other day if only when he said he got this other woman I had got a hitman, I said, even if they traced me and found out it was me, I would have got, I would have got out by now on good behaviour and I would have gotten all this money, and I would have gotten the insurance, and I would have gotten the whole of the bloody house and his pensions".* (Eva, *low income*, T1, P5, L57)

Eva is annoyed that her ex-husband has not been honest about his financial situation. Her irritation is magnified by the fact that her ex-husband is building a new life with his girlfriend while she has terminal cancer and probably won't live more than another five years. She muses on what would have happened if she had simply hired a hitman to take her husband out and figures she would have been better off.

**Angela** thinks that she has been naïve and feels that she has probably sold herself short in the financial settlement:

*"I didn't look into how much is his University pension going to be worth, because he's a professor and he is going to be worth a lot of money in the future and it's possible that I've sold myself short, but I just <-> he'll have probably 25- 30 years of final salary*

*pension and he's going to be earning a lot of money by the time he retires and he's younger than me," (Angela, High Income, T1, P11, L66)*

Her husband has a final salary pension which will be sizable by the time he retires because he is a lot younger than her. She regrets not thinking about that when they were doing the negotiations.

Uncertainty leaves the women constructing unhelpful 'what if' scenarios as they imagine all the things that could go wrong.

**Angela** is currently employed but she worries about what would happen if she lost her job.

*"If I was to lose my job I would be really, really stuck, you know, I'm less employable and I probably wouldn't be able to get another job, and I am spending a lot of my savings on my stamp duty for the property, so I've less money to fall back on". (Angela, High Income, T2, P21, L43)*

**Tessa** is not worried about her current financial situation, but she projects ahead to when she is seventy and wonders what would happen if, at the age of 70, she can't afford to eat beans on toast, while her ex-husband is sitting in a multi-million-pound mansion in Oxford:

*"I, I'm, anxious in a way that I think not because it's what it's not about what other people think of me, I don't care about that, it's that I will end up aged 70 thinking "can I have cheese on my baked beans, or can I just have baked beans today? Whereas he is sitting in a nice little house in Oxford having sold the house in London for three million, four million pounds and won't have, noticed any change to his lifestyle whatsoever," (Tessa, High Income, T1, P11, L60)*

Despite the fact that she has her own career and her own income, the dramatic contrast between her ex-husband having millions of pounds, and her having to choose between cheese and baked beans reflects the powerlessness and the financial inequity that Tessa felt throughout her entire marriage.

**Lisa's** wonders what would have happened if her Mum and Dad had not helped her out financially:

*“he thinks that everything’s his, well he hasn’t got this big pension without my help. So he’s got to share some of it, but no, he’s sat in a nice four bedroomed house, fully furnished, and I’ve literally been, well, I aint been kicked out onto the streets, but without my mum and dad it would be a very different situation. Without my mum and dad, I wouldn’t have had the money to have a solicitor so what would I have had to have done? Just walked away and leave it?” (Lisa, low income, T1, P18, L8)*

Lisa’s divorce was particularly acrimonious and her husband was so antagonistic that she ended up leaving the family home. He did nothing to help her and without her mum and dad she would not even have been able to afford a solicitor. Lisa contrasts her ex-husband sitting in a nice four-bedroom house, ‘fully furnished’, with her having been kicked out onto the street. Without financial help from her parents, that might have happened.

Finding the money to pay solicitors creates additional stress for all the women.

**Lindsay** has very little money left, and she lives off less than she pays her solicitors every month:

*“I’ve paid solicitors fees, and the solicitor fees are more than what I’ve lived off and I’m still paying. I’ve got to pay out now, I’ve got 7k left and I’ve got to sell the house yet. What am I going to live on? What am I going to live off?” (Lindsay, Low income, T1, P16, L41)*

**Mandy** is living on a credit card which her husband has the power to cancel at any time:

*“the credit card that we’ve used for the last, however many years, is in his name, but I am named on the card. I’m a card holder, so I am waiting, at some point, he did cancel it, because he said there was fraudulent activity on it, but I mean, I never saw any fraudulent activity on it, I mean, I can’t even see any statements on it because it’s all electronic, going to his email, so I can’t see, that used to come to the joint, <-> I mean I am, every day, waiting for him to cancel the credit cards. I’ve still got the debit card from the joint account which I don’t think he can stop without freezing the account”, (Mandy, Low Income, T1, P12, L5)*

Mandy has been so controlled by her ex-husband that she has no access to any bank statements, so she lives in a constant state of anxiety.

**Lisa's** situation is not much better:

*“because I would have qualified for legal aid originally, they did it at a reduced rate so I was so I was only paying I think about 80 pounds an hour, whereas I think the normal things about two hundred, two hundred twenty an hour, dependent on what level.<->I think my bill came to just over 20 and I think his was nearly, no, in fact, no probably more than that because I think it was about twenty eight with the last lot he had <->I've got lots of bills because I've just paid as I go cause when they're doing that for you, you have to pay upfront so I was paying blocks of three hours like two hundred and six, two hundred and sixteen pounds so I was just keeping on top of it so I've still got debts because I've got it on credit cards with balance transfers and that” (Lisa, low income, T1, P34, L30)*

Lisa would have qualified for legal aid but in April 2013 it was withdrawn for almost all divorces. It is now only available to women who can prove they have suffered domestic abuse. Although her lawyer charged her a reduced rate, her legal bills still amounted to £20,000. Lisa knows how much her lawyers cost to the pound, and she has been trying to keep on top of the debt she has accrued. Though the divorce is over she is still paying her legal bills off using credit cards and balance transfers.

**Mandy** worked in an extremely low paying job and her husband worked in a very high paying one, so when the divorce finally went to court, he was ordered to pay Mandy's legal costs:

*“he, he had to pay the divorce cost which to me was a gain, a mega goal, because normally they split the cost and you pay your own costs, but for me, at least I have got something a little bit more of what I classed as fairness,” (Mandy, Low Income, T1, P12, L48)*

Getting her costs paid was a 'mega goal' for Mandy because it meant that she didn't have to worry about legal fees. The importance of that legal decision becomes clear at time 2. Mandy's half of the divorce cost a staggering £40,000:

*“I mean it was certainly in excess of £80,000 for the whole divorce for both of us” (Mandy, Low Income, T2, P32, L50)*

## Time 3. Six months post-divorce

### Settlement brings relief

By Time 3, **Valerie's** financial settlement has been sorted out and even though it is less than she had hoped for, she feels an enormous sense of relief:

*“once the settlement was sorted, even though I knew it wasn't going to be enough, once it was sorted and it was enough for the immediate years, five or six, it was an immense relief that I had made the decision, that I wasn't going to spend another hundred thousand pounds to go to court and that we had finally reached a decision and all of a sudden it was like this huge relief, <-> the minute David said 'yes I can accept that, let's move with that one', it was like oh my God it was just unbelievable, even though it hasn't taken away all the fears I have now, it really took away that terrible feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning” (Valerie High Income, T3, P53, L67)*

As soon as her husband agreed to settle, she felt her fear and anxiety lifting. The change in her mental state was 'sudden' and 'unbelievable'. Reaching a decision gave her certainty and that took away her terrible 'feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning':

Even though she has paid a high price to leave the marriage, **Tessa** believes that she has done the right thing for herself and now that it is all over, she feels relieved:

*“I've done the right thing for me, I feel angry with him, but I, I feel relieved, relieved. That's another good word isn't it, relieved that I'm out of it all, but the cost is high, you” (Tessa, High Income, T3, P42, L51)*

**Rachel's** husband has done his absolute worst to hurt her, but she has survived. She had been paralysed with fear, but the divorce is now over, and she feels immense relief:

*“I was paralysed with, you know, fear, fear of everything, and now it's gone, because he's, you know, he's done what you know, the worst, and also, in a sense I feel relief”, (Rachel, High Income, T3, P31, L44)*

The relief that Rachel describes is not the presence of positive emotion, but the removal of

fear that had left her feeling paralysed.

*“I’m not desperate. I was desperate”. (Rachel, High Income, T3, P42, L55)*

**Lisa** feels relief:

*“now it’s a relief <-> for me in the way he treated me, that was all good, if he’d been nicey, nicey, all the time then I would have struggled. I needed to have that fight” (Lisa Low Income, T3, P42, L50)*

Although arguably Lisa had the most difficult divorce of all, the obstacles that her ex-husband put in her way made her more, rather than less determined. It may be confirmation bias but she now says that she would have found it harder if she had not had to fight. The words ‘nicey, nicey’ are deeply sarcastic, as if she could never, ever envisage her ex-husband behaving in that way.

Although Lisa does not think that she got a fair deal in her divorce settlement, but that doesn’t matter now:

*“We ran out we had a meal a bottle of wine and it was just the relief that it was over and as I say I don’t think the outcome was fair ahm so as I said do I think it’s fair? No, but can I live with it yeah ahm” (Lisa Low Income, T2, P35, L22)*

The fact that it is over, and she is now free, is a huge relief.

**Lindsay**, who has struggled with her mental health for years, now feels that she is less depressed:

*“I don’t think as much as I get depressed sometimes. I don’t think I’m as stressed even though I’m worried about the finance bit now. I feel I was living on a knife edge before: I was on pins all the time. And I used to dread if I’d been out. I used to dread coming back to the house<-> I don’t feel I’m all stressed out all the time” (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P59, L28)*

Lindsay uses language in a powerful way. She describes how she felt like she was living on a “knife edge” and that she was “on pins’, all the time. These words really evoke the stress of

living with the constant threat of domestic violence.

Although she has a long way to go, **Rachel** no longer feels desperate and being able to sleep provides tangible evidence of an improved emotional state.

*“so how am I feeling? I sleep which I didn’t before”, (Rachel, High Income, T3, P31, L3*

**Lisa** feels she is finally in control of her own destiny.

*“I think now all the uncertainty is all behind me now, there is still uncertainty, but I’m in control of it which is a big difference” (Lisa Low Income, T3, P29, L40)*

Her divorce has taken nearly four years and in that time, she was living in financial limbo. Now she can put the uncertainty behind her and move on.

Having been controlled by her husband for decades, **Mandy’s** settlement is a psychological and financial victory:

*“For me, it feels like I’ve got everything because all the money that we had was kept so hidden and so secret.” (Mandy, Low income, T2, P33, L29)*

Knowing that she has financial stability is a huge weight off her shoulders:

*“you’re responsible for yourself, not worried, but you have to sort your own problems <- > I definitely you know I do feel taller you know in that you’re going around holding your head up and you just feel a whole lot better you know”  
(Mandy Low income, T3, P44, L15)*

Mandy is now responsible for herself and she can sort her own problems out. She is a changed person and after years of being cowed by her husband, she can now hold her head up and she feels taller as a result.

**Angela** never wanted to be divorced, but the experience has forced her to find tools to help herself manage her emotions better.:

*“I am less stressy now, and also feel I have more tools to manage it because I’m going, you know, I go to the gym much more, and I’ve been meditating now for about three years, or trying to, so I sort of feel like I’ve got tools to manage it”, (Angela High Income, T3,*

P28, L51)

**Eva** has bought a flat and she is financially secure. She is grateful for her ‘little life’ and appreciates small pleasures, like her son asking her how she is and making her a cup of tea:

*“ I feel I’m in a more secure place because I’ve got my money I’ve got my flat and I’ve got my little life and it’s okay <-> I’m lucky I’ve got my boy and I’m lucky I’m living with a son who’s lovely and calm and nice and who says how’s your day mum and how do you feel and would you like a cup of tea and I can talk to him about things (Eva, Low Income, T3, P51 L5)*

**Angela** speaks for all the women when she says she has definitely moved on:

*“Yeah, definitely I’ve definitely moved on”. (Angela, T3, P32, L33)*

### **Counselling offers valuable support**

At Time 3, Tessa, Angela, Rachel, Eva, Lisa, and Lindsay are either having counselling, or have had counselling as way of coping with the trauma of marital breakdown and divorce.

**Tessa’s** employers are paying for her to have ‘coaching’, but she knows that it is actually counselling:

*“I had the first session with the coach last week and I’ve got another one next week which is good. <->they’re calling it coaching. I know full well it’s counselling and so does she. I mean, I said, is this, is it coaching or counselling too, and they said it doesn’t matter. Just use the time for whatever you want, so that’s what I’m doing, but yeah, I want to talk through the whole thing yeah. Um I just think I mean what’s bothering me I suppose is that I actually started my, I can talk about this, so I started my conversation with this woman at the time, the Tavistock last week, with basically, it’s been a massive year, you know, I’ve had the most enormous year, you know, I have, I started, last January, and by you know, six months later I was divorced and had moved house, and then I had the builders in, and you know and then now this <-> and you know, and now changing jobs and you know it just hasn’t stopped. (Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L41)*

Tessa finds it hard to admit that she needs counselling, so she talks about stress in terms of



practical challenges like renovating her house or changing jobs, but she does plan to ‘talk through the whole thing’.

**Angela** sees a counsellor almost every week and it has become her main support system:

*“I see somebody you know every week, well it’s not, well it is more or less every week actually, I sort of feel like my main support” (Angela High Income, T3, P36, L13)*

**Lisa** has had counselling and she has found it helpful.

*“so counselling I find really good it helped me yeah” (Lisa Low Income, T3, P45, L66)*

**Eva** wisely suggests that everyone who goes through divorce should talk to a counsellor because divorce is a legal ‘process’, but it is an emotional ‘experience’:

*“I think it’s trouble is the process is the process is a legal thing and it isn’t an emotional process you have to go and find your own counsellor or whatever you don’t want to do it through the courts lawyers because that’s very expensive <-> You know that would be good to unpick how you feel about things I mean I’d go to counselling when Brian first moved out and that was very helpful because I felt very confused about everything, about him” (Eva Low Income, T3, P43, L45)*

Counselling has given **Lindsay** the coping mechanisms she needs to manage her depression:

*“Counselling teaches you coping strategies (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L16)*

*I’ve got the I’ve got the mechanisms there I have to be. I have days where when I’m not it’s when I’m not feeling well in myself as well, that makes a difference” (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L30)*

## **Theme 1: Discussion**

Ever since stress was considered to be a measurable entity, divorce has been classified as one of the most stressful life events (Strizzi, 2021). In the original Social Readjustment Rating Scale (1967) for example, divorce was rated 73 out of 100, which made it less stressful life than the death of a spouse (100, but more stressful than a spell in prison (63). Assigning ratings scales to a phenomenon such as divorce sanitises it, because it is so much easier to

ignore numbers than it is to ignore people. In contrast, qualitative investigation demonstrates that ‘stressful’ is a completely inadequate descriptor for the tumultuous feelings of anger, distress, fear, and uncertainty that define the divorce experience.

At Time 1, the women in this study are collectively traumatised. Their interviews reveal, in great detail, their sense of desperation and their overwhelming feelings of intense anger. They find it hard to rationalise the vitriol that they feel, but in their (2008) IPA study of ‘Women, Anger, and Aggression’, Virginia Eatough, Jonathan A. Smith and Rachel Shaw position the emotion of anger in a relational context:

*“Emotions bind us to other people, and when we are angry, we are angry in the context of the relationship. The close and intimate relationships we with our spouses and partners, children, and family, for example, are shot through with complex and dynamic power relations and are the ones likely to elicit the most intense anger.”*  
(Eatough, Smith & Shaw, 2008)

The women’s feelings of anger, and frustration, and injustice, don’t just relate to the divorce process; they are a response to a multitude of stressful experiences; relationship conflict, the breakdown of their marriages, betrayal, infidelity, financial insecurity, the strain of the legal process and the uncertain futures that they face.

In psychological terms, divorce is a traumatic event, but marital breakdown is a chronic stressor. The average divorce takes around 12 months, but the marital breakdown that precedes divorce can take years, or even decades. Divorce is not a single event, therefore. It is a complex process involving multiple traumas and transitions, which unfold across years, not months, and because every single divorce follows its own individual time trajectory, most research into divorce is, by necessity, retrospective. The need for studies of divorce that occur in “real-time” has been widely acknowledged (Thuen, 2001; Cipric et al., 2020) because health outcomes related to divorce can be sensitive to a “time heals effect”

The research linking stress to negative health outcomes is vast (O Connor, 2020) and studies of divorce confirm the relationship between divorce and poorer physical and mental health. Divorcees report more symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation than the general population (Amato 2000, Kessing et al. 2003 Hewitt et al. 2012 Hald et al. 2020). Divorce has also been linked to health problems (Sbarra, [2015](#)), more frequent hospitalization (Nielsen et al., [2014](#)), higher general mortality rates and higher suicide rates (Corcoran &

Nagar, 2010; Kposowa, 2020). In this study, all the women experience mental and physical health problems. At Times 1 and 2, Valerie is suffering from debilitating arthritis and is taking tablets to help her sleep. Eva is depressed. Tessa is anxious and overwhelmed. Lisa and Lindsay are on anti-depressants and Valerie, Rachel and Lindsay have suicide as a way to stop the emotional pain. Twice during the first interview, Lindsay says *‘I still think about killing myself’* (Lindsay).

This particular finding merits further research because although marital status has been identified in sociological, epidemiologic, and psychiatric research as an acute risk factor for suicide (American Association of Suicidology, 2013), the relationship between suicide, divorce and gender is underexplored. Most studies of marital status compare the rate of suicide in divorced populations to the rate of suicide in single or married people, but very few have looked at the differences between divorced men and women. Most recently, Kposowa (2020) interrogated the US 2015 National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS) and found that divorced people have a suicide risk that is over 97% higher than that of married people. Overall the male age-specific suicide rate is around three times higher than the female (ONS, 2016) however the differences between male and female suicide rates close when divorce is factored in. Kposow (2020) found that divorced men are twice as likely to die by suicide as their married counterparts, but divorced women are more 1.5 times likely to suicide than married women (Kposowa, 2020).

Kposowa’s (2020) data does not look at age as a variable, but it is a factor that should not be ignored. In the UK, people aged 40-59 have the highest age specific suicide rate. Although the ONS does not publish data on suicide by marital status, several of my participants mentioned suicidal ideation in their first interviews so I paid the ONS a fee of £125 to produce a dataset which showed mortality rates for suicides by females aged 40 to 64 by marital status in England and Wales. The data shows that the suicide rate for divorced women is 8.9 per 100,000 compared to just 3.2 per 100,000 for married women in this age range.

Married <sup>7</sup>		Civil partnership				Divorced <sup>8</sup>						
Deaths	Rate	LCL	UCL	Deaths	Rate	LCL	UCL	Deaths	Rate	LCL	UCL	
216	3.4	3	3.9	2	:	:	:	123	8.4	6.9	9.9	
230	3.6	3.2	4.1	1	:	:	:	135	9.3	7.7	10.9	
217	3.5	3	3.9	5	18.5	u	6	43.2	133	9.1	7.5	10.6
206	3.3	2.9	3.8	0	:	:	:	127	9	7.4	10.6	
228	3.7	3.2	4.1	0	:	:	:	122	8.3	6.8	9.8	
235	3.8	3.3	4.2	1	:	:	:	143	10.1	8.5	11.8	
226	3.6	3.1	4.1	1	:	:	:	121	8.9	7.3	10.5	
201	3.2	2.8	3.6	1	:	:	:	121	8.9	7.3	10.5	

Box 1.9 Deaths registered between 2010 – 2017: Suicide by marital status in women aged 40-64.

Other ONS data from 2002 to 2015 shows that the average suicide rate for divorced women (10.1) is three times higher than it is for single women (3.1) and married women (3.3), and 1.5 times higher than it is for women who have been widowed (6.5). The findings from my study and this confirmatory ONS data suggest that suicidality in women who divorce in midlife is an area that urgently requires further investigation.

Using datasets to explore completed suicides in middle aged women who have divorced provides a useful quantitative benchmark, but it tells us nothing about how women struggle with their mental health before, during and after marital breakdown. Marital break-up involves a great deal of stress and intrapersonal conflict before the actual decision to separate is made (Bulanda et al., 2016), and as this study demonstrates, the impact of a particular stressor such as divorce cannot be adequately understood if it is examined in isolation. As Pearlin (1989) argued, stressful experiences don't occur in vacuum, they need to be considered within the structural contexts of people's lives. It is only by examining the constellations of stressors surrounding a disruptive life event such as divorce, that we can establish a holistic understanding of how chronic strains such as financial difficulties are compounded by overlapping stressors such as health problems, or depression, to aggravate the level of stress that a person experiences. On a practical level, depression and anxiety triggered by the cumulative impact of multiple stressors also add to the burden of divorce by making tasks such as dealing with lawyers or moving house even more challenging (Amato, 2010, 2014).

Previous research has found that sociodemographic factors such as being unemployed or having lower levels of education are linked with more depressive symptoms (Symoens et al., 2014). However, regardless of income, education or employment, this study found no difference in the level of distress experienced by participants. Despite having jobs and being relatively financially independent, the women in the high income group – Rachel, Valerie, Angela, and Tessa - are just as anxious about the financial implications of divorce. They may be justified in feeling this way. Fisher and Low's (2016) study on 10,300 adults across 18 annual waves of British Household Panel Survey (1990–2008) showed that women from the highest income households (pre-divorce) lost more and took longer to recover their standard of living than women from lower-income households.

All the women worry about the financial impact of divorce and they are right to do so

because an abundance of research confirms that women do end up poorer after (Arber, 2004, Dolan, 2019, De Hoon et al., 2015). Jenkins (2008) analysis of data from the British Household Panel Survey found stark and sustained gender differences in income between men and women after divorce. After five years, men's earnings had increased by 25% whereas women's income levels remained lower than they had been prior to the divorce. Lichtenstein (2022) examined the financial well-being of divorced women from 1996 to 2016 and found that 40% of the cohort experienced financial strain for twenty years.

The financial aftermath of divorce for women is well researched, but the economic consequences for women who divorce in midlife are under explored. After divorce, older women have fewer years of working life remaining to recoup financial losses before old age. Remarriage can be a route to economic recovery (Jansen et al., 2009; Ozawa & Yoon, 2002), but age is a barrier to repartnering for older women (Brown et al., 2019). Economic well-being is lower for those who experience a later-life divorce than a divorce earlier in the life course (Lin et al., 2017; Zissimopoulos, 2013). When Lin and Brown (2021) investigated the economic consequences of grey divorce for women and men they found that women experienced a 45% reduction in their standard of living compared to a 21% reduction in the standard of living for men (Lin & Brown, 2021). The poverty levels of women who are on benefits are nearly twice as high for women who divorced after age 50, as they are for those who divorce prior to age 50 (Lin et al., 2021). By comparison, no appreciable economic differential emerges for men (Lin et al., 2017).

This study provides a clear explanation of why women are financially disadvantaged by divorce. Most of the participants married when they were very young and few went to university. During their marriages they shouldered the burden of childcare and took lower paid jobs so that their hours were more flexible. Most of them have no pensions, or savings, and cumulatively, these factors make them extremely financially vulnerable. For all the women in this study, financial anxiety is both real, and anticipatory. They believe that they will end up having less money than their husbands when their divorces are finalised and that inequity fuels their anger. Even Tessa, who is arguably the most professionally successful of all the participants, worries that:

*“I will end up aged 70 thinking “can I have cheese on my baked beans, or can I just have baked beans today? Whereas he is sitting in a nice little house in Oxford having sold the house in London for three million, four million pounds and won't have, noticed any*

*change to his lifestyle whatsoever,” (Tessa, High Income, T1, P11, L60)*

This study is unique because it is the first LIPA study to track the experience of divorce in real time and capture the changes in women’s psychological states as the move through the divorce process. For this particular theme, the key transition occurs at Time 3, six months post-divorce. By this time, the women’s financial settlements are in place and the overwhelming emotion is initially one of relief. Sheets and Braver (1996) found that even women who only received satisfactory divorce settlements still report high levels of satisfaction and they attributed this to the greater perceived control women gain after divorce. Valerie articulates this precisely,

*‘once the settlement was sorted, even though I knew it wasn’t going to be enough, once it was sorted and it was enough for the immediate years, five or six, it was an immense relief’ (Valerie).*

The women’s financial settlements provide them with certainty and allow them to begin to think, with greater clarity, about the future. At Time 3, the women realise that a lot of their anxiety was related to the fear that they might not have been awarded a reasonable settlement and the sense of autonomy that a divorce settlement provides gives the women a sense of both closure, and control. Doss Damo & Cenci (2021) identified a similar sequence of initial feelings - fear, relief, sadness, anger – in 24 people who had divorced or separated in the previous 3 years (Doss Damo & Cenci, 2021)

This study clearly demonstrates that divorce anxiety is exacerbated by the unnecessarily opaque legal process. There appears to be absolutely no regulation around legal fees. Tessa, the wealthiest woman in this study, paid just £5,000 for her divorce whereas Lisa, who would have qualified for legal aid if it had not been abolished, paid her lawyers more than £20,000. This study confirms that partners who are unwilling to co-operate, who lie about assets such as pensions, or who have the best legal advice, seem to be able to manipulate the legal process to their advantage. The inadequacies of the divorce process urgently need to be examined through the lens of the psychological impact that they have on women in particular.

Divorce is a traumatic experience but the women emerge from the process feeling as if they have survived something terrible. This seems to empower them and their mental health and wellbeing improves as a result. Lindsay feels *‘less depressed’* and her physical health

improves too. Angela feels '*less stressy*' and Eva feels '*more secure*', Rachel finds she can '*sleep*' again and Lisa finally feels like she is '*in control.*' One of the reasons that the women have transitioned from a negative to a positive emotional state is because they have had psychological support. Tessa, Angela, Rachel, Eva, Lisa, and Lindsay are either having counselling, or have had counselling to help them deal with the trauma of divorce. Searches of Google Scholar, Psych Info, APA and UCL academic libraries reveal no research on the specific impact of therapy on post-divorce adjustment in women who divorce in midlife, however Sakraida (2005) found that women use counselling or talking to friends as a coping method (Sakraida, 2005).

Women are generally more likely than men to seek help for psychological trauma. In fact women in the UK are more likely than men to receive treatment for all mental health conditions, with 15% of women receiving treatment compared to 9% of men (Lubian et al., 2016). The participants in this study certainly find counselling universally helpful and since being divorced is a predictor of higher health service utilisation (Twomey et al., 2015), the relationship between counselling and post-divorce adjustment merits further investigation from a health economics perspective. In this study counselling gives the participants much needed coping mechanisms for dealing with the stress of their divorces and in her final interview, Eva wisely advocates that everyone who goes through divorce should talk to a counsellor. As she says divorce may be a '*legal process*', but for the person going through it, it is an '*emotional experience*'

# Chapter 7.

## Theme 2. From Self-Doubt To Self-Worth

This theme explores the impact of midlife divorce on female agency. In the first interviews, the women reflect on how marriage has disempowered them and as a result they are now in a much more vulnerable position. By the third interview, a change has occurred, and the women are significantly more confident and determined.

### Time 1: Decree Nisi

#### Marriage disempowers women, regardless of income or employment

When the women in this study got married, they were expected to have children, not careers.

**Valerie** has been a wife and mother for three decades and she is not qualified to do anything else:

*“I’ve got no qualifications <-> I’ve not worked for 30 years”. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)*

When Valerie got married, she didn’t think that qualifications were important. In fact not working was aspirational because it meant that her husband was rich enough to support her.

**Lindsay** wanted to be a nurse but she had no qualifications.

*“I wanted to be a nurse and I hadn’t got any qualifications then, only secondary education. But I got accepted to go and take an exam and I passed and I got in. I went. I didn’t end up going. The biggest regret of my life.” (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P7, L12)*

Lindsay actually passed the nursing exam, but family problems prevented her taking the place. It is the biggest regret of her life because she knows that if she had a career to fall back on, she would not be in such a vulnerable position now.

For Valerie, Lindsay and all the other women in this study, being a wife and mother was a



full time job. Even those who worked full time still had primary responsibility for childcare and running the home.

**Rachel** was the main breadwinner in the family but she pulled a second shift when she got home:

*“Up all night, feed this, despite the fact that they were my beloved children and I love them to bits, work and then go home and cook. <-> I did everything. Absolutely everything. And then he would bowl in at 7 o’clock at night in time for dinner.  
(Rachel, High Income, T1, P7, L13)*

Rachel’s marriage was dogged by enormous domestic inequity and resentment was the inevitable consequence.

**Tessa** also worked full time but felt like she was doing two jobs:

*“actually I feel as if I’ve been doing two full time jobs for 25 years, <-> I’ve been making 80 percent of the effort and getting 20 percent of the power. And that’s what this is all about. That’s what this is all about, I’ve just had enough of putting all the effort in and getting none of the power” (Tessa, High Income, T1, P1, L57)*

Although she had a high powered job in the civil service, Tessa feels that during her marriage she did 80% of the work, but she only ever had 20% of the power. She asserts - twice- that her entire divorce is motivated by her lack of power in the marriage.

For all women, the job of ‘mother’ is time limited:

*“ It’s like, kind of, almost as if we, we’ve done our job now, well, you’ve brought the kids, you know, he doesn’t need you anymore. I mean. You know. I don’t particularly. You know. I don’t particularly want you now, you know, you do it, like we’ve done our job. Yeah. We’re like surplus to requirements” (Lisa, Low Income T1, P24, L3).*

After a lifetime of child rearing and domestic responsibility, **Lisa** likens midlife divorce to redundancy. Once the job of raising the kids is done, women are ‘surplus to requirements.

**Lindsay** echoes Lisa’s sentiment:

*'I felt like a piece of rubbish he'd just thrown in the bin. That's what I felt like.*  
(Lindsay, low income, T1, P15, L60)

**Rachel** sees menopause as the turning point:

*'once you've got the menopause it's like, as if men's instinct is that you've got to go. They're neither interested, or disinterested. You've just got to go. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L2)*

She feels that once women hit menopause, men lose interest in them and they become disposable. She repeats 'you've got to go' as if it is an ultimatum.

**Angela's** husband was particularly brutal:

*"stony faced" <-> hardened his resolve, yeah it made him think "she's really emotional I don't want to have anything to do with her" (Angela, T1, P13, L59)*

Her use of the words 'stony faced' and 'hardened' make her husband sound completely impenetrable. To not want anything to do with the mother of your child is the ultimate rejection.

## **Doubting the past. Fearing the future**

The women are neither married nor divorced at Time 1. The divorce has been filed for, but the actual state of 'being divorced' is as yet unknown. Suspended between marriage and divorce, they wait for the future to arrive.

**Angela** keeps herself busy doing things that feel meaningless:

*"I try to do a lot of things, you know, some of that feels a bit meaningless really, you know, you go to this, you go to that, when actually I just want to be part of my family."*  
(Angela, High Income T1, P12, L26)

She bides her time going to this, and that, but what she really wants to do is to go home.

**Mandy** turns her distress inwards and finds fault with herself.

*"I am so naive and that's why I get so upset with myself"*  
(Mandy, Low Income, T1, P32, L67)

She is full of self-doubt and hates the fact that she is so naïve.

**Eva** is self-critical too.

*“I feel I ought to be a bit more confident, I keep reading that people get more confident when they’re in middle age, but I don’t feel any more confident” (Eva, Low Income, T1, P14, L54)*

She compares herself to people that she reads about and finds that she does not measure up. The fact that she has not become more confident in middle-age compounds her feelings of inadequacy.

When **Angela** looks back, she sees her marriage through a completely different lens:

*“when I look back, you know, you, um, sort of feel like, um, he was in the driving seat a lot more than he would have thought, he was, um, he would say that I was in control and I was the sort of um assertive partner, but actually it when I look back now, I realise that wasn’t the case at all. I was trying to please him all the time”.*

*(Angela, High Income T1, P11, L15)*

Her husband used to tell her she was in control, but when she looks back, she realises that he was actually in the driving seat and she just spent all her time trying to please him

**Lindsay** no longer knows who she is:

*“I always thought it was Frank, Lindsay and Tina. And now it’s just Lindsay. And I didn’t know how to, even now. I don’t really know who Lindsay is, I don’t know who I am, because who I thought I was has been taken away, being a wife. And being the person who was the homemaker, even though I went to work. And the person who liked to look after people. You know. And the person who sorted family problems out, cos I did even, in his own family. I was always there to sort problems out” (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P30, L28)*

She was a wife, a mother, and a homemaker. Now that those roles have been taken away from her, she doesn’t know who she is anymore.

**Valerie** describes a kind of existential dread as she contemplates what lies ahead:

*“I’m in limbo. I need to know what’s going to happen even though I’m terrified of what that might be and that I don’t know what to say”. (Valerie, High Income T1, P18, L46)*

She talks about being ‘in Limbo’, a ‘non-place’. Limbo is an appropriate analogy for the Decree Nisi stage of divorce which leaves all the women in a very uncertain state. Uncertainty creates a sense of stasis. The women can’t go backwards and they don’t know what lies ahead, so they can’t move forwards either:

## **Time 2 & 3: Decree Absolute and six months later**

### **Midlife divorce increases feelings of confidence, control, and self-worth.**

At Times 2 and 3, the women reflect on how they were constantly undermined by their husbands when they were married. Now that they are divorced, they realise that they are much more confident and capable than they ever realised.

When **Lisa** looks back she sees that her husband made her feel like a useless idiot:

*“I’m not willing to put up with any, any nonsense now, I just if I don’t want to do something, I don’t do it and I’ll say so, it’s been. I have paid and I’ve had counselling, I’ve not just sailed through it, but I think you do you find yourself again and I realise I’m not the idiot I was made to feel and I’m not useless and I am quite capable of doing things myself, so it’s just sad that it’s, you know, after all these years that it’s, that it’s come to this” (Lisa Low Income, T2, P33, L6)*

Being alone has shown her that she is actually very smart and quite capable. She feels that she has found ‘herself’ again and she is much stronger and more determined. She wishes it had not taken her so long to realise her own worth.

**Lindsay’s** husband also made her feel useless:

*“I think the change is that Frank’s gone. I think he made me feel I was useless I couldn’t do anything” (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P62, L5)*

Lindsay used to be scared of everything when she was married. She was afraid to drive anywhere by herself but now, she puts a route into her satnav and heads off. Lindsay is

‘going places’, in every sense:

*“I was scared, I was scared of everything. I am now scared but I’m not as scared how can. When I was married, I was scared of everything the littlest of things could scare me. I wouldn’t drive I wouldn’t drive a distance on me own I wouldn’t plan a route and go and drive somewhere. Now I put me satnav on me phone and I can find places and go places”.*  
(Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L65)

**Eva’s** husband also made her feel very insecure:

*“and he wasn’t going to make me feel secure because that’s down to me, but I was wanting him to do something that he couldn’t do, so that was difficult, and I wasn’t able to realize that until he left, and then I thought, once he’d gone, the whole world doesn’t fall apart, I can manage, I can unblock the loo, I can phone people up and get them to come and sort things out”* (Eva, Low Income, T3, P45, L53)

Now Eva takes pleasure in the fact that she can do practical things for herself. When she was married, she relied on her husband to make her feel secure so being able to unblock the loo or call a handyman confirms that she can manage by herself. Eva now accepts that her security is, and always was, something that she has to take responsibility for.

Like Eva, **Valerie** has discovered that she is much more capable than she thought she was:

*“facing lots of challenges, and being continually outside my comfort zone which I never was and I used to think I can’t do that, I don’t know about this, and I couldn’t possibly do that, and all of those things I do, I don’t think to myself, I do think I can’t do it, I don’t have a lot of choice sometimes, and I just have to go ahead and ring this person and make that uncomfortable phone call, and hang on the phone for hours, and deal with aggravation, and these things I never thought I’d be able to do”* (Valerie High Income T3, P43, L58)

**Mandy’s** ex-husband controlled her completely, but since the divorce she has become much more assertive:

*“I don’t take any nonsense I have stopped being a yes person because I suppose I’ve always been so controlled it’s always been yes okay, yes okay, yes okay and I would be*

*running myself ragged to please everybody whereas now I just say no I can't do that <->so you know I have taken back control in quite a few different ways, so I'm definitely changed like that" (Mandy Low Income T3, P48, L61)*

Mandy has stopped being a 'yes' person who runs herself ragged trying to please everyone. She has definitely "changed" and has 'taken back control' of her life.

### **Feeling better about life**

Post-divorce, all the women are in a much more positive state of mind. Now that she doesn't have to tiptoe around her husband, **Lisa** feels that she is a different 'better' person:

*"I think I have to say that it has changed me for the better. I think I'm a nicer a better person because I don't have to be walking on eggshells" (Lisa Low Income, T3, P43, L43)*

Emotionally, **Angela** feels that she is in a better place. She also has a better understanding of the dynamic that led to the divorce now:

*"I feel like I'm in a much better place in terms of my emotional understanding than I was before, (Angela, High Income T3, P28, L42)*

**Eva** feels much freer now, and she is proud at how she has coped with everything:

*"I feel much freer I think that's just how I feel I do feel freer, and I've coped with everything now I've been through all those stressful things of divorce and death and moving house and being diagnosed with a serious illness. I've done all of them I'm still here, so you just get on with it and I think that's I think it's natural in human beings to worry about things and now I've got big worries I realize that there is a quite pathetic really, but I think if you haven't got big worries the little worries just fill the space you have to worry about don't they so just I am quite a pragmatic person. I take every day as it comes and I think of that John Lennon song you know life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans" (Eva, Low Income, T2, P33, L20)*

Eva's cancer diagnosis has helped her to put a lot of things in perspective, so she does not worry about the future. Instead, she prefers to 'take each day as it comes':

**Lindsay's** physical health has also improved.

*"I think generally my health is a bit better. Yes I do, and I think it's now, this is all over, all since Frank's been gone, even, I think I've had a bit better health, yes I do. There's still things I can't do, or I still have days here and there and I'm unreliable, but generally speaking, I would say I am, so perhaps some of the stress of living with him. I'm convinced I became ill because of my marriage. I'm convinced of that, you know, about being knocked about cause it wasn't just a slap across the face, when he did do it you know, and don't get me wrong, he never blacked me eye, I never got a bloody nose, or a bloody lip, but I'd be black and blue down here and down me arm there, or all down me back. I remember once I saw me back and it was all colours, like from down there."* (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P69, L46)

She has begun to understand the association between the stress of living with Frank and hiding the domestic violence and the health problems that dogged her during her marriage.

**Valerie's** divorce has not been easy, but the obstacles she has encountered seem to have made her stronger and more confident:

*"I found the confidence who'd have thought I could tackle obstacles that have been thrown my way"* (Valerie High Income T2, P38, L50)

**Tessa** is much more optimistic about her life:

*"I make my own decisions about absolutely everything, that's huge for me, so I don't have to consult. If I want to buy pans and I know it sounds silly as an example, but I don't, I can get rid of things, I get rid of a lot, <-> or buy another one, so that feels very good, so I make my, I'm doing a lot of, it's easy, life is easy in terms of, I don't have to consult, you know, I just, I just, I just make my own decisions. I know what I want to do, and I just get on and do it now, you know, it's, I'm to, I'm at liberty to, I'm not controlled. I feel very free <-> I feel much, I feel in control of it all, which is good* (Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L65)

Now she feels that she is finally 'at liberty' to make her own decisions and life is a lot easier as a result. She doesn't have to consult her husband and she can just get on and do stuff. She no longer feels that she is being controlled and that feels good.

**Lisa** also feels that she is finally in control her own destiny:

*“it’s in my control now isn’t it so it’s down to me to make the best of it really and that’s not revenge I don’t think the right word but to go on and have a good life that’s the best the best thing you can do” (Lisa Low Income, T3, P37, L29)*

Lisa is determined to make the most of her life going forwards. For a woman who has been treated as badly as Lisa has, living well really is the best revenge.

## **Opportunities for growth**

Many of the women have set themselves new goals or found new projects and activities to engage in. **Lindsay** is thinking about going back to school:

*“I have thought about going back to college and doing O level, is it an O level <-> so I’ve thought about going to, I like English, I used to love English, and English literature at school, so I thought well I’ll do that one” (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P43, L30)*

Although she is sixty years old, she wants to go back to school and do her GCSE’s. She is looking forward, not backwards now, and from thinking about getting a GCSE in English and math, she moves from volunteering through to an image of herself working in a school:

*“I’ve seen a job working for MENCAP, but voluntary, six hours one day a week, and they will train you to do one to one session with disabled people, or mentally impaired people as well, just basic things like reading, writing, so I’ve got that on me iPad now. I’ve downloaded the stuff so I’ve just got to get me CV together and I’m going apply for that because I said to Tina that might get me into something<-> You know they’ll train if they’re going to train me to get some basic skills of doing that and then could perhaps go on to working in a school. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P56, L4)*

Being able to picture the future is an important part of the post -divorce recovery process for Lindsay.

**Valerie** has completely turned her life around:



*“I’m completely different I’ve really, really grown in confidence I’ve launched this business which has excelled all expectations”*

*(Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)*

**Angela** has turned the activities that she previously described as ‘meaningless’ into useful coping strategies:

*“I have more tools to manage it because I’m going, you know, I go to the gym much more, and I’ve been meditating now for about three years, or trying to, so I sort of feel like I’ve got tools to manage it, (Angela, High Income T3, P28, L51)*

She has developed a number of healthy coping strategies and the activities that she has used to fill her time, have become useful self-help tools.

**Lisa** is investing in herself too:

*“I’ve got back to doing a few keep fit classes I don’t particularly relish them but after I’m there afterwards I feel better so I’m doing that I’ve been on holiday I don’t know and I’m seeing my parents and various friends that I meet up with and do things through yes it’s just you’ve got to put a bit of effort in it doesn’t come knocking to your door but it’s worth it because you’re kind of doing for yourself if that makes sense” (Lisa Low Income, T3, P44, L10)*

She is going to the gym regularly, and although it’s an effort, it makes her feel better, so she perseveres. She is also investing in her social support network and is spending time with her parents and her friends.

**Rachel** has discovered that she has a talent for doing mosaics:

*“I have started mosaic classes and I have absolutely unbelievably taken to it like fish to water. First time I did it I couldn’t believe it and I’m going to have a studio and I’m going to do portraits of women” (Rachel, High Income, T3, P40, L60)*

Discovering her creative ‘self’ has given Rachel’s life new meaning and purpose and her newfound creativity is helping her to envisage a new life for herself.

## Moving forwards

Moving on after divorce is both psychological and geographic. Most of the women have had to sell their family homes and downsize. Although that seemed terrifying when the divorce was initiated, resettling, and owing their own homes helps to give the women a sense of security.

**Tessa** is now living in her own house and thinking about what she wants to do with her life:

*“the point is I have moved on, Because I moved, and because that’s a final, literally closing the door, I feel that, that, kind, I’m now thinking ahead, In terms of, what’s next for me, And the answer is well I can do any job I like, I can move abroad if I want to, I can let my house out and I can, I can go, you know I could, I could save some money and take a year off, You know, I could do an extra bathroom, I could have a lodger, You know, I could do something at the City Lit or something at Birkbeck, I can do whatever I want, full of opportunity, (Tessa, High Income, T2, P27, L1)*

Simple things like being able to make decisions about saving money, putting in a bathroom, taking in a lodger, or going to night classes give Tessa a sense of agency. She is finally able to think in terms of ‘*what’s next for me?*’

For **Mandy**, having her own money is transformative. It makes a material difference to her life, and to the lives of her adult children, but it also gives her the power to control her own destiny. Money means she can look forward to having a new car and a new kitchen, and she can give her children deposits so that they can buy their own homes. Most importantly, having money will finally allow Mandy to live like a ‘normal’ person:

*“I’m very happy that I can look after my children and I’m not going to be worrying about money at all yeah I’m very happy that I can have a new kitchen and I can have a new car, and I know it sounds stupid, but I can live like a ‘normal’ person” (Mandy T3, P51, L51)*

Having been terrified of losing her home, **Rachel** is now excited about moving :

*“I think of the studio I’m going to have, any of these three houses I saw have gardens, I have to have a garden, and there’s plenty of room where I am going to hopefully have a studio.” (Rachel, T3, P41, L36)*

The desire to have space for a studio for her mosaic works has made the prospect of moving from her house feel like a positive step forward.

At Time One **Angela** was still hoping that her husband might call off the divorce, but by Time 3 she says:

*“Yeah, I’ve definitely moved on. (Angela, High Income T3, P32, L34)*

Although Angela has moved house, for her moving on is both geographic and psychological.

## **Theme 2. Discussion**

From a demographic perspective, the participants in this study are a representative sample of women who were born during the baby boom and inculcated with very traditional ideas about gender roles. All the women’s identities were very much bound up in *‘being a wife. And being the person who was the homemaker’* (Lindsay). The ‘motherhood penalty’ is the term that is widely used to describe the disadvantages that having children has on women’s earnings and career prospect (England et al., 2016). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women have many more opportunities, but they are still expected to be the primary carers for children (Hadfield et al., 2007). In April to June 2019, 3 in 4 mothers with dependent children (75.1%) were in work in the UK, but almost 3 in 10 mothers (28.5%) with a child aged 14 years and under, said that they had reduced their working hours because of childcare reasons. This compares with just 1 in 20 fathers (4.8%) (ONS, 2019).

Kahn et al., (2014) used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Young Women (NLS-YW) to model the motherhood penalty over the course of women’s careers as they age and found that for the majority of mothers who had fewer than three children, by the time they reached their 40s, their wages approached those of childless women. However the women in this particular study are aged between 50 and 65, and that extra decade makes a difference. Women over 50 face particular difficulties in accessing work in later life. Deemed *‘too old to hire, too young to retire’*, they tend to have been away from the labour market for longer and they face additional barriers such as a lack of digital skills. They also impede themselves by having very gendered expectations about the types of jobs that they perceive themselves as being suitable for.

In this study, seven of the eight women worked, but in both the low income and the high income groups, work choices were often limited to jobs with flexible hours that would fit around childcare. Peake & McDowall's (2012) research demonstrates that career development is never linear and for women in particular, external factors such as pregnancy, and by extension, childcare, scupper progress (Peake & McDowall, 2012). Women with children are much more likely to drop out of work force, to cut back to part-time employment, or to choose occupations that are family friendly (Harkness et al., 2019). Cumulatively, these compromises mean that mothers achieve less than women who are able to commit to full-time employment and take advantage of opportunities for training and career advancement (Aisenbrey et al., 2009).

Working is about much more than having an income. It is a protective factor for women's mental and physical health. When Caputo et al, (2020) drew on more than three decades of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Mature Women to assess the relationship between female employment during midlife and women's mental and physical health and mortality over the following 16–25 years, they found that consistent work earlier in life predicted improved health and longevity as women enter late life.

Valerie was the only woman in the group who actively chose not to work at all. Her husband earned a lot of money, so she didn't need to. She was also culturally programmed to believe that it was better for women to stay at home and mind the children. The paradoxical 'good' stay at home mother and 'bad' working mother argument is one that only those who don't require a second income can afford to engage with, but Valerie's domestic arrangements are still very much a middle class ideal (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015). However, as Valerie realises to her detriment, women who adhere to traditional gender roles are doubly disadvantaged after midlife divorce. She emerges from her marriage with no qualifications and she has not worked for thirty years, so her chances of getting a job are extremely limited.

Theoretically, the empty nest should relieve women of their domestic burden and allow them to pursue jobs, but having been out of the market for decades, the women have no skills and no confidence. All the women in this study were also very young when they married which limited their opportunities for education and employment. This was not unusual at the time. Today, the average age at which a woman in the UK marries is 31.5 years, but in 1970 it was 22.8 years (ONS, 2019). Valerie and Lindsay had '*no qualifications*' (Valerie, Lindsay) and

bar Tessa, none of the women had been to university. This is in line with research which shows that in the UK, women over the age of 50 are less qualified than any other age group: one in five 50 to 64 year olds have no qualifications compared to less than one in ten 35 to 49 year olds (Palmer, 2015) and fewer than half (48.5%) of those with no qualifications are in employment compared with 8 in 10 (80.7%) of those with at least one qualification (UK Census, 2011).

Like any major transition that disrupts routine, the empty nest has the potential to change the way people evaluate interpersonal circumstances (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010) and one of the key determinants of a woman's response to the empty nest is her level of involvement in the maternal role (Black & Hill, 1984). Research into 'empty nest syndrome' tends to focus on maternal feelings of redundancy which relate to children no longer needing mothering. Sheriff and Weatherall (2009) explored this topic in their accounts of post maternity and observed that '*a nest without chicks captures some of the redundancy of a family home without children*' (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009).

However, in this study, the significance of the empty nest is less to do with losing children from the home and more to do with losing the role that made them feel valuable within the marriage. Lisa explains that once children are raised '*we've done our job now, well, you've brought the kids, you know, he doesn't need you anymore*' (Lisa). The feelings of redundancy that Lisa describes relate to the fact that she is now worthless to her husband. Her job is done and she, as a woman, is now '*surplus to requirements*' (Lisa). Lisa articulates it most explicitly, but it is a sentiment that many of the women share. Lindsay felt like '*a piece of rubbish he'd just thrown in the bin*' (Lindsay) and Rachel believes that once women hit menopause '*men's instinct is that you've got to go*' (Rachel). Angela's '*stony faced*' husband didn't '*want to have anything to do with her*' (Angela). I can't find any research that has explored the uncomfortable relationship between midlife divorce, an empty nest, and feelings of marital redundancy which were mentioned by so many of the women in my study. It is possible that it is a phenomenon that is specific to women born in the Baby Boom whose primary role in adult life has been motherhood. It may also be a reflection of their very low self-esteem at that time point.

Certainly, all the women in this study feel angry about how things have worked out for them. They feel that they sacrificed opportunities, shouldered the entire domestic burden, ran the home, and raised the kids, and yet, they got absolutely no credit for it. Looking back on the

domestic inequity that they experienced within their marriages, the women regret prioritising the needs of their families and wish they had thought more about their own needs. This is in line with existing research by Levinson and Levinson (1996) which observed that middle-aged women, born during the Baby Boom, who adhered to traditional gender roles of wife and mother, had more serious regrets than women of that generation who had also pursued a career (Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Nearly two decades later, Newton et al. (2012) found that the majority of women experience regrets about prioritising their family and significantly more regrets about experiencing limitations on their career such as working part-time instead of full-time.

Although the women resent their husbands for taking their labour for granted within the marriage, they also blame themselves for allowing it to happen. Regret is a backward looking emotion which is experienced when people realise that their present situation would have been better if they made different decisions in the past (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007). The women are riddled with self-doubt and self-blame and they regret the choices that they made, or that they failed to make. When Angela looks back she realises that her husband was in the driving seat and she was *'always trying to please him'* (Angela). Eva wishes that she was *'more confident'* (Eva) and Mandy gets upset with herself for being *'so naïve'* (Mandy). They try to do things to keep busy, but it all feels *'meaningless'* (Angela) and they end up feeling as if they are in *'Limbo'* (Valerie). They regret the past and are *'terrified'* (Valerie) of the future.

Divorce can serve as a *'midcourse correction'* for women who have regrets about adhering to traditional roles within a marriage. (Stewart and Vandewater, 1999) and by Times 2&3, the experience of divorce seems to have galvanised the women. They have a very different perspective on what happened during their marriages. Lindsay realises that there was nothing wrong with her, it was her husband that made her feel *'useless'*. Lisa realises that she is not the *'idiot'* she was made to feel in her marriage and Eva recognises that she had been looking to her husband to make her feel more secure but now she knows that she can manage alone.

Eva delights in the fact that she can *'can unblock the loo'* and Lindsay, who was *'scared of everything'* when she was married, now puts on her SatNav, and takes herself to new places.

Stewart and Vandewater (1999) also found evidence that recognising regret can motivate behavioural changes such as returning to school to pursue a degree. That is certainly the case

for the women in this study. Although she is sixty years old, Lindsay has *'thought about going back to college and doing O levels' (Lindsay)* so that she can get a decent job. Peake and McDowell (2012) found that external factors and unforeseen event can be a catalyst for career change. Their study of seven men and women who had made mid-career transitions found that experiences such as an unplanned pregnancy or unexpected redundancy can end up providing the impetus that is needed for a career change. Midlife divorce is no exception. By the end of the study Valerie has *'launched this business which has excelled all expectations' (Valerie)*. Lindsay is applying for volunteering work at a charity with a view to full time employment. Lisa has gone full time at her job in a supermarket and Tessa is applying for a different job.

The women are also investing in personal growth. Rachel has discovered that she has a talent for mosaic and she begins to *'think of the studio I'm going to have' (Rachel)*. Angela is practicing meditation and Lindsay feels that her mental and physical health has improved since the divorce and is convinced that the stress of her marriage was what made her sick in the first place. This finding that is at odds with most research which finds that midlife divorce has an adverse impact on women's health (Wickrama, 2022, Thomas et al., 2019, Lorenz et al., 2006).

Other studies have found that divorce enables women to become more independent, feel more in control of their lives, and acquire greater self-esteem (Baum et al., 2005) and that they go through a process of *'finding themselves'* (Gregson and Ceynar, 2009). More recently, Sarah Milton (2022) conducted some qualitative research in which middle-aged divorced women spoke of *'a newfound independence which they both valued and enjoyed, compared to the 'compromise' they had experienced within their former relationships (Milton & Qureshi, 2022)*. In Milton's (2022) study, women described finally *'knowing themselves'*, and being increasingly conscious of their ability to make *'deliberate choices that were in their own interests'*. This study echoes Milton's findings. Although divorce has not been easy for them, they come through the experience feeling stronger, more confident, and more optimistic about the future. The words *'free'* and in *'control'* are repeated constantly. They have discovered autonomy and are determined to make the most of themselves and the time they have left.

## Chapter 8.

### Theme 3. Repartnering: From Unattainable To Undesirable

This theme explores the women's aspirations to repartner after divorce. Initially the women would like to find new relationships, but they know that age is a barrier because men prefer younger women. By the time their divorces are complete, the women are much more focused on protecting their financial settlements. They are enjoying their independence and finding a new relationship is not a priority.

#### Time 1: Decree Nisi

##### Being older makes it much harder

The women are not yet divorced but they are thinking about the future and finding a new relationship. Although they would like their divorces to have a 'nice fairy-tale ending', they know that age means the odds are stacked against them. The women feel angry that it is acceptable for middle aged men to date, but the same is not true in reverse.

**Rachel** believes that menopause is the female equivalent to a 'best by' date:

*"The whole idea that it's okay for a man to go out – this is our society- with a woman who is 26, 36, 40 years younger than him. And this is what we are. And then, you know, I thought of the menopause. And I thought, once you've got the menopause, it's like as if men are, their instinct is that you've got to go. They're neither interested in it, nor disinterested. You've just got to go. <-> I mean why have we got this. And we, we applaud and laud it." (Rachel, High Income. T1, P22, L1)*

She rails at the unfairness of a society which disposes of women once they have reached menopause yet lauds older men who date women who are several decades younger.

**Angela** thinks that the odds of repartnering are against older women too.

*"I think I've been particularly angry about the whole thing because I'm older, <-> I did*



*feel, you know, and I still do really, he's left me, um, and it's very, very different for middle-aged women than it is for middle aged men. I don't know if you've ever been on 'Guardian Soulmates' for example <-> they are 60, <-> they would like to meet a woman between 35 and 50."* (Angela, T1, P11, L8)

She has been experimenting unsuccessfully with online dating, but she is finding it to be a very disheartening experience, because men of her age are only interested in dating much younger women. She worries that she is too old now because the men in her age bracket are only interested in women who are significantly younger:

**Mandy** sees her age as a barrier too:

*"so where as if it had been 10 years before, if I have been 43 not 53 you know, probably I would have looked for something more in my life, but no,"*  
(Mandy T1, P14, L4)

She feels that if the divorce had happened ten years earlier she would have had a chance of meeting someone new. Because she is now 53 years old, she feels that divorce has robbed her of the possibility of future happiness:

*"I mean I just feel that he's robbed me of any future happiness, you know, because now I feel too tired and too old and too far down the line to happily start another relationship."*  
(Mandy, Low income, T1, P25, L3)

She is just too old and too tired and 'too far down the line' to have another relationship:

**Eva** has terminal cancer, and she thinks that getting involved with someone else would just be too complicated:

*"I'm not thinking of getting married now because it's just too complicated, I can't deal with the complications, um, you know, do you want to come and live with me and sit around in a hospital while I wait for a consultant, um",* (Eva, Low income, T1, P11, L21)

She needs to conserve her energy and she is pragmatic about the limited appeal of having a relationship with someone who spends half their life in hospital waiting rooms.

**Angela** sums up how the women feel about midlife dating:

*and I just think it's really, really, really hard for middle-aged women, you know"*  
(Angela, High Income. T1, P11, L28)

Although they know that their chances of finding a new partner are limited, they allow themselves to dream

**Valerie** thinks it would be nice to have someone in her life:

*"I didn't leave my husband to, for somebody else. <-> wasn't desperately trying to find somebody else, you know, to help me out, to pursue my knight in shining armour. That would be a huge bonus. I'm not denying it. Yeah, that wasn't the reason I left. Yeah. So I'm not looking for a man to come and save me. But it would be nice to have a. It would be nice to have someone in my life".* (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L53)

Valerie already has a boyfriend and she still keeps her lover on the side, but she still believes that finding someone to 'help her out' would be a huge bonus. Although she insists that she doesn't need rescuing, she would not be averse to being saved by a knight in shining armour.

**Lisa** would also like a fairy-tale ending:

*"I'd like to think, or be a nice fairy-tale ending <-> But yeah, I wouldn't like to think that I would never. I think I'd like a quite like a companion, or like someone that you can take out of the cupboard, a bit like when you're a child and you got toys and you take them out when you want, and when you don't want em, you can put em back in"* (Lisa Low Income, T1, P20, 62)

The relationship that Lisa describes is a fantasy which is entirely on her terms. She wants a companion that she can play with when she feels like it, but who can be put back in the cupboard when she loses interest. Focusing on fairy tales is a way of avoiding the grim reality of midlife dating. When she says 'I wouldn't like to think that I would never' she betrays her anxiety about the fact that she might never find another relationship.

**Eva** misses companionship:

*"I miss the companionship. I miss having a cuddle, I miss when you come home at night there isn't someone there to say how was your day, that's what I miss, but then my ex*

*wasn't very good at that anyway, so I suppose it's just having somebody there, they don't actually do anything, they're just there" (Eva, Low Income, T1, P15, 49)*

However when Eva says she 'misses' simple things like having a cuddle and having someone to talk to at the end of the day, she is not describing something that she has lost because her ex never actually did any of those things for her. What she is really describing is what she would like to have in her ideal relationship. Realising her mistake, she concludes that because men don't actually do anything so relationships are just about having somebody else around.

**Mandy** finds it difficult to think about the future at all:

*"but yeah, I mean I, I cannot see a life, I can't see a life, I can't see a different life. I'm never going to have a relationship with anybody else*

*(Mandy T1, P14, L42)*

She didn't want her marriage to end and she cannot picture herself in a different life or a different relationship.

## **Times 2&3: Decree Absolute and six months later**

### **The women are unwilling to jeopardize their financial security by having a new relationship**

Once the women's financial settlements are in place there is a clear focus on protecting the assets that they have fought so hard to secure. They don't trust other people's motives and they have been wrong once, so what would stop them being wrong again.

**Lisa** won't jeopardize her financial security:

*"I'm not gonna jeopardize what I fought so hard to get, what I've got now, and I'm certainly not going to jeopardize losing any of it now, but that's me, other people you know need to be in a relationship, don't know, some people have to, but I, am at the moment that's, no I don't. I don't need and can't see that it can enhance my life in any way" (Lisa Low Income, T2, P37, L38)*

She fought a long and difficult battle to get her divorce settlement and having finally achieved a degree of financial stability, she can't see what a relationship would bring to her

life.

**Lindsay** has also had to fight for what she got and she has no intention of sharing it:

*“even if I did meet somebody, I can’t see me ever having anybody in my home me now no, no visit, you visit, yeah that’s fine come for a, mean yeah that’s fine, but no I’m not sharing my home with another man ever again. What I’ve got here I’ve worked hard for, I’ve had to fight for every step of the way when I shouldn’t have to do, when I’ve worked, because one man said it was all his, it was all his money, because he was the breadwinner” (Lindsay, Low income, T2, P42, L34)*

Lindsay feels that she worked hard to get the money she was awarded in the divorce and she has no intention of diluting her assets by letting a man share her home.

**Mandy** is now wealthy. However she finds that money is a double-edged sword.

*“I would say, I would assume that somebody would be wanting something out of it other than just a friendship and I suppose the money side of that has made it a little bit more difficult as well in the sense that I don’t know, you know, now it would be are they going out with me because they know I am okay, you know, I have a nice house, I have a nice car”. (Mandy, Low income, T2, P47, L28)*

Mandy feels that she couldn’t have a relationship because she would be too suspicious that any man who might want to date her would just be after her money:

*“I just could not fall into a relationship, you know <-> I just don’t want anybody, I don’t want to be suspicious of why people are there, unless they’re fixing my car and fixing my water tank” (Mandy, Low income, T3, P49, L29)*

Mandy’s settlement has given her financial security but it has also created a barrier to the possibility of a new relationship. She would rather be alone than become economically entwined with anyone who might potentially threaten her financial security.

Money also makes it difficult for **Eva** to trust other people’s motives:

*“I’m a lot better off than I would have been which is nice because I don’t have to worry about money, but yes, there’s always that, I just think that relationships are very difficult,*

*...<-> It's not just about not trusting them, it's about trusting my judgment of that person, because I thought I knew my husband and I obviously didn't and I don't know whether the person I thought he was when I married him was that person, and what I believed about how things were going was happening, or whether he was this other person, and I just didn't see it, and whether that would be the same if I met someone else who looked really nice" (Eva Low Income, T3, P50, L58)*

It is not just about not trusting men. Eva wouldn't allow herself to have another relationship because when it comes to men, she no longer trusts her own judgement. She was wrong before and she could be wrong again.

### **The women value their independence and are ambivalent about finding a new partner**

Post-divorce, the women are more optimistic about the possibility of finding a new partner but they no longer want one. They are intent on retaining their independence.

**Lisa** is not looking for a relationship at all:

*"At the moment that is really I really can't see what anyone could bring to my life at the moment that could enhance it so I'm certainly I'm certainly not looking, and I can't imagine me ever, I can't imagine me ever re marrying, and I kind of think I wouldn't live with anybody. I could see having a relationship, they do, you know, meet up, maybe stay over there or something, but again, that's a, I feel, a long way off, but I can't"*  
(Lisa Low Income, T2, P37, L35)

She can imagine herself having a relationship at some point in the future but whoever it is will be staying firmly 'over there' and she cannot imagine herself living with someone or remarrying. Divorce has made think about what she wants and how a relationship might enhance her life. She concludes that it would add nothing.

**Lindsay** is very clear about wanting to retain her independence too:

*"I think I'll end up wanting a physical relationship if somebody's nice to me, and kind to me, and we can go places, but I still want my independence. I still want to be able if they came here, say look I'm fed up of you now, go, go home you"*  
(Lindsay, Low income, T3, P75, L5)

She wants a sexual relationship with someone who will be kind to her, and who she can do things with, but she wants to be able to get rid of them when she is fed up with them. She is much more assertive and if she has a relationship with anyone it will be on her terms.

**Valerie** is equally ambivalent about commitment:

*“owning my own flat, and he stays sometimes, and I kind of look forward to when he goes so I’ve got my place back to myself again, and I’m thinking if I’m happy to see him three or four nights a week and stay there, but as happy to leave him and get back to my own space again, how can I possibly ever live with somebody again, you know, they say people get older you get set in your ways, you don’t want to live with someone again and I’m thinking to myself how am I ever going to ..”.* (Valerie, High Income, T3, P45, L46)

Although she has a boyfriend and she likes it when he stays over, she is just as happy when he leaves and she is not sure that she will ever be able to live with anyone again.

**Eva** now believes that the only way for her to be herself is to remain single:

*“I don’t feel I could be myself unless I’m on my own, that I could be myself with somebody else”* (Eva, Low Income, T3, P45, L11)

**Angela** no longer trusts men and she is unable to think about a new relationship.

*“It makes me <-> very, very, very cautious, <-> I sort of think I can’t really focus on a new relationship at the moment”.* (Angela, High Income, T3, P34, L25)

Angela’s confidence has been knocked by the failure of her marriage and she feels so badly betrayed that she would be ‘very, very, very’ cautious about trusting anyone else.

**Mandy** completely rules out the possibility of a new relationship:

*“I gave my heart to him and it’s not there to give to anybody else now”*  
(Mandy, Low Income, T3, P53, L52)

Despite everything her husband put her through, **Mandy** feels that she gave her heart to her husband and so therefore, it is not hers to give to anyone else.

## Theme 3. Discussion

Collectively, the women have difficulty envisioning themselves in new relationships and the idea of a new partner seems to be something that several of the women can only ‘imagine’. Lisa and Valerie fantasise about a ‘*fairy tale ending*’ (Lisa) and being saved by a ‘*knight in shining armour*’ (Valerie), while Eva conjures up a spectral companion who doesn’t actually do anything but is ‘*just there*’ (Eva). The unreal way the women broach the topic of repartnering, may, in part, reflect the ambiguity that they feel about relational commitment. Lisa articulates it best when she describes wanting a companion that she ‘*can take out of the cupboard, a bit like when you’re a child and you got toys and you take them out when you want, and when you don’t want em, you can put em back in*’ (Lisa).

The women are acutely conscious of how their age disadvantages them. Rachel describes how menopause makes women invisible to the opposite sex and rails at the fact that it is deemed perfectly acceptable for a man to out with a woman who is ‘*26, 36, 40 years younger than him*’ (Rachel). Eva’s life is made more complicated by the fact that she has a terminal cancer diagnosis, so the idea of getting married again would be ‘*too complicated*’ (Eva). It would also be very unlikely. Older women are significantly less likely to be actively dating than men of the same age (Miller et al., 2021) and they are less likely to remarry than men. When Brown and Lin examined women’s and men’s likelihoods of forming a remarriage or cohabiting union they, found that about 22 % of women and 37 % of men repartnered within 10 years after grey divorce (Brown et al., 2019).

Theoretically, online dating should make it easier for the women to repartner, but Angela’s experience with it has been disastrous. Age hypergamy, the tendency of men to date and marry women who are younger than themselves, becomes more extreme with age and she routinely sees men of 60 advertising for partners in their thirties. Research by England and McClintock found that when men are in their 20’s they typically marry women who are roughly one year younger than they are, but when men are over 60, they typically marry women who are between 9 and 12 years younger than they are (England and McClintock, 2009).

Women are doubly disadvantaged by the fact that, on average, they live longer than men, so after the age of 40, there are significantly more women than men in the population. Mandy realises that if she had been even ten years younger, she might have had a chance of meeting

someone new. By waiting until she was 53, her husband has managed to ‘rob’ her of the ‘*chance of any future happiness*’ (Mandy). Demographics and age hypergamy mean that the repartnering pool shrinks rapidly as women age, whereas for ageing men, the pool of eligible partners grows (Schimmele and Wu 2016). As a result, older women are less likely to repartner and more likely to live alone. In 2007, 20% of men and 30% of women in the 65–74 year age group lived alone (Rolls et al., 2011).

When the women talk about the possibility of meeting someone new, they describe wanting a relationship that is based on companionship, rather than sex. This is in line with existing research which finds that companionship is by far the most cited reason for dating in mid and later life (Dickson et al., 2005). The emphasis on companionship may also reflect the predominant cultural script which suggests that sexual desire is not an age-appropriate norm for women in midlife (Bradway & Beard, 2015,).

The second interviews in this study took place shortly after the women’s divorces were granted and the third interviews took place within twelve months. This time frame may not have been long enough for the women to really put the experience behind them and lingering feelings of vulnerability make them very cautious about any kind of romantic commitment. As Angela says, the fact that a man she loved and trusted for twenty years could ‘*just betray me by leaving me, makes me very, very, very cautious*’ (Angela). Rachel has been damaged by all the ‘*lies, deceit and betrayal*’ and as a result she feels she must now ‘*question everything*’ (Rachel).

There is a clear shift in the way that the women approach the possibility of repartnering between Time 1, and Times 2 and 3. At Time 1, meeting a new partner is a fantasy that is out of their reach. At Time 2 and 3, it is something that they may, or may not, eventually choose to do, but they will only do it if it is on their terms. The women’s divorce settlements have given them greater financial security and they are much more ambivalent about repartnering as a result. Lisa is ‘*can’t see what anyone could bring to my life at the moment that could enhance it*’ (Lisa). Even Valerie, who has continually had both a romantic partner and a backup just in case, asks ‘*how can I possibly ever live with somebody again*’ (Valerie).

Although she looks forward to seeing her boyfriend, she looks forward to him going home just as much. Lindsay thinks she will want a relationship at some point but she is adamant that she wants to retain her independence, ‘*I still want to be able, if they came here, say look,*



*I'm fed up of you now, go, go home you' (Lindsay).*

The motivations for repartnering in midlife are very different to the motivations driving relationships at earlier stages of the life course. With children out of the picture, the resources and constraints facing older adults are different from those that younger adults experience (Brown et al. 2012; Vespa 2012). For younger people, research repeatedly finds that economic resources are positively associated with marriage formation for women and men alike (Schneider 2011). In fact, for younger adults, financial stability is viewed as a prerequisite for marriage, whereas cohabitation is more likely to be an option for people in more fragile financial circumstances (Cherlin 2004;).

Vespa (2012) used economic theory to examine whether union formation during young adulthood was comparable to union formation in later life and found that regardless of age, wealthier individuals are more likely to repartner during the second half of life, but older people are more likely to cohabit than they are to marry (Vespa, 2012). Because couples who remarry become entwined economically, cohabitation is a much more appealing option for women who divorce in midlife (Vespa, 2012) and older single adults, are now equally likely to form cohabiting or marital unions (Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2012). Remarriage also frequently involves relinquishing a pension received from a previous spouse, whereas living together means that women can maintain their financial autonomy, protect their assets, and continue to receive pension benefits. As a result, cohabiting women receiving a pension are less likely to marry than their counterparts who do not have this resource (Vespa 2013).

In this study, cohabitation is viewed as too big of a risk. Decisions around repartnering are almost entirely driven by post-divorce anxiety around financial security, and the main barrier to forming new relationships is the risk of unwittingly compromising themselves financially. As Lisa says, *'I'm not gonna jeopardize what I fought so hard to get'* (Lisa). Lindsay says that even if she did meet someone else she would never risk letting them move in: *'no I'm not sharing my home with another man ever again. What I've got here I've worked hard for'* (Lindsay). Mandy is even more cautious. She was awarded a life changing financial settlement by the courts and although it has made her life immeasurably better she is now suspicious that the only reason people might be nice to her is because of her money. She says, *'the money side of that has made it a little bit more difficult as well in the sense that I don't know, you know, now it would be are they going out with me because they know I am okay'* (Mandy).

Eva doesn't want a new relationship. It is partly to do with the fact that she now has more money than she anticipated and partly to do with the fact that she doesn't trust her own judgement. Her argument is that she trusted her husband and he turned out to be a mistake, so what would stop her making the same mistake again. Previous research with women who have been bereaved has found that widowed women believed that men would try and take advantage of them because they had been left a 'nice sum' of money (Dickson, 2005).

This study adds to a body of research which confirms that in midlife and late adulthood, women are significantly less likely to seek a relationship, less likely to desire a relationship, and less likely to marry than their male counterparts (Miller et al., 2021). Older divorced women enjoy the company of men, but they don't necessarily want to remarry (Dickson et al., 2005). They enjoy a newfound sense of autonomy and view this stage of their lives as time for themselves. The findings in this particular theme strongly echo Bianca Fileborne's (2015) study of women's sex and dating behaviours in later life. Her qualitative interviews with 15 women aged 55 to 81 found that they were overwhelmingly single by choice, that they fiercely protected their independence and freedom, and that they were unwilling to compromise (Fileborne et al., 2015). The women in this study are similarly determined to prioritise themselves. As Lisa says, '*I'm not willing to make any compromises, because I'd rather have nobody than just make do*' (Lisa)

## Chapter 9.

### Theme 4. Maternal Role: From Privileged To Peripheral

This theme explores the impact of midlife divorce on maternal relationships with adult children. In the first interviews the women were all very confident about the strength of the bond between them and their children. By the third interview this has changed significantly. With the exception of Mandy, all the women find that their relationships with their children have been destabilised by the divorce process.

#### Time 1: Decree Nisi

##### **Mothers are primary carers, regardless of income or employment.**

The women's relationships with their adult children at Time 1 reflect a lifetime of maternal investment. Despite differences in income and employment status, the women adopted very traditional gender roles throughout their marriages. They were all primary carers and because they did the bulk of the childcare, they spent much more time with their children than their fathers did. As a result, fathers appear to have had a much more peripheral role in their children's upbringing.

**Tessa** believes that she is the primary parent and she is confident that if her sons had a 'real' problem, she is the one they would turn to:

*"I'm definitely the primary parent <-> They're very conscious of their, Dad's, sort of, limitations, in the nicest possible way, <-> but em, I suspect, if there was a real problem they'd come to me first, Probably", (Tessa, High Income, T1, P2, L53)*

She is so sure of her connection to her sons that she can afford to be magnanimous. She describes her sons as being conscious of the fact that their dad has '*limitations*' and then softens her tone by adding '*in the nicest possible way*'.

**Lisa** did absolutely everything for, and with, her children while they were growing up:

*“You know they were. They were mine. <->Well they were his. They were his. But he wasn't the one doing everything for them 24/7. He didn't have to. He never had to pick them up from school, or he never had to, you know, if there was a parents evening then it would be me that's sorted all that” (Lisa Low Income, T1, P4, L1)*

The children were Lisa's domain and she felt they belonged to her, much more than they belonged to her ex-husband.

**Angela** worked full time, but she was very happy to be responsible for running the home:

*“I always thought that the, you know, the home, my mothering, my being a mum and John's partner were the center of my life and then really the main other part of my life was my work, and I didn't have loads of outside things that I did on my own” (Angela, High Income, T1, P4, L56)*

Angela's identity was so completely bound up in being a wife and a mother that she now recognises there was little else in her life beyond those roles.

**Tessa** worked full time too and she was also responsible for running the home and doing everything for her three children:

*“I've been doing two full time jobs for 25 years, and haven't actually had a lot of choice in a lot of the stuff that I've been enabling, So you know things like our lifestyle and you know, I, I've, made all the social arrangements, You know I've kept the kids happy and fed, and adjusted and, make big decisions about their exams, And I've helped them and fed them and encouraged them and I've got three lovely boys I mean they are great, but, I just feel as if I have made vast amounts of effort, huge, huge, huge effort, And he hasn't” (Tessa, High Income, T1, P12, L3)*

She recites a shopping list of chores to illustrate the 'huge, huge, huge' effort that she alone made to support her family.

**Lindsay** structured her entire life around caring for her daughter Tina and she was virtually a single mother because her husband was never around:

*“I went back to work when Tina was three and I did part time and when she was five, I did*

*full time. And again, I continually worked but having horrible jobs that I hated. But I could never do a job I liked because I had to fit in with his hours. I couldn't rely on him coming home in the evening to pick Tina or anything, from child-minders. (Lindsay, Low income T1, P1, L61)*

Lindsay did jobs that she hated just so she could have the flexibility she needed to manage the childcare. Although she needed to finish work to pick her daughter up from a childminder, she describes this as fitting in with her husband hours.

**Mandy's** husband was never around so she had sole charge of the children:

*"He was never there. And I mean I don't know also whether he didn't put that gap there himself. <-> So it wasn't that I didn't allow him. You know he would never have bathed children. But he would never have put himself in that position anyway.*

*(Mandy T1, P26, L18)*

She exercised maternal gatekeeping to protect her children but now she wonders whether he actually kept himself away from the children on purpose.

**Eva** was responsible for everything when it came to the children too, but she resented the fact that she was expected to do everything:

*"I found it very difficult in that anything to do with the children was somehow my job."*

*(Eva Low income T1, P3, L54)*

### **Mothers assume their children prioritise them, but maternal investment does not guarantee support.**

As the women begin the process of divorce, there is an unspoken assumption that maternal investment will be rewarded with loyalty from their adult children. The women present themselves as consistent parents who have tolerated years of inconsistent behaviour from their soon to be ex-husbands, and seven of the eight participants recall their adult children either criticising their fathers or blaming the failure of the marriage on them.

**Mandy's** husband played such a small part in childcare that the bond between him and his children was unusually fragile:

*“I don’t think they care if they never see him again because he doesn’t really mean anything to them, em, because he wasn’t a loving considerate, his main obsession by the end was money, it was all he wanted, was money” (Mandy Low Income T1, P8, L41)*

Mandy is very clear about why her children have no time for their dad. Because he was never loving or considerate, and he cared more about money than he did about his family, by the time of the divorce, Mandy is fairly certain that her children don’t care if they never see their father again.

**Lindsay’s** husband was violent to her and to her daughter Tina and he eventually left Lindsay for another woman:

*“she says “I’m an adult Mum and I never want to see him ever again in my life. Never.” (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P4, L37.*

Lindsay has been the primary support for her mother, who has been suicidal since her husband left. As a result of how her father has behaved, Tina has now completely cut her father out of her life. Lindsay reiterates the word ‘never’ for emphasis.

**Rachel also** says that her daughter will never speak to her father again:

*“She says she’ll never speak to him again.” (Rachel, High Income, T1, P20, L28)*

Rachel’s daughter Ines is furious with her father because he makes no effort to hide the fact that he has a new mistress, whilst continuing to live in the family home.

**Valerie’s** adult children have been very supportive because they ‘understand why’ the marriage is ending:

*“My children have been very supportive. As I said to you, you know, they understood that we weren’t happy, they understood why David made me unhappy because he’s done it to them, yes, unpredictability, irrational personality, inconsistencies, and they understand why.” (Valerie, High Income, T1, P16, L23)*

Valerie presents her children as allies by explaining that they too, had first-hand experience of all her ex-husband’s negative attributes. They know their father is unpredictable because

he has been as irrational with them as he has been with Valerie

**Tessa** believes that her sons are cross with their father and that they blame him for messing up the marriage:

*“I think they think that their dad has messed things up. And I think they’re cross with him, because he has, because they say things to me like ‘oh god, dad’s still doing this’, or ‘he’s not done that’, or ‘I’m finding this really difficult’” (Tessa, High Income, T1, P19, L62)*

*‘I think they think’* is not the most reliable evidence, and the examples Tessa provides are very vague and not related to specific behaviours or experience.

When **Eva** remembers her son casually characterising his father as ‘knob head’, it provides a little light relief in an interview that is otherwise punctuated with the desperate details of her divorce and her diagnosis with terminal cancer:

*“Charlie just said to me “dads a knob head. End of”, we don’t need to discuss anything. He is very black and white, and I said to Frank about it, and he said I don’t want to talk about it, and he said, ‘when dad was here he used to ignore me all the time anyway, so it’s not any different now’” (Eva, Low Income, T1, P13, L63)*

Eva’s sons are not at all bothered by the fact that their father has left. He ignored them when he was living with them, so they don’t feel his absence will make much difference to their lives.

**Angela’s** son Freddy ‘felt’ for his mother after his father left her and saw him as the ‘villain’:

*“after John left, um Freddy, I felt, turned more towards me, in that he saw John as the villain of the piece, and that, he felt for me,” (Angela, High Income, T1, P9, L40)*

Angela has not coped well with the divorce process and when she describes how her son ‘turned more towards’ her, she paints a picture of an adult child who has been forced to pivot away from his own future, towards the parent that has displayed the greatest emotional need.

Although there was convergence in five of the eight women’s assumptions about support from their children at Time 1, there was divergence in the experiences of three of the

participants which is worth exploring in more depth. Despite having been the primary carers for their children, the relationship between three of the participants and their adult children appears to be fragile and Rachel, Angela and Lisa are uncertain about the support of one or more of their adult children.

Although **Rachel's** daughter has rejected her father, her son Toby is pragmatic about his father's decision to end the marriage:

*“Toby until recently, his attitude has sort of been. What do you expect dad to do? You know, he, we don't like. We don't want it; we don't like it. But you know he's entitled not to love you and to want to get out.” (Rachel, High Income, T1, P20, L1)*

**Angela's** son supported her initially, but he has also made it clear to his mother that he does not want her to depend on him. He appears to be compartmentalising his relationship with his father as something that is separate to his relationship with his mother, and Angela is careful not to complicate the relationship by talking to him about her ex-husband:

*“his main thing is that he doesn't want me to be dependent on him and to show any signs of vulnerability with him, so I don't talk to him about John. I don't ask him about has he seen his dad really, <-> I don't want to sort of make it more complicated (Angela, High Income, T1, P9, L47)*

**Lisa's** children were both at university when her husband had an affair and then filed for divorce. Because Lisa feels that she is the innocent 'victim', she expects her children to prioritise her over their father, but her children don't see things that way:

*“Because the way I see it, see I'm the victim and I'm the innocent party. So I should be prioritized over him. That's how I see things. And they don't.” (Lisa, Low Income T1, P14, L14)*

## **Time 2 & 3: Decree Absolute and six months later**

### **Mothers compete for support as their adult children insist on remaining neutral**

The women in this study enter into the divorce process worrying about split finances, not



split loyalties amongst their adult children. They are not at all prepared for the possibility that they might have to compete for their children's attention once their divorce is finalised.

The one person who has maintained an unchallenged relationship with her children throughout the course of her divorce is **Mandy**

*"I was so lucky with my kids, because it was always going to be a one-sided relationship. You know I know my kids are 100 percent behind me. I don't know how I would have coped if they were 50/50". (Mandy Low Income T2, P39, L46)*

Strict maternal gatekeeping and the one-sided nature of her relationship with her children has ensured that she has remained fully supported throughout the entire legal process. Now that Mandy has received her Decree Absolute and is legally divorced, she is able to admit that she would have found it very hard to cope if her children had a more equal relationship with both their parents

In contrast, **Rachel** feels hurt by the fact that her children refuse to support her unilaterally:

*"Yes it is, yes, it's hurtful in a way, yes, <-> I expect the children to support me you know, meaning to hear, to be horrified at what this man has done. I expect it..." (Rachel, High Income, T3, P39, L48)*

She thinks that they should be horrified at what their father has done to her, and she expects her adult children to take sides.

**Lisa's** children have made it clear that they will maintain relationships with both their parents and that they refuse to get dragged into their parent's divorce:

*"in the beginning it was more or less said to me, 'Oh you know you're our mum, that's our dad, and you know we don't want nothing to do with the divorce', and so I just kind of felt, so I don't talk about, I don't really talk about anything to them about it at all"*  
*(Lisa Low Income, T2, P26, L17)*

Their neutrality silences Lisa who has now stopped trying to talk to them about the divorce, or indeed anything at all.

**Valerie's** adult children don't want to be caught in the middle of their warring parents:

*“yes my eldest son found it difficult, and they don’t like to talk about it, or be caught in the middle, you know, initially my husband was, they were getting furious with him because he was in a state, <-> I was also voicing my opinion about certain things, and they couldn’t stand it” (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L3).*

Her adult children can’t stand the ongoing antagonism between their parents and although they have been clear about the fact that they don’t want her to discuss the divorce with them, she can’t resist ‘voicing her opinions’.

**Rachel’s** adult children have also told her not to talk to them about the divorce:

*“don’t speak to me about it mummy, the children, because I don’t want to be involved <-> so it’s a lonely thing” (Rachel, High Income, T3, P43, L46)*

They don’t want to be involved and are no longer willing to listen to anything to do with their father or the divorce. This leaves Rachel feeling both silenced and lonely.

Although **Valerie’s** adult children have made it clear that they want her to stop offloading her anxiety on them, six months after the legal process has been finalised, she continues to do just that:

*“I find I’m doing that (consulting)with my kids which is not very healthy <->They told me to stop, and even though they’re adult children and I’m a mature woman and it would be hard not to gripe about things sometimes, and she lives here, if she didn’t live here it wouldn’t be nearly so bad for her, but going through that whole process, and going through extreme anxiety on certain days, I couldn’t really hide it from her.” (Valerie High Income, T3, P44, L48)*

Valerie acknowledges that she is a mature woman and she knows it is not healthy, but she feels unable to hide her anxiety or stop herself griping in front of her daughter. This process has led to an inversion of the normal parent child :

*“it’s changed the dynamic between my daughter and I which I’m not terribly keen on<-> It means that sometimes she seems more like the mother, and I seem more like the child which you know should come much later in life when the mother becomes old and infirm” (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L60)*

Valerie, who has never really lived independently or supported herself, acknowledges that this inversion of responsibility is a little premature, but nevertheless, she assumes it to be an inevitability.

**Lindsay's** relationship with her daughter Tina has also been inverted:

*“The only thing I’m truly thankful for is, I’ve got Tina, but there’s a sting in the tail isn’t there, because Tina’s had to lose her dad, that’s the thing. I’ve got Tina, but I don’t care about him not having Tina, but I care that Tina hasn’t got him”.*

*(Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P46, L58),*

Tina has had to care for her suicidal mother since her father left. Lindsay is grateful for Tina’s support, but she acknowledges that there is a ‘sting in the tail’ because it comes at a price. In choosing to stand by her mother, Tina has sacrificed her relationship with her father. Lindsay sums up the impossible dilemma that divorce presents for a woman who is estranged from her partner. She wants the best for her daughter, so she wants her to have access to her father, but she hates her ex-husband, so she wants to deny him access to his daughter. Even so, Lindsay sounds victorious when she repeats the phrase “*I’ve got Tina*” twice.

**Lisa** wants her children to prioritise her, but she can’t compete with her ex-husband:

*“I can’t compete with somebody that’s nearly died from a brain hemorrhage and that. I think you tell anybody that, they’re going to get a sympathy vote aren’t you, aren’t they, and what happened to him, and for those couple of months yes, you know, for a week or so, he was at, you know it was 50/50 whether he was gonna survive, and so I can’t do anything to compete with that”.* *(Lisa Low Income, T2, P35, L35)*

Lisa’s husband had an affair, however her ‘victim’ status has been undermined by the fact that her ex-husband had a brain hemorrhage in the middle of the divorce proceedings. Lisa now feels that she ‘can’t compete’ with somebody that’s nearly died because they’re obviously going to get the ‘sympathy vote’.

*that’s all I wanted them to do of me, is to see things from my point of view and think of yeah mum what he did was wrong, we know that, but I think his illness kind of gave him a bit of a, a bit of a, and you know, he’s milked it, so yeah, (Lisa Low Income, T2, P27, L13).*

When she says, *'his illness kind of gave him a bit of a, a bit of a'*, the word that she leaves out is *'edge'*. Her ex-husband's illness gave him a competitive advantage and he *'milked'* it in order to get his adult children to support him:

**Mandy** clearly articulates the competitive nature of post-divorce parental relationships:

*"your worry is always them against you, him with the children with him, as opposed to me with the children. I mean I know they're not children, but they're my whole world, and it would have mattered. I know you don't use the children, but I didn't want him to suddenly to become super dad having not been there for the 30 years. <-> so yeah, we are stronger, and he is, as I was hoping, and as I thought he would do, gone off to do his own thing"*  
(Mandy Low Income T3, P44, L53)

Her secret fear was that her ex-husband might suddenly turn into *'super dad'* after the divorce, and she is very grateful that this hasn't happened.

### **Mothers feel excluded when adult children continue to have a relationship with their fathers**

Having been the conduit through which their ex-husbands related to their children: the women are now completely excluded from that relationship. While the women's family support structure feels diminished, their adult children now have two satellite families formed from the original family unit.

**Angela's** feels that her son has abandoned her:

*"when we first split up, which is three and a half years ago now, he was very, very angry with John to begin with, you know, because John had left and that's understandable. I think it was about six months when he didn't see John, but now John's back in favour again. John's so cool. Well, Dad's so cool, why can't you be cool. Take a chill pill. Dads really chilled."* (Angela, High Income, T3, P25, L31)

Angela's son has switched his allegiances completely and having initially seen his father as the villain, he now thinks his father is *'so cool'* and his mother should take a *'chill pill'*

When **Eva** was first interviewed, both of her sons were living with her. Since then, her eldest son has moved out of her house, and he is now living with his father:

*“the older one <-> He’s very like his dad, <-> He’s living with this dad at the moment at the moment because he’s between flat shares” (Eva, Low Income, T2, P28, L60)*

It appears to be a temporary arrangement, but Eva puts some emotional distance between herself and her son by describing him as being ‘very like his dad’

The feeling of abandonment is something that **Tessa** is also experiencing:

*“it feels as if they’re just carrying on without me. And that was my fear. You know, nothing for them has changed. Their bedrooms are the same. The dogs are the same <-> Anyway so, I do sort of feel slightly sad about the fact that they’re all or, I’m imagining that they’re all they’re round the kitchen table having a roast chicken without me. But they’re probably not.” (Tessa, High Income, T2, P23, L32)*

When Tessa instigated her divorce, she knew that her husband would not be willing to sell his historic family home and the decision was made early on that her three adult sons would maintain a primary residence at their father’s house. She had not anticipated that the idea of her ex-husband and her sons carrying on with their old life, without her in it, would affect her emotionally.

**Valerie** attempts to rationalise her ‘weird’ feelings of loss as she tries to reconcile herself to the fact that her adult children continue to have a relationship with their father:

*“It’s just things happening in a new life that I’m not part of, it’s not a big thing, it was and it’s part of divorce you know, they’re still in touch with their father, so therefore if it’s their father’s birthday, or his girlfriend’s birthday, they’re going to be there, it’s quite normal, it’s just that I didn’t expect it to hit me with such a blow the first time, but now what can I do it’s part of the divorce <->)I don’t know what the word is, sadness, loss, sense of loss, jealousy that he should spend time, it’s not jealousy it’s not, it’s not jealousy, but it’s a sad sense of loss, than a weird feeling that I’m not part of this new life, that they’ll have when they spend, when they’re celebrating with them, that’s not jealousy, it’s not ‘I wish it was me and I want to be there’, it’s just a sense of loss”.*  
(Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L27)

However, pragmatic she tries to be, she feels a mix of sadness and jealousy and an

overarching sense of loss as her ex-husband and her adult children create a ‘new’ life together that she will never be a part of.

Both of **Eva’s** sons continue to have a relationship with their father and his girlfriend:

*“I don’t think they’re particularly bothered by the girlfriend. They go out together. The girlfriends got a sister and they both quite like, they think she’s really fun, but they don’t really talk about it, and I don’t really want to ask them about it because it looks like I’m, you know, prying, and I don’t really care quite frankly” (Eva, Low Income, T2, P28, L66).*

Eva is dying of cancer and her ex-husband has a girlfriend who has a sister that gets on well with her sons. It can’t be easy for Eva to watch this new family dynamic, but she doesn’t talk about it with them and says, rather unconvincingly, that she doesn’t really care.

**Tessa** believes that her sons should want to see her:

*“they should, they should want to see me, which they do, but they don’t need me”.*  
(Tessa, High Income, T2, P23, L22)

But the more she thinks about it, the more she is aware that she is no longer ‘needed’. In fact she worries that her sons might erase her from their lives:

*“They might just, I might just disappear” (Tessa, High Income, T2, P19, L45)*

Tessa’s concerns about disappearing get to the heart of the divorce dilemma. When children are no longer dependent, they have the power to choose whether or not they want a particular parent in their lives. If Tessa’s adult children decide that they don’t want to see her, she might as well disappear.

## **Mothers feel held to account**

Uncomfortable and unanticipated feelings of exclusion are compounded by the growing realisation that their adult children are now critically scrutinising their contribution to the failure of the marriage.

**Valerie** is now being judged harshly by her adult children. Valerie had a ten-year affair with a neighbour which her marriage never really recovered from. She spent years planning to

leave but was worried about finances. An unexpected financial windfall suddenly made it possible, but instead of declaring the money, Valerie hid it:

*“he always thinks he’s right and everything, but it’s black and white, and he had a hard time, not because I left my husband, although he understands why, but then, when the long-time affair came into it, and winning all that money came into it, he finds it very, very hard to get over that” (Valerie High Income, T3, P47, L30)*

Valerie was finally forced to reveal the money during the legal negotiations and her eldest son, in particular, cannot get over her deceptiveness. Valerie finds his criticism difficult to take and she is, in turn, critical of him. It’s easy to see how this stance could rapidly undermine the maternal bond.

In the first two interviews, **Tessa** provided a very traditional divorce narrative of a woman who had made enormous sacrifices to accommodate the needs of her husband and her children, whilst having her own needs ignored. She presented her decision to let her husband and sons remain in the family home as an act of self-sacrifice. By Time 3, the revelation that Tessa is living with another man makes her decision to move out look a lot more calculated:

*R: Do you think half of your kind of mixed emotions about the kids feeling guilty is to do with the fact that you’ve met someone else?*

*P: Yeah probably, probably, I mean you know, they’ve met him because he lives in the house, you know so so so*

*R: Do they not question that?*

*P: No, they don’t. I mean they can have their own opinions, you know, it’s another of the unspoken things. I mean I could, I mean, I need to talk to this other guy and say to him, look, you know, I mean, I said to him, look, I’m not, but if they are*

*R: He sleeps in your room?*

*P: Yes (Tessa, High Income, T3, P40, L54)*

She has described her partner as her ‘lodger’ to her sons but they share a bedroom, so it is obvious that they are lovers. Despite the fact that her sons have been in her house and know that she shares her bedroom with another man, she has never actually talked to her sons about her new relationship. Addressing the ‘*unspoken things*’ would require Tessa to take more responsibility for the failure of the marriage and that is not something she finds easy to do.

**Rachel's** daughter blames her for not having had the courage to leave sooner:

*"My daughter says Mummy you should have just left it, and that, that is what I regret".*  
(Rachel, High Income, T3, P42, L11)

**Valerie** regrets that she wasn't more honest with her children and she thinks she probably should have attempted to repair the marriage by going to counselling:

*"That it was all my fault, well the way I did things. My eldest son has an issue with the way I did things, he thinks I should have told David that I wanted to leave, but then stayed at home to discuss it, to maybe have gone for counselling and this kind of thing, and divvied up the money, you know, in a more amicable fashion*  
(Valerie High Income, T3, P48, L16)

**Tessa's** sons now blame their mother for the marriage breaking down:

*"if we had a conversation, they'd probably just say, well actually, you know, you've basically blown everything apart haven't you mum, you know, you've, you've changed, you, it's a game changer, you've changed everything, and dad's, you know, and you know, we're having to look after dad"* (Tessa, High Income, T3, P35, L17)

The realisation that their mother has not been completely transparent about her motivations for divorcing their father has fractured Tessa's relationship with her sons:

*"basically, saying you know it's all mum's fault. She's left Dad"*  
(Tessa, High Income, T3, P31, L52)

**Rachel's** daughter is angry with her mother too:

*"she's very sad, but at the same time she's angry with me"*  
(Rachel, High Income, T3, P31, L28)

**Valerie's** children also blame her for the divorce:

*"I am held to account, it shattered their security, even if you've got adult children and they've moved out, they can always run home to mummy and daddy, that's what I always had, you know, somewhere to go on a Sunday, somewhere, it's that security of your*



*parents, when they're there, and all of a sudden, even though I'm still alive, and my husband's still alive, the fact that I broke the family unit, even though they know why it happened, and I understand that it's very hard for them to come to terms with".*

*(Valerie High Income, T3, P48, L35)*

She is now being 'held to account' for breaking up the family unit.

**Tessa** who has always been very confident and assertive is uncharacteristically emotional during this third interview. She is no longer certain that she has done the right thing:

*"I occasionally have moments of when I think, not, that I've done the wrong thing",*

*(Tessa, High Income, T3, P31, L36)*

*"This whole episode has shaken me more than I thought".*

*(Tessa, High Income, T3, P31, L32)*

*"I feel a bit raw about it" (Tessa, High Income, T3, P37, L50)*

*"It feels slightly ahm rudderless", (Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L46)*

Having steered her family through the entire divorce process, she has emerged feeling lost and rudderless.

*"I'm a bit kind of lost with it all", (Tessa, High Income, T3, P37, L25)*

## **Mothers are rejected by their adult children**

At Time 3, the relationship between three of the women and one or all of their adult children has collapsed completely. Angela, Eva, and Lisa share some characteristics. They all suffered from post-natal depression, or experienced clinical depression, and this may have complicated both their marriages, and their relationships with their children. Eva has also been diagnosed with terminal cancer and is more focused on her health, than her divorce, or her children. Lisa's ex-husband had a brain hemorrhage during the divorce process and her inability to show empathy may have soured her relationship with her daughter and her son. It has certainly made her bitter and volatile. As the third interview in this study was conducted just six months after the completion of the divorce, a follow up interview after eighteen months or two years would provide a more complete illustration of this trajectory of change.

By Time 3, **Angela's** relationship with her adult son has completely broken down. Having

specifically bought a flat so that she could be close to him, Angela has not seen her son for months:

*“I mean he’s nearly 22 now. He lives only just round the corner and he’s completely ignoring me at the moment since January” (Angela, High Income, T3, P25, L23)*

At Time 2, **Eva’s** eldest son was living with his father temporarily. Six months later he is still there and despite the fact that she has terminal cancer, Eva has not seen him for more than a month. Far from regretting his absence, Eva is openly critical of him and says she is glad that he is now living with his father. Given her health issues, distancing herself from this kind of aggravation may be a necessary form of self-preservation:

*“I’d rather he was living with his dad than living with me. I love my older son but he’s very noisy, he’s very messy, and he’s not really considerate, and he reminds me of his dad a lot. I mean I adore him, but I haven’t seen him in a month or so (laughs)”*  
*(Eva, Low Income, T3, P43, L11)*

**Lisa’s** son and daughter have both chosen to pursue PhDs at Edinburgh University which is several hundred miles away from where she lives. In a very unexpected turn of events, her ex-husband then moved to Edinburgh too, and to add insult to injury, Lisa’s daughter has moved in with him:

*“Oh well he’s moved up near the children and Lottie’s already moved in with him”*  
*(Lisa Low Income, T3, P40, L143)*

**Angela** cannot acknowledge that she might have anything to do with the breakdown in her relationships with her son:

*“My relationship with my son is broken down. I blame all of this on the breaking up of the relationship”*. *(Angela, High Income, T3, P28, L5)*

She blames what has happened entirely on the divorce and describes her son as a misogynist who views women as weak:

*“because I’m the victim and he is a top dog, and victims are not what the top dog wants. Well, I’m the victim in his eyes, you know, I was the one that was left and I’m so, I’m*

*really weak, and then also, I'm a woman and that's added to my weakness, so he is particularly taking his anger out on me". (Angela, High Income T3, P25, L24)*

When Angela says "I'm the victim" she is articulating something that she, and many of the other women believe.

**Lisa** has always believed that she is a victim who deserves to be supported by her children:

*"Oh gosh I'm gutted that he's moved up near them. I do feel that they're up there, so a nice family and I'm the one who hasn't done anything yet I'm the one left here"*

*(Lisa Low Income, T3, P40, L50)*

Instead, she is now completely alienated from both of her children by the third interview. The word gutted evokes disemboweling, as if Lisa's internal organs have been ripped out. Her children are gone, and she has been discarded.

**Angela** desperately wants to repair her relationship with her son, but her strategy is to employ precisely the kind of passivity that her son can't bear:

*"my big priority, <-> is to sort out my relationship with Freddy, <-> I don't feel I really did anything wrong, but I don't mind apologizing. I'll eat humble pie if it means that, you know, I can have a relationship again with him that's a bit more normal, oh yeah",*

*(Angela, High Income, T2, P25, L47)*

Alienated from her family, **Lisa's** mental health has deteriorated noticeably and although she is clearly stressed, she has stopped taking her anti-depressants:

*"I'm not taking any of my anti-depressants at the moment. I've kind of been weaning them on and off, on and off and then I actually forgot to take them for a couple of days I just thought I don't think I need them, so I haven't taken them now for a few weeks. I'm kind of ready to have a crash" (Lisa, Low Income, T3, P40, L26)*

Rejected by her adult children, **Lisa**, in turn, is beginning to find ways to reject them. Changing her name by deed poll feels like an act of revenge by a woman who has been excluded from the family that she created:

*“I do intend then to change my surname because more to the point I don’t want to be buried with that name because I’m not that person anymore. I kind of feel I’ve done that now, brought up. They’re older now, they’ll potentially be changing their names. And at the end of the day, it is just, I know it’s just a surname, but I kind of don’t want to be part of that anymore, if that makes sense <-> Yeah, I’m not part of that family anymore”.*  
(Lisa, Low Income, T3, P39, L44)

## **Mothers prioritise their own needs**

A narrative of self-sacrifice is more fitting for the role of ‘wife and mother’, and it is very difficult for any woman to admit to prioritising herself over her children. However, when children are adults, women who want to redefine themselves as someone other than a wife, or a mother, have to cut the umbilical cord in order to get on with their lives.

**Valerie** recognises that her children would have preferred it if she had stayed in a marriage that made her miserable while they got on with their lives, but she is not ready to give up on life:

*“ But also how many times do you read in magazines and television that you should never stay at home for the sake of the kids, they’ll never thank you for it anyway, and I can see that’s exactly the case, my eldest would rather I’d have stayed at home in a miserable marriage while he goes on with his life and goes here, there and everywhere, which is exactly what he should be doing, but I’m only fifty, I’m not ninety five and ready to be pushed into a home,”* (Valerie High Income, T3,P47, L44)

When the offspring in question are thirty years old, Valerie feels that there is no point in a woman staying in an unhappy marriage ‘*for the sake of the kids.*’ In previous interviews she was relying on her adult children for support. Now she is adamant that she is not ninety-five and she wants to live her life to the full.

At Time 3, **Tessa** finally admits that moving into a smaller house was not an act of generosity which ensured consistency for her sons, it was an attempt to escape:

*“You know what, I’m fed up of living with adult children. I want, part of this was about actually having a life of my own really, you know, and I quite, I mean you know to be*

*honest with you, I mean it's things like, maybe I'd like to have another relationship, and how would that have worked, you know, with the children"*

*(Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L39)*

Tessa can now admit that she did not actually want to have her sons living with her and what she really wants is a new life and a new relationship.

**Angela** is conflicted, because on the one hand she is desperate to repair her relationship with her son Freddy, but on the other hand she recognises that the only reason she is less anxious now is because he is not in her life:

*"for the last few years when we were all together, Freddy was really all I could focus on. I was, my anxiety was all about Freddy, because he was creating absolute havoc in my view, and I was so stressed out with Freddy, so I don't miss that, you know, that being stressed, stressy, and I am less stressy now, <-> but actually, the main factor is that I don't have Freddy every day of my life, you know, so I don't have to cope with him,"*

*(Angela High Income, T3, P28, L49)*

Angela has realised that Freddy was the cause of a huge amount of her stress and now that he is not around, she feels a lot less 'stressy'.

Having been let down by her adult children **Lisa** says she is now determined to prioritise herself:

*"ultimately I'm top of the list now and that's how it's going to be"*

*(Lisa High Income, T3, P41, L42)*

**Lisa** is now intent in prioritising her needs, even at the expense of her children:

*"the only difference, the situation I'm in whether I buy a property or not, the only difference that makes to, is going to be Lottie and Connor. If I buy somewhere when I pass away, they can sell it and they can half each. If I rent for the rest of my life there'll be nothing at the end. There'll be nothing to sell and they won't have nothing to share <-> I don't know if I want the responsibility <-> do I want the responsibility of owning a property? I don't know <-> that decision only really affects Lottie and Connor"*

*(Lisa Low Income, T3, P41, L48)*

All through the first interview Lisa talked about the importance of securing a settlement so that she could buy a property so that she would have something to leave to her two children when she dies. At the third interview she is considering renting for the rest of her life because the only people who might be affected by that decision are her children. When she says *'If I rent for the rest of my life there'll be nothing at the end'* it sounds like a way of punishing her adult children for their betrayal.

## Theme 4. Discussion

The eight women in this study have a total of sixteen adult children, who range in age from 19 to 35. During their marriages, they adhered to very traditional gender roles, and as primary carers, they spent much more time with their children than their husbands did. They fully expect this pattern to continue and, indeed, most research on the impact of divorce on relationships with adult parents finds that mothers have more frequent contact with their adult children (Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Shapiro, 2003). In fact Lin et al (2022) found that the odds of increased interaction between older mothers and their adult children doubles after midlife divorce, whereas contact with father's cuts by half (Lin et al., 2022).

At Time 1 in this study, all eight participants have complete confidence in the strength of their relationships with their adult children. As Mandy says, *'my kids are 100 percent behind me'* (Mandy). Collectively, they believe that the huge maternal investment that they have made ensures their adult children's support for them during the divorce. Lisa describes her relationship with her children in terms of ownership, *'They were mine. <-> he wasn't the one doing everything for them 24/7'* (Lisa).

Academic research certainly supports the relationship between maternal investment in childhood and filial support in later life. Parents build reserves of social capital through investments of time, money, and affection in their young children and this investment obliges adult children to reciprocate in kind if the invested parent experiences challenges in later life (Henretta et al., 1997). Relative to mothers, fathers tend to spend less time with their children (Sayer et al., 2004) and the women in this study are acutely conscious of that inequity. Tessa quantifies it when she says, *'I have made vast amounts of effort, huge, huge, huge effort, And he hasn't'* (Tessa).

Because fathers don't invest as much in their children, they are less likely to receive support and caregiving from adult children as compared to mothers (Lin, 2008) and the contact fathers have with adult children post-divorce is further weakened by the fact that adult children often blame fathers for the breakup (Cooney et al., 1986). Rhyne (1990) found that adult children report feelings of anger toward their fathers, but not their mothers after the divorce (Rhyne, 1990). In this study, seven of the eight participants recall their adult children either criticising their fathers or blaming the failure of the marriage on them. At Time 1, Angela's son saw his father as *'the villain'* (Angela). Tessa's sons *'think that their dad has messed things up'* (Tessa) and Rachel, Lindsay, and Mandy's children *'don't care if they never see him again'* (Mandy). Valerie's children *'have been very supportive'* (Valerie) because they had first-hand experience of her husband's *'unpredictability, irrational personality, inconsistencies'* (Valerie).

Most adult children of divorce are aware of the conflict in their parents' relationship prior to divorce (Kozuch & Cooney, 1995) and the quality of adult children's relationships with their parents after midlife divorce may actually reflect the quality of the relationship they had with them when they were growing up (Nakonezny et al., 2003). When relationships between parents and children are strong, that solidarity can help to buffer the stress of divorce. In this study, Mandy exercised strict maternal gatekeeping to protect her children from their father and as a result *'it was always going to be a one-sided relationship'* (Mandy). Because her children always had a very distant relationship with their dad, divorce was unlikely to change that in any way.

At Time 1, this theme seems to fit neatly with academic research which suggests that after a midlife divorce, adult children are more willing to provide support and caregiving to their mothers than fathers (Lin, 2008). However, between the interviews at Time 1 and Time 3, this theme departs rather dramatically from existing literature. The relationship between six of the eight participants and their adult children deteriorates significantly and in three cases, it completely collapses. Because the valence of this theme is so at odds with what is known, it needs to be very well evidenced. For a theme to be supported in an IPA study, it must be relevant to half the participants or more (Smith et al., 2009) and that is certainly the case in this study. Post-divorce, only two out of eight participants (Mandy and Lindsay) maintain the support of their adult children and in both cases, the adult children are completely estranged from their father.

Despite the disproportionate increase in ‘grey divorce’, very little is known about the impact that midlife divorce has on maternal relationships with adult children and when family communication around divorce is examined, the behaviour of individual parents are very rarely considered separately. One exception to this is Leustek & Theiss’ (2020) exploration of how family communication patterns influence psychological wellbeing in adult children following late life parental divorce (Leustek & Theiss, 2020). Their study, which was largely focused on communication patterns, found that when fathers are more open and have more conversations about divorce, it makes adult children feel unsettled and distressed. The researchers suggest that this is because it is generally out of character for fathers to communicate in that way. In contrast, openness and conversation with mothers is more normative, and therefore adult children are less likely to feel that the purpose of a mother’s communication is to burden them with information about the divorce. Leustek & Theiss (2020) did not actually explore the content of communication between mothers and their adult children and they consider this a crucial next step because mothers’ conversations with adult children could potentially invoke conflict or turmoil by increasing adult children’s perceptions of turbulence in the family (Leustek & Theiss, 2020).

My study extends Leustek & Theiss’ (2020) research by providing new insights into the ways in which women’s conversations with their adult children can exacerbate distress and ultimately, cause adult children to distance themselves from their mothers. My study confirms that women routinely drag their adult children into parental conflict and ask them to take sides. Although feeling pressure from parents to take sides during divorce causes great stress (Cooney et al., 1986), the women in this study demand their children’s unilateral support. Rachel finds it *‘hurtful’* that her adult children don’t seem to be *‘horrified’* by their father. Lisa just wants her children to *‘see things from my point of view’* (Lisa)

In order for adult children to continue to have a relationship with both parents, they must remain impartial, but when emotions are running high, adult children’s neutrality can feel like rejection. Lisa’s children have told her *‘we don’t want nothing to do with the divorce’* (Lisa). Rachel’s children have said *“don’t speak to me about it mummy”* (Rachel). Valerie’s children have made it clear that they don’t want to *‘be caught in the middle’* (Valerie,) and yet, even though Valerie knows that her children can’t stand her *‘voicing her opinions’* about their father, she can’t stop herself.



Adult children are an important source of psychological and social support for parents across the life course (Kalmijn & de Vries, 2009) and in qualitative studies, the most common theme expressed by adult children of divorce is the issue of parentification, or role reversal (Jurkovic et al., 2001). This is evident in my study too. Valerie describes how her daughter sometimes seems more like *'more like the mother'*, and she seems *'more like the child'* (Valerie). In contrast, by leaving their father, Tessa's sons are now *'having to look after dad'* (Tessa). Lindsay's relationship with her daughter Tina has also been inverted. Tina had to care for her mother when she was suicidal and she is now completely estranged from her father.

Because adult children are not bound by custodial orders and can choose to maintain contact with both parents, it should, theoretically, be easier for them to sustain good relationships with both mother and father. They can also prioritise their own needs, form their own opinions and give and withdraw support in ways that younger children cannot. Adult children have the capacity to negotiate parental relationships for themselves, and they also have longer and therefore stronger ties to their father.

When parents' divorce in mid or later life, there is no need for them to be involved in facilitating the relationship that their adult children have with the other parent. In fact adult children who live independently don't even need to tell their mother if they are seeing their father, and the same is obviously true in reverse. This lack of involvement in the relationship their adult children now have with their fathers is problematic for the women. Tessa feels left out of the relationship that her sons have with their father and says it *'feels as if they're just carrying on without me'* (Tessa). She imagines that *'they're all they're round the kitchen table having a roast chicken without me'* (Tessa). Valerie struggles to articulate what she feels *'sadness, loss, sense of loss, jealousy'* (Valerie) when she thinks about the life that her adult children have with their father and his new partner

The women find themselves competing for their adult children's attention. Lisa's ex-husband had a brain hemorrhage during the divorce process and she *'can't compete with somebody that's nearly died'* (Lisa). As a result, she has now withdrawn from her adult children and doesn't *'really talk about anything to them'* (Lisa). Angela can't bear the fact that her son thinks his dad is *'so cool'* (Angela) and Valerie ruminates on her adult children attending *'their father's birthday, or his 'girlfriend's birthday'*, and admits that she did not *'expect it to hit me with such a blow'*. Although Mandy is the only participant whose relationship with her adult children has not been in any way compromised, she honestly articulates the competitive

nature of post-divorce parental relationships:

*“your worry is always them against you, him with the children with him, as opposed to me with the children. I mean I know they’re not children, but they’re my whole world, and it would have mattered. I know you don’t use the children, but I didn’t want him to suddenly to become super dad having not been there for the 30 years. <-> so yeah, we are stronger, and he is, as I was hoping, and as I thought he would do, gone off to do his own thing”*  
(Mandy Low Income T3, P44, L53)

Younger children are rarely aware of the details of parental divorce, but when parents with adult children divorce, their behaviour is subject to a much greater degree of scrutiny. Adult children have an insider perspective on the marriage, and they understand the nuances of the parental relationship in ways that are not necessarily available to external observers. As such, they are able to make their own minds up about who is responsible for what, and when mothers are perceived to be at fault, they are held to account. This is certainly the case in this study. Tessa’s children think that the divorce is *‘all mum’s fault’* (Tessa). Valerie’s children also believe that the divorce is *‘all my fault, well the way I did things’* (Valerie) and Rachel’s daughter is *‘angry with me’* for putting her through so much.

By Time 3, the relationship between three of the women and one or more of their adult children has collapsed completely. Angela’s son has been clear that *‘he doesn’t want me to be dependent on him and to show any signs of vulnerability with him’* (Angela). Having moved to a flat near where he lives, she has not seen him for months and she believes that their relationship has *‘broken down’* (Angela). Eva’s son has moved in with his father and his new girlfriend, and both of Lisa’s children are now living hundreds of miles away with her ex-husband. The women *‘blame all of this on the breaking up of the relationship’* (Angela) and are unable to acknowledge that they might have had anything to do with the outcome *‘I don’t feel I really did anything wrong’* (Angela). They feel both indignant and abandoned *‘I’m the one who hasn’t done anything, yet I’m the one left here’* (Lisa).

Rejected by their adult children, the women find ways to reject them in turn. Eva reframes her relationship with her son by saying he is *‘very messy, and he’s not really considerate, and he reminds me of his dad’* (Eva). Angela makes herself defenseless, *‘I’m the victim’ ‘I’m really weak’ ‘I’m a woman’* (Angela). Lisa is so *‘gutted’* (Lisa) by the fact that her husband and two children have created a *‘nice family’* which excludes her, that she has decided to cut

all ties to them by cutting her adult children out of her will and changing her name so that *'I'm not that person anymore'*.

Although this study was purely focused on the women's experience of divorce, the deterioration in the women's relationships with their adult children may be best understood by looking at research which has explored the experience of parental divorce in childhood from the perspective of young adults. When Kate Hughes (2007) conducted interviews with young adults whose parents had separated she found that although they all had stronger, closer relationships their mothers than their fathers, they were simultaneously intensely critical of their mothers, particularly about the longevity of their anger and their hostile feelings about the divorce. The participants described their mothers as angry, bitter, and depressed and there was a collective sense that mothers should have 'moved on' and (Hughes, 2007)

Hughes' study was retrospective, so it is difficult to make a comparison between her findings and mine. Her participants were also younger when the divorces occurred and had remained very close to their mothers. Although their mothers demanded support at the time, it may, in fact, have inhibited their capacity to 'move on'. In this study, the emotional distance that manifests between the women and their adult children seems to motivate the women to turn their focus back towards themselves and start getting on with their lives. Having sacrificed everything for their children the women conclude that *'ultimately I'm top of the list now and that's how it's going to be'* (Lisa). Valerie stops worrying about being the one who instigated the divorce because *'you should never stay at home for the sake of the kids, they'll never thank you for it anyway'* (Valerie). Tessa, who also instigated her divorce, finally admits that the real driver was not her husband's inadequacies, but desire to have *'a life of my own'* (Tessa). Even Angela acknowledges that during her marriage her *'anxiety was all about Freddy, because he was creating absolute havoc'* and now that her son is not around, she is a lot *'less stressy now'* (Angela). This finding also merits further research.

Greenwood (2012) found that five years after a mid to late life divorce, most parent/offspring relationships have recovered and are no longer reported as strained (Greenwood, 2012) so it would be prudent to interview this cohort of women in five years' time to see whether there has been any further change in their relationships with their adult children.

## Chapter 10. Conclusion.

Study 1 uses IPA to explore the experiences of three married women, aged between 50 and 56, who were all openly unhappy about aspects of their marriages. The three women's children had recently left home and in their absence, the women focus on the shortcomings in their relationships with their spouses. Within the marriage, motherhood gave them power and authority. In contrast, the empty nest makes them feel more vulnerable and they are disturbed by the fact that they are all living in sexless marriages. They are not sure whether their marriages will survive, and yet when they contemplate the reality of divorce and what they would lose, they hastily retreat back into the comfort of the marriage. The women exist in a state of limbo, half in and half out of their marriages. They are not happy enough to stay, but they are not unhappy enough to leave. As a result, they feel stuck. Louise explains it best:

*"I don't hate what I've got so it's difficult (47.13). I kind of feel safe within that environment because I've got the kids with him and when I look at the step-parenting thing that friends have, it is a disaster." (9.15, Louise )*

The average divorce takes around 12 months, but as Study 1 demonstrates, the psychological transition out of a marriage begins long, long, before the implementation of a divorce. It is a natural precursor to Study 2 because it captures a time point in the divorce story that directly precedes the experience under investigation in Study 2.

The eight women in Study 2 are aged between 50 and 65 and when we first meet them, they have just received their Decree Nisi, which means that they are still technically married, but their divorce has been filed. Using LIPA, interviews at three time points capture the changes in the women's psychological states as they move through the legal process. The first interviews occur shortly after the women receive their Decree Nisi. The second interviews occur just after they receive their Decree Absolute and the final interviews take place six months after the women's divorces have been finalised. Through the study the women move from states of anxiety to relief, and from self-doubt to self-esteem. Pre-divorce, repartnering is an aspiration that ageism will deny them. Post-divorce, repartnering feels available, but is no longer desirable. At the beginning of the study all eight women have strong and stable relationships with their adult children. By the end of the study, there has been a pronounced deterioration in the relationship between six of the women and their adult children. In three

cases the relationship has broken down completely.

## **Contribution**

Study 2 makes an extremely important contribution to existing research on divorce because it is the first LIPA study to track the experience of divorce in real time, as it is happening.

Conducting a LIPA study is always a logistical challenge, but this is even more true for a study of divorce. If a LIPA researcher is conducting a time-based study of cardiac recovery they can recruit through a heart clinic. If they are doing a LIPA study of the transition from pregnancy to childbirth, they can recruit through an ante-natal clinic or a hospital. Divorce is different. It is a largely private event and each divorce has its own individual trajectory so finding a homogenous sample of participants who began their divorce at the same time and, more importantly, move through it at a roughly similar pace is a major challenge. Divorce also requires two people, who are generally at loggerheads, to cooperate with each other.

If one spouse refuses to sign a form or reveal their assets, progress halts and there is nothing the other partner can do to hasten the process. Finding the eight women who took part in my study required a great degree of persistence. A total of 82 women filled in the survey to take part in this study, but only 12 matched all the required criteria. First interviews were conducted with all of them, but there was a 30% attrition rate. Four of the Time 1 participants did not progress to their Decree Absolute within the required time frame and so sadly, they had to be dropped from the study.

The argument for a longitudinal approach to qualitative divorce research is strong. Cross-sectional analysis only gathers data at a single time point. If the study is conducted at the time of the divorce, the interviews capture a great deal of hot cognition, but not much else. If a study is conducted years after the divorce has taken place, it fails to capture the emotional intensity of the immediate experience. There is a wealth of longitudinal quantitative data on divorce, but large-scale recurring survey datasets generate big 'thin' data (Elliott et al., 2008) which provides a useful snapshot of social behaviour as it changes and has, for example, captured the increased prevalence of grey divorce (Brown and Lin, 2012) however it tells us nothing about the psychological impact of divorce on ordinary people. This is an oversight because divorce is both a common and an extremely stressful life experience (Strizzi et al., 20221).

IPA is commonly used to explore experiences that are existentially important to the

participant, however the way people respond to major transitions, or life changing events, naturally changes as they move further away from the event in time. In response to this, longitudinal IPA or LIPA has emerged as a way of capturing these changes as they happen. The growing popularity of the LIPA model reflects the need for research to better understand the lived experience of change. By integrating a longitudinal perspective, LIPA enables the researcher to illuminate the meaning of an experience and how that meaning, and its causes, consequences and continuities can change over time. As such, it is an ideal method for exploring major life transitions, or any life event where temporal change, or adaptation, are integral to the experience (McCoy 2017).

In the context of an experience like divorce which impacts society at both a macro, and a micro level, understanding how and why change occurs, and how people adapt to it is fundamentally important. Although there is no direct route into someone else's experience, LIPA's focus on experience and its combination of both empathic and interrogative hermeneutics, coupled with a commitment to capturing longitudinal change, stability, or growth, make it an ideal methodology for a researcher who is attempting to get the heart of a hugely complex legal, emotional, and psychological transition.

### **Limitations of the study**

Income proved to have no real impact on the women's experience of divorce. Regardless of whether they were working in high powered jobs, or on the till at Tesco, all of the women in this study experienced extreme anxiety about the financial impact of getting divorced. With hindsight, I should probably have realised that resource loss is always stressful (Hobfoll, 1989), so regardless of income group, wealthier women were just as likely to be distressed about financial outcomes as the women in the lower income group. The reference point for a woman who is divorcing is the level of wealth that was available to her during her marriage, and since post-divorce financial outcomes were always going to be less than their original reference point, distress was inevitable (Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005).

This study did find evidence that the least well-off women were paying much more to their lawyers than the women in the high-income group. Tessa, the wealthiest woman in this study, paid just £5,000 for her divorce whereas Lindsay and Lisa, who would both have qualified for legal aid if it had not been abolished, paid their lawyers more than £20,000 each. Mandy, who was also in the low-income group, had her legal fees paid by her husband, but they amounted to £40,000. Exploring discrepancies in how lawyers charge and

investigating whether poorer women are being unfairly penalised was beyond the scope of this study and would need to be explored at a much larger scale using a quantitative methodology.

Both Studies included small numbers of participants who were all females of white British ethnicity, so the findings may not be generalisable to the female population as a whole, and comparative work with different ethnicities and socio-economic groups would also be required to confirm these findings. The findings for women are unlikely to be applicable to men, or to couples in same sex relationships. The challenge of recruiting a homogenous sample of participants to a longitudinal study of divorce limited the number of participants in Study 2 and it would be worth repeating this study with a bigger, or different, cohort to confirm the findings. Study 2 (LIPA) uncovered such an extensive range of mediating factors that there would be scope for further research to narrow its gaze and analyse individual issues such as ‘the impact of female midlife divorce on mental health’ or ‘the impact of female midlife divorce on relationships with adult children’ in greater detail.

## **Evaluation**

Both Study 1 (IPA) and Study 2 (LIPA) adhered to the criteria for good quality IPA as set out by set out by Smith (2011) by being sensitive to context, coherent and rigorous (Yardley, 2000, 2008). They conformed to IPA methodology by being transparently idiographic in the way that they present both the participants voice and the researcher’s interpretations, and all interpretation is grounded in the data Both studies have a clear focus and the data collected was exceptionally rich. The volume of data required a very strict approach to transcription and analysis. In fact there was so much data for Study 2, 24 interviews in all, that I was forced to develop new selection protocols for the methodology in order to retain rigour.

Learning how to use LIPA in a way that captured change was, at times, very difficult. The LIPA research method is still considered to be in its infancy (Farr & Nizza, 2019) and so there were no existing protocols for some of the difficulties that I encountered. As a result there was a degree of experimentation and iteration as I worked out how best to present the women’s stories as they changed over. I have, however, been incredibly fortunate because I have been travelling just behind a group of LIPA pioneers who have laid an important trail of research by which I can judge the merits of my own. Joanna Farr and Isabella Nizza’s (2019) review of 66 sixty-six papers from peer-reviewed journals that used LIPA to capture

and analyse data over multiple time points identified the common features of good quality studies. The first marker is that good LIPA studies present their findings in a way that clearly expresses the dynamics of temporal change for their participants. I have, I hope, made a new contribution to the method in this respect.

My former career as a Graphic designer was an advantage as I began experimenting with ways of visualising the valence of psychological change. My initial attempts were simply to use red arrows to indicate the trajectory but the final solution involved colour coding each interview time point and using colour coded blocks to step up for positive change, down for negative change, or to remain level when there is no change. This simple visual key is an easy way to communicate whether a theme's trajectory has been positive, negative or stable over time, and it may be a useful mechanism for researchers who are conducting future LIPA studies.

Farr and Nizza (2019) identify two main approaches to managing data and presenting results in LIPA. The first, '*Themes spanning time*' tracks the progress of a specific aspect of the participants' experience over multiple time-points, whereas the second, '*themes tied to time points*' develops themes around a single time-point. My study takes the first approach and it follows changes in themes through the course of three time points at both an individual and a group level. Although it was relatively easy to identify themes that repeated across all three time points, locating the specific transitions for a single phenomenon proved much more challenging. My participants were looking back and relaying historic events or experiences, and looking forward to an unknown future, so it could, at times, be very difficult to track precise points of change. A key breakthrough came in reading Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney's (2014) phenomenological study of post-divorce adjustment in midlife. Their study was focused on post-divorce adjustment, but the interviews with participants, by necessity, jumped back to the time of the legal divorce, in order to benchmark the participant's current emotional state against how they had been during the event. The obvious deficiencies in this study design confirmed the need for a longitudinal study which tracked a series of 'present tense' interviews which, over time, might better capture the transition from hot cognition during the divorce process to a more reflective state two years later.

This was an important realisation and informed the structure of my main study. Discussions with my supervisor Jonathan Smith further led to the decision to restrict myself to using quotes that were spoken in the present tense. This discipline rooted the quotes I used in the



here and now and made the jump from one time point to the next much more distinct. It meant letting go of lots of fascinating data, but the rigour made it so much easier to see identify important transition points and present real psychological change. If I were to conduct this study again, I would be much more attuned to the tense that my participants were speaking in, and would, at all times, prompt them to return to the present when they drift away from it. This learning is something that will benefit other LIPA students.

In 2020 Nizza, Farr and Smith published their paper ‘Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality’ (2020). The four markers that they identify are: constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words and attending to convergence and divergence. This thesis certainly tells a compelling story. Study 1 involves three women contemplating their marital difficulties and wondering whether they would be better off in or out of their marriages. Study two continues that narrative by following eight women as they move from married, to divorced and beyond. Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account of the experience of divorce requires the researcher to provide a narrative that is acutely attentive to the words and meaning making of the participant (Van der Zalm and Bergum 2000), but which also facilitates the double hermeneutic as the researcher attempts to “*make sense of the participant making sense of their personal and social world*” (Smith 2004, p.20). For good IPA and LIPA it is important that the analysis should be interpretative, not just descriptive. In conducting my analysis I followed IPA guidelines and did my best to understand what the experience of divorce was like, at that time, from the point of view of the participants, whilst at the same time, asking critical questions about what they else they might be trying to reveal, or to hide, whether consciously or subconsciously. Sometimes my participants ‘leaked’ feelings that they didn’t actively want to communicate to me, for example, when Lindsay talks about how her daughter Tina, who is estranged from her father, has had to *lose her dad*, she unwittingly repeats the words ‘*I’ve got Tina*’ twice in quick succession.

Close analytic reading of the participants' words was core to the analysis process. Everything I found is rooted in the data and all themes are supported by at least five, often more, of the participants. With so much data to deal with, accurately labelling quotes so that they could easily be traced back to transcripts was very important. In Study 1, there was only one interview to contend with, but in Study 2, each participant had interviews at three time points. Labelling was designed to include Name, Income group, Timepoint, Page Number, Line

Number, for example, (*Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L16*). In Study 2, there was a great deal of convergence but divergence was just as important. This was most evident in theme three. Six of the eight women experienced a deterioration in their relationships with their adult children and in three cases the relationship broke down completely. For the other two women, the pattern was completely reversed. They retained the undivided loyalty of their adult children but in both of those cases, the children were alienated from their fathers.

## **Future Research**

Using LIPA for Study 2 was a process of discovery. Every time I returned to interview a participant I had no idea what to expect. Their stories and experiences were all so very different, yet when I conducted the analyses, identified themes, and looked across cases, the parallels were extraordinary. I was most surprised by the deterioration in the relationship between the women and their adult children, but having completed the analysis for the second study, I realised that Study 1 had already red flagged this issue. In Study 1, all three women described their absolute conviction in the loyalty of their adult children. Louise describes it best when she says:

*“The trump card is the family thing, (8.15, Louise) and you know, the kids are, you know, the kids are brilliant with him and they, but I know that if he did it again, or, or something happened, I know where their loyalties lie” (42.5, Louise).*

The women in the Study 2 group were in exactly the same position at Time 1. They were convinced that their adult children would side with them unilaterally through the divorce, but by Time 3, the relationships between six of the eight women and their adult children had fractured and in three instances, had broken down completely. Eight women is a small sample and my results may not be generalisable, but this finding is so at odds with existing research on female divorce that it merits further research.

It would also be worth following up on the psychological wellbeing of the women's adult children. There has been a great deal of research into the psychological impact of divorce on younger children, but remarkably little investigation into the impact that mid or later life divorce has on the mental health and wellbeing of adult children. This small study suggests that this subject requires further investigation, because during the course of their divorces, five out of eight participants mention that one of their adult children had been suffering from

anxiety, depression, taken anti-depressants or had thoughts of suicide during the course of their parent's divorce.

It is widely known that children of divorce are more susceptible to mental health problems (Auersperg, 2019; Strohschein, 2012) and have long-term issues with depressive symptoms (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012), but the specific influence of midlife divorce on the maternal relationship and corresponding mental health problems in adult children of divorce has not been examined. Exploring this finding was beyond the scope of this thesis, but in view of the deterioration in the women's relationships with their adult children, the exponential increase in grey divorce, and the corresponding escalation in both mental illness and suicide in young people under the age of 25 (McManus et al., 2019), this is an area that requires investigation sooner rather than later.

During the course of this research project, I was always aware that I was only getting one side of the story, so conducting a comparable longitudinal study with men would be crucial to achieving a full understanding of the experience of divorce in midlife. Existing research on men and divorce is largely focused on the negative impact it has on father's relationships with their children, but my findings from Study 2 contest this. Further research would clarify whether how midlife divorce impacts father's relationships with adult children and comparing and contrasting the male and female experiences would provide greater insight into the points of convergence and divergence between the genders.

I also feel that more research needs to understand why couples don't engage with relationship counselling. Six of the women in Study 2 had personal counselling during the course of their divorce, but none of them had gone to relationship counselling with their partner. Most couples wait approximately six years after their marital difficulties and problems surface before they seek help (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004) and by that stage it is often far too late. There is a real need for simpler, less antagonistic, ways to help couples to understand each other, as making early intervention solutions more acceptable could potentially save a lot of relationships.

## **Reflexive Statement**

Many IPA researchers are 'insiders' who share some aspects of the experience that they are investigating. This is certainly true for me. I got divorced when I was in my thirties and

although my experience was different because I was younger and I had three small children, the psychological and emotional impact was no different at all. At times, the women I spoke to were very, very distressed and throughout my PhD I kept notes as a way of offloading some of the feelings that the interviews brought up for me.

On the sixteenth of June, 2017, I wrote the following note after an interview with Rachel. It reveals how in tune I was with my participants, but also, how much residual anger I felt at the unfairness of the divorce system.

*“I’ve just left Rachel. We talked for three hours and she revealed so much of herself in that time that by the time we parted she felt like an old friend. These interviews bring up so many things for the participants, but they bring up a lot of stuff for me too. More and more, I realise that I would not be qualified to do this research if I had not been through the experience of divorce myself. When the participants talk about how they feel, I understand the crazy mixed up emotions that they are describing. I find it hard to put into words. So do they. But I know it, and I remember it, and I can be genuinely empathic because I really have felt their pain. <-> The women describe a tumultuous and overwhelming cascade of feelings which appears to makes no sense, but the commonality of those feelings suggests that they are a universal response to a divorce system that is purposely obstructive, unfair and unhelpful. For one woman to feel that way might imply that the issue was within her. For every woman I speak to feel that way suggests that the divorce system itself is culpable.”*

Seeing my participants emerge from their divorces feeling stronger and more confident confirmed that, despite the pain, they, and indeed I, had done the right thing in getting out of an unhappy marriage. There is no doubt that my interest in this topic is personal, but it is also professional interest. For the last nineteen years I have been the sex and relationships columnist at The Times newspaper and in that time I have supported nearly a thousand couples.

I was keen to research the experience of divorce because it is an incredibly common, but utterly life changing, experience. Half of all marriages end in divorce and it is the gift that keeps on giving. Children whose parents divorce face – on average – a 103% higher chance of getting divorced themselves, compared to children whose parents do not divorce (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2004) and that intergenerational transmission means that a single divorce ripples down through subsequent generations. Marriages end, and I don’t think there is

anything we can do to change that, but this PhD confirms that a lot more should be done to make the process less traumatic for everyone involved.

## **A Final Thought**

The eight participants that allowed me to be part of their journey deserve a lot of credit. They generously allowed me into their lives when they were at their most vulnerable. There was a lot of tears and tissues in the early interviews, but it was a complete privilege to be able to document their journeys and see them change and become stronger over time. Many of the participants told me that taking part in the study provided them with an important opportunity to reflect on what was happening to them. Tessa explains:

*“ it’s really been quite helpful in a way. It’s quite a thought provoking, you know, sort of makes you sort of think about stuff and a bit sort of a way but not too much though, so it’s not intrusive (Tessa, High Income, T3, P4,5L55,)*

Rachel took part in the study because she wanted to contribute to research that might, conceivably, help other women going through the experience, however talking to me also seemed to make the experience less lonely for her:

*“It feels like I might be able to share the awful experience of this with other people who must be going through exactly the same things on their own without the help, because there’s no help, you know, it’s, it’s a lonely thing, so it slightly makes you feel less lonely that, you know, you might be able to extrapolate something, or someone might be able to extrapolate something constructive to help, (Rachel, Time 3 P43, L56)*

This study provides important insights into the immediate impact of divorce, but the final interviews took place sooner than I would have liked. I think that interviewing this same cohort of women again in five years would provide a really valuable long-term perspective on post-divorce recovery.

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# Appendix

**Departmental Ethics Committee  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES  
BIRKBECK COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**CLASSIFICATION OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**Date of approval:** March 2016  
**Supervisor:** Jonathan Smith  
**Investigator(s):** Suzi Godson  
**Reference Number:** 151637  
**Title of project:** How middle-aged women with an empty nest make sense of marital conflict: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Dear Suzi,

The above application has been given ethical approval by the departmental ethics committee.

You should be aware that it is your responsibility to report any unexpected problems or events arising from the research that might have adverse consequences for you and/or your participants. In the first instance, please discuss with your supervisor who will advise you as to whether the problem causes a change to the planned research and needs further ethical approval from the committee. If so, please submit a revised application giving details of why this is necessary.

Approval for this study expires March 2019. If the study is still ongoing at this [time](#) please submit a renewal of ethical approval form that can be found on the departmental webpage.

Please retain this certificate for your records.

Good luck with the research.

*Anne Richards*

Anne Richards  
Chair of the departmental ethics committee  
Date: 21st January 2016

## *Study 1. Ethical Approval*

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES  
BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**INFORMATION SHEET FOR: How Do Middle Aged Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Marriage: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. A member of the research team can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of this study is to explore how middle-aged women with an empty nest make sense of marriage. The empty nest stage can be a particularly vulnerable period because when attention is directed away from children and back towards the primary relationship, it can highlight any shortcomings in the marriage. This study will help us to understand whether relationships are experienced and managed differently when they are not mediated by the needs of younger children.

You have been chosen to take part because you are a female, aged between 50 and 60, have adult children, and are married. If you take part in the study you will be required to spend about one hour answering questions about your experiences of marriage. The interview will be tape recorded and then transcribed and anonymised, at which point the original interview will be erased. Your name and that of other people you mention will be replaced with pseudonyms. The interview will take place in your home or a café, somewhere quiet and comfortable that is convenient for you.

The results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences, or written up in journals, but any published data will be totally anonymous and there will be no means of identifying you, or any of the participants involved. The audio recordings that will be made during the interview will be transcribed, coded and then destroyed.

You have a right to ask any questions regarding the study and even after you consent to taking part, you have a right to withdraw at any time during the interview process and up to 2 weeks after the interview.

The project has received ethical approval from the Department of Psychological Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Birkbeck University of London

Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com) Telephone: 07767815835  
Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: [ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk)



**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES  
BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**CONSENT FORM FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Marriage: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that I will remain anonymous and that all the information given will be used for this study only.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the study at any time during the interview and for up to two weeks afterwards without giving any reason I also understand I can decline to answer particular questions.

I understand that audio recordings will be made during the interview and then transcribed. I understand that the transcript will be coded so that I remain anonymous and the original audio recordings will be destroyed.

I understand that all information given will be kept confidential and stored in a password-protected computer or in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher Suzi Godson and the supervisor, Professor Jonathan A. Smith, will have access to the data.

I understand that the results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences or written up in journals. However I also understand that published data will be totally anonymous

I confirm that I am over 16 years of age

**There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one retained by the researcher for records.**

Name (participant):  
Date:

Signature:

Name (researcher):  
Date:

Signature:

Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com) Telephone: 07767815835  
Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: [ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk)

**DEBRIEF SHEET FOR: How Do Middle Aged Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Marriage: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this study. Be assured that everything that you have said in the interview will remain anonymous and confidential. The audio recordings will be transcribed and anonymised and once that task is completed the recordings will be destroyed.

The results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences or written up in journals. However any data will be totally anonymous, and there will be no means of identifying any of the participants involved.

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle-aged women with an empty nest make sense of marriage. The results of this study will help us to understand whether marital relationships are experienced and managed differently when they are not mediated by the needs of younger children. Thank you very much for contributing to this important research.

**Support Group Contacts for individual or couple counselling**

**Relate**

Telephone: 0300 100 1234

Live Chat: <http://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/talk-someone/live-chat-counsellor>

Email counselling: <https://message.relate.org.uk/>

**British Association Of Counselling And Psychotherapy**

Find a therapist tool: <http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/>

**If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact the researcher or supervisor.**

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com) Telephone: 07767815835

Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: [ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk)

Alternatively, the departmental address is: Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, Malet St, London WC1E 7HX, TEL: 020 7079 0868.

**Once again a big thank you for taking the time to take part in this research.**

How Do Middle Aged Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Marital Difficulties: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

*Questions about the marriage*

1. Tell me about how you met your husband
2. When did you decide to get married?
3. What, if any, were your expectations about your role and your husband's role when you got married?

*Questions about children*

4. How did you decide to have children?
5. What impact did having children have on your relationship?
6. What has it been like for you to watch your children become independent adults

*Questions about the relationship*

7. Have you had any major crises in your marriage?
8. Have you had any major challenges to your relationship?

*Questions about the current conflict*

9. When did things start to become difficult in the marriage?
10. What has the experience of marital conflict been like for you personally?
11. Can you think of anything that might help to improve your marriage?

*Questions on the self*

12. How would you describe yourself as a person?
13. How would you describe your husband as a person?

*Questions about age*

14. How does being older affect the experience of marital conflict?
15. How does having adult children affect the experience of marital conflict?
16. How does having an empty nest affect the experience of marital conflict?

*Questions about expectations for the future*

17. How do you feel about the future of your marriage?
18. How do you feel about your own future?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Study 1. Interview Schedule*

Table of Master Themes. Cross Case Analysis	
1. Whats love got to do with it?	
<p><b>Marriage as an escape</b></p> <p>From unhappiness</p> <p>From rootlessness</p> <p>From mediocrity</p>	<p>52.7 so it was a very unhappy house really, it was a bit, it wasn't em, 1.8 we all just used, we all escaped. (Jane) 3.8 we got boyfriends and girlfriends really early so that we could just spend our whole time with them really, (Jane)</p> <p>24.7 'cos I was, you know a military brat and we moved all the time, and I really didn't want that for my kids, (Claudia)</p> <p>29.15. At 28 it was quite exciting and diplomatic life when you are in a little one bedroomed flat in Chrystal Palace and you fly out and your fiancée has a huge house with servants (Lindsay)</p>
<p><b>Marriage as a financial investment</b></p> <p>Banking on a safe bet</p> <p>Status by proxy</p> <p>Marriage as a way to fulfil maternal ambition</p>	<p>4.15 he seemed like a really good bet, 14.15 he was a good bet, he was going to be a good partner and dad I suppose, (Jane)</p> <p>38.14 he was in a foreign country in a very fake world. The ex pat community is very fake. Big house, servants, and I was back in London with nanny, kids, sainsburys, nice lifestyle, (Lindsay)</p> <p>18.2 I wanted kids. I was really quite keen and em, and Nick was sort of holding back a little bit until we were a bit more financially stable, and then, and then when we were we sort of, we went for it, (Claudia)</p>
<p><b>Marriage as a strategy for meeting personal needs and ambitions</b></p> <p>A need for stability</p> <p>A desire for status</p> <p>To create the perfect family life</p>	<p>1.15. I do think I was looking for some stability. 13.15 I wanted, I suppose I wanted someone who was going to stick around (Jane)7.15 he wasn't going to go off with other women for one thing, which is, 'cos I'm horribly jealous. (Jane)</p> <p>33.1. He was a spy. So that was very interesting... He was a diplomat and then we were married and that was great (Lindsay) 4.15 We weren't allowed to tell anyone - MI6 - it was huge. He's a James Bond, (Lindsay)</p> <p>37.7 I just thought for our kids, first of all, (.) I thought we should go back and get them into a nice English school and, you know, good school system, and live in one house that they grow up in, (Claudia)</p>
<p><b>Echoing Parental legacies</b></p> <p>Mirroring traditional maternal roles</p> <p>Getting it right this time</p> <p>The inherited self</p>	<p>2.6 My mum didn't work at all, my dad he was in the German air force so it is very traditional where I come from (Claudia)</p> <p>20.6 My mum had no energy and it was too much and I wanted to be a very hands on Mum. Get it right this time but of course it's gone completely wrong (laughs) (Jane)</p> <p>2.12 I think that the way I am comes from my background, (Lindsay)</p>

*Study 1. Master Table of Themes  
What's love got to do with it?*

<b>2. Motherhood as a trump card</b>	
<b>Tradition and Restriction</b>	
Half employed	48.1 I've always worked part time when, you know, while we had the kids, you know, and he's always worked full time, so it was quite a traditional set up I guess, you know, (Claudia)
Under-employed	20.8 it was really really traditional in that sense. He was earning the money I was at home looking after the baby. I made the house nice. I did the cooking so yeah, really really traditional. It really, really lowered my horizons. I remember sort of thinking "what, what can I do now? (Jane)
Sidelined	41.37. he didn't have any responsibilities at all, gets up, goes to work, dinner, drinks, cocktail parties, whatever, comes back to his big house and whatever. And I'm back in London. No screaming kids, no tantrums, no nappy changing. (Lindsay)
<b>Validation</b>	
Mother as creator	5. 8 the family thing is still core to everyone, but then I'm the one who's created it. I'm the only one to blame for it. (Lindsay)
Mothering as a skill	13.7. but I sort of thought you know, I'm running quite a good ship here and its nice. (Claudia)
Motherhood as an instinctive connection	27.17 because I am, we are, because I know her so well, like when you know daughters, you know all you have to do is see them slightly turn their body and you think "oh ok, I know what's going on here", 43.17 he can't read her at all, he's terrible at reading her, he just bar (Jane)
<b>Control</b>	
The kids as a possession and an insurance policy	9.15. The trump card is the family thing. (Lindsay) 42.5. and you know, the kids are, you know, the kids are brilliant with him and they, but I know that if he did it again, or, or something happened, I know where their loyalties lie, which is sweet. No, its sweet. (Lindsay) 41.6. He adores the kids and they, you know my friends say, you know, "he wouldn't have that if it wasn't for you", because I didn't turn them against him, and I wouldn't do that (Lindsay)
In charge of the family and the marriage	32.5. I do the house and the the social side you know organize friends and stuff you know there are lots of jokes, you know "Nick have you checked with mission contro" before he says to a friend yeah we can meet up (Claudia)19.8. I made us do this marriage course and that was really good. (Claudia)
Determining the size of the family	47.2 when I came back we got back together again and it was just a complete role reversal. And I was sort of in charge and its been like that ever since (Jane) 26.6 I wasn't bothered about having one child, that was fine, but I think Lara would have liked a little brother or sister and Victor would have liked one (Jane)
<b>Empty nest as a catalyst</b>	
Loss of purpose	17. 1. and I just, I just lost my purpose in life. It was really quite bad, 39.1 from a personal point of view the kids going was a really rubbish time 26.14 it's a killer time and one that we are not really em, eh, prepared for 9.1 well she left to go to uni in September, last September, and em, well, I really fell into the most monumental hole then. (Claudia)
Being forced to face the future	19.14. I think about it a lot. Lily is off to art foundation Michael's gone, Jacks at uni, and then she goes and so I'm trying to force how I am feeling now, because do... I wanna (Lindsay)
An incentive	49.16. when she, when she, the idea of her going filled me with so much horror and, like empty nest fear, and that that's why I started, that's why I did the A levels and did that awful year of dental nursing to get to to this course 'cos I had to have something to aim for and 1.17. I had to have, I sort of thought I can't bear it if she goes and it's just me and him in the house. Its going to be horrendous. Its going to be the end of us (Jane)

*Study 1. Master Table of Themes  
Motherhood as a trump card*

<b>3. Into the sexual void</b>	
<b>Sexlessness</b>	
Because she rejects it	28.12 Well, Victor and I haven't had sex for five years. No we, it is, he still find me very attractive, but I don't find him attractive, but I do love him and so we're very like, we hold hands when we go out, and you know, I'll kiss him when he comes in from work, and we give each other a hug em, but there's just, I just can't do the sex thing. (Jane)
Because he has lost his libido	36.13 OK maybe in the past we've had the kind of sexual relationship where he's always been up for it and em, and that's, you know, and I either said "yes or no" and that's, it was kind of like that, and maybe that's slowed down a bit as well, and I think that's definitely coincided with, you know, with the empty nest and again, with menopause, I don't know which, (Claudia)
Because their sexual relationship never recovered from his infidelity	24.3 we struggled. The physical side never really came back 35.5 our relationship has never recovered really from that, in the sense that, we're not, we're not over. 9.6 Nothing. There is nothing. 50.7 He's not actually being a husband, a physical husband. 51.7. I don't have a, I don't have a sex life I don't have that (Lindsay)
<b><u>An unspeakably difficult problem</u></b>	
Avoiding	23.14 every time we tried to talk about it, because he tried to bring it up every time, I would just, you know, prefer to chew my own foot off, rather than have that conversation, but in the end it became so unavoidable, we had to have it, it was the most awful, but I was so relieved after we had had it.(Jane)
Blocking	33.17 he's completely blocking the conversation, "oh you are just firing questions at me" and "I don't wanna" and it's literally like that 40.17 He is pretty rubbish at talking about sex, (Claudia)
Demeaning	7.13 So he says "all you want is sex" 5.15, and says "so all you want is sex and then you'll shut up", its very demeaning. 5.15. He just refuses to speak , 30.9. He won't tell me, he won't talk about it. No. He wont talk about it. 13.11. I've tried. I've tried. He wont talk to me. It comes up about twice a month and he goes zip. He just wont talk about it 7. 15. He just doesn't respond and then the next day is another day and he just moves on. (Lindsay)
<b><u>The search for solutions</u></b>	
A separation	12.6. I still go on to him, "Look why don't you just walk away?" "What is it?" I said. "You know, this marriage" I sometimes when I've had a few glasses of wine I say "this marriage is lonely for me", (Lindsay)
A conversation	18.16 I guess I sort of think if he talked about it, then that would be the magic bullet (Claudia)
An open marriage	10.13 we had a conversation about open marriages and if, you know, and he said well, if you, but and I said I, I don't want to, but if you want to, um I'd be, I would completely accept it and be completely fine with it. I don't want to know anything about it, do not, just do your thing if you want to do that and he went "no I cant be bothered" (Jane)
<b><u>Doubt</u></b>	
Rumination	34.9 I don't know and how do I know that they're not still in touch? I mean, I don't know, but he's very, he goes away on business, 42.9 And I keep thinking "Men like sex. Where is he getting it? Is it just him?" and I don't know... 3.18 but I think, if he is having an affair (Lindsay)
Insecurity	7.17 and I, I just always think I wonder if men think that 'cos you know, that's, you know, they tend to go for the younger model and you just, and I'm really... Nicks a good guy, don't get me wrong, but I just wonder whether he sometimes looks at me and he thinks "who is this old woman?" (Claudia)43. 9. Or you get distracted by someone else who makes everything seem easier (Claudia)
Uncertainty	6.23 he's sort of said, he's over the sex thing now he's in his sixties, although, so you know, but men can go on forever can't they, but I don't know, he doesn't seem to, he says he doesn't have a libido, so maybe like, and it does come to that point where they don't have sex any more when they are old enough (Jane)

*Study 1. Master Table of Themes  
Into the sexual void*

<b>4. Stuckness</b>	
<b>Empty nest as a spotlight</b>	
Intense focus on the couple	25.17. It gets more intense for you as a couple when the kids have gone. (Claudia)
No kids to hide behind	1.17. I had to have, I sort of thought I can't bear it if she goes and it's just me and him in the house. Its going to be horrendous. Its going to be the end of us (Jane)
Crunch time	42.16. Where am I going? What am I going to do when they've gone? Do I want to be more part, or not? (Lindsay)
<b>Contemplating 'alone' ness</b>	
Visualising	33.19 We have a, we've got a little cottage down on the seaside in Kent and every time we go there, 'cos my sister lives down there and my mum lives down there now, and when we go down there now, I just sort of envisage myself in that cottage, just me and the dog, yeah, sort of, yeah, wouldn't it be lovely (Jane)
Persuading	38.24 I could have a lovely apartment in town, I'd have my job and my lovely friends and I'd be all right with that (Lindsay)
Questioning	2.20 usually, it kind of coincides with becoming 'the invisible woman' as they all, they call you, when people don't notice you anymore because you are, yeah, you are not in your prime, erm, and I guess, I think, when, if you then suspect that that might be happening with your husband as well, I guess that's, that's really painful. (Claudia)
<b>Rejecting 'alone'ness</b>	
'Alone' ness feels lonely	40.19 recently when Victor has been away I've really missed him and really felt lonely, before Lara came back, so I was really sort of pacing round the house thinking "I don't like this. I don't like being on my own"(Jane)
The relationship is a safe place	9.15. I don't hate what I've got so its difficult 47.13. I kind of feel safe within that environment because I've got the kids with him and when I look at the step-parenting thing that friends have, it is a disaster. (Lindsay)
The relationship is resilient	11.13.I would never, with us, think this, this could break us, or this would end our sexual relationship. (Claudia)
<b>Wanting it all</b>	
To be both with and without him	1.20 independence yeah, and yet I still want him in my life. 1.23. I can't imagine my life without him and although I think about my life in the cabin in the woods, you know, we've been together for so long, its like we're ingrained in each other.(Jane) 2.20 I always think that the way Helena Bonham Carter lived with the film director where they had their own houses but they had a separate house with a door in between, that's my idea of absolute heaven.(Jane)
To be both in and out of the marriage	9.15 I mean, I could very easily have an affair. I mean, I could because he doesn't question where I am. I'm busy. He's busy. He never asks me where I've been. (Lindsay) 1.6. I, i, have, I did meet someone who I'm really fond of, but I can't go there because I'm not giving up what I've got. (Lindsay)
Needing to talk, yet not wanting to	37.12 he doesn't want to talk about that, and he doesn't want to acknowledge that, because maybe acknowledging that would be a massive turn off, 6.16 Just conversation wise, I think it's a conversation I want to have and he's really resisting, 44.12 It's easier for a man to pretend that things are not happening, or things are not changing. Yes it is, I mean, yeah, but I don't, I don't really know how to tackle that conversation with him, so that's still...28.12. I mean I'm, I really I don't wanna, I hate just talking about it because it makes it, it sort of erm, it erm, in a way it sort of, it makes it, it makes it real, and I don't want to, you know, I'm, I'm still trying to fight it all
<b>Coming full circle</b>	
Uncertainty	30.20. These are all things that are going on in my head anyway. 16.19. really its just such a rollercoaster 10.20. I'm, I don't, I'm not sure, I'm, I have, I feel, I'm worried 17. 18 and I'm not sure, oh I'm not sure, (Claudia)
The unanswerable question	9. 21. What to do? Do you branch out with something completely new or do you stick with what you've got and make it work? (Lindsay)
Self preservation Retreat to the safety of the marriage	36.22 Yes, because we had that conversation again where he said "do you want to have an open relationship" and I had, I think, been with this guy for about a year at this stage and I just thought "Oooo God" and knew that he wanted the answer to be "no" so I said "no no no of course not, of course not" because I knew that it would be horribly devastating for me to say "yeah hun" so I just didn't, I had the chance to leave, but I didn't 'cos I didn't want to hurt him and also, I suppose, I was being a bit selfish I guess, and also self-preservation. (Jane)

*Study 1. Master Table of Themes  
Stuckness*

**Departmental Ethics Committee  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES  
BIRKBECK COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**CLASSIFICATION OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

**Date of approval:** 25/01/2017  
**Supervisor:** Suzi Godson  
**Investigator(s):** Jonathan Smith  
**Reference Number:** 161742  
**Title:** How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Marital Breakdown, And Does A Legal Or Mediated Path To Divorce Impact Experience, Or Outcome: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Dear Suzi Godson and Jonathan Smith,

The above application has been given ethical approval by the departmental ethics committee.

You should be aware that it is your responsibility to report any unexpected problems or events arising from the research that might have adverse consequences for you and/or your participants. In the first instance, please discuss with your supervisor who will advise you as to whether the problem causes a change to the planned research and needs further ethical approval from the committee. If so, please submit a revised application giving details of why this is necessary.

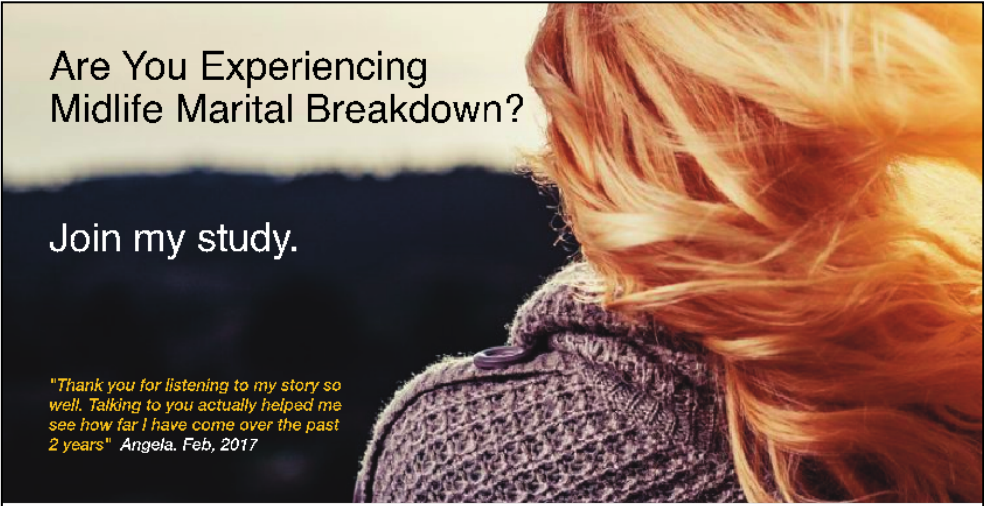
Approval for this study expires January 2020. If the study is still ongoing at this time please submit a renewal of ethical approval form that can be found on the departmental webpage.

Please retain this certificate for your records.

Good luck with the research.







## Are You Experiencing Midlife Marital Breakdown?

Join my study.

*"Thank you for listening to my story so well. Talking to you actually helped me see how far I have come over the past 2 years" Angela, Feb, 2017*

Divorce is a miserable experience at any time, but divorcing in mid life can be even more challenging. This is particularly true for women, who are often juggling biological chaos, ageing parents and teenage children, whilst simultaneously trying to resurrect a 'slightly more dormant' than one had expected' career. Cumulatively, these challenges can either undermine a woman's self confidence, or liberate her from all sorts of constraints, but either way, the transition is never an easy one.

Divorce is not something that women take lightly, particularly after a very long marriage. One US study found that 37% of middle aged female divorcees had deliberated for five years or longer before finally deciding to split. And although the overall divorce rate has stabilised at around 42%, in mid life, the odds of divorce are much worse. In 2013 alone, nearly 60,400 people over the age of 50 got divorced in England and Wales, and between 1991 and 2011 there has been a 73% increase in the number of divorces awarded to men over the age of sixty; the average length of those marriages was 27 years.

**One US study found that 37% of middle-aged female divorcees had deliberated for five years or longer before finally deciding to split.**

Although we have inched closer to equality in other areas, divorce is still a terribly gendered process and women continue to be perceived as 'carers' whereas men are assumed to be the 'providers'. For younger women, with small children, this can be advantageous as they are more likely to be awarded custody. After all, women head 91.2% of single parent families. However, custodial issues are rarely an issue for women who divorce in midlife and therefore, the husband's duty to provide for grown up children is something that he negotiates directly with them.

Because many women who divorce in midlife are poorly informed about the nature of the legal process, they assume that their partner has an on-going financial responsibility for them. In fact, a middle-aged woman who is employed and/or has assets may find that the reverse is the case. And although we read about celebrities having quickie divorces, women who divorce in midlife are advised not to agree to Decree Absolute until financial affairs have been agreed, which means the process can take much longer.

**There has been a 73% increase in the number of divorces awarded to men over the age of sixty; the average length of those marriages was 27 years.**

**For all of these reasons, I want to conduct study which looks at how women with an empty nest make sense of midlife marital breakdown. And I also intend to explore whether using lawyers, or mediation, makes a difference to the experience, or the outcome.** I'm currently recruiting participants to take part and if you think you might be a suitable candidate, do please get in touch with me at [divorceresearch@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:divorceresearch@yahoo.co.uk). I'm looking for women who are aged 50-65 who have children over the age of 18 and who have already applied for, or received Decree Nisi, but who do not yet have Decree Absolute. If you fit the criteria, I will need to talk to you twice, once now and once in a year's time, but everything you say will be transcribed immediately after the interview and your identity will then be anonymised. The study has ethical approval from Birkbeck University and my supervisor is Jonathan A. Smith.

**To join the study email [divorceresearch@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:divorceresearch@yahoo.co.uk), or type the following URL into the search bar of your web engine and fill in the short questionnaire:**

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/DivorceStudy2017>

### Study 2. Recruitment Materials Flyer 1

Are You A Female, Over The Age Of Fifty, With Adult Children, Who Is Going Through A Divorce? If So, I Would Really Like To Talk To You For My PhD Study: **How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Divorce And Does A Woman's Income Impact The Experience, Or The Outcome?**

**What are the aims of the study?**

The primary aim of the study is to understand the experience of midlife divorce for women who's children are adults, and to explore how a woman's income impacts the experience, or the outcome.

**Who Can Participate?**

- Women aged 50-65
- Who have adult children, or who's youngest child is over the age of 18
- Who have received their Decree Nisi, but NOT their Decree Absolute.



**What does participation involve?** You will be interviewed twice; once when you join the study and again, a year later. Each interview will take about an hour and can be arranged at your convenience. You will be asked a set of open questions, which you can answer in any way you choose. It is a relaxed process which previous interviewees tell me can be very cathartic, although I don't offer any advice or counselling. The interviews will be recorded, but your identity will be anonymised as soon as the interviews are transcribed.

**Outcomes:** The study is experiential, so I am really trying to understand what it feels like to be a woman going through a divorce in midlife. The first interview will take place at the beginning of the divorce process, and the second interview will explore how you reflect back on the experience and also, how you are feeling now. The study will also examine whether income and employment affect the experience and the outcome. This study will provide much needed insight into the challenges and complexities of female midlife divorce.

**How do I join the study?** To take part in the study type the following URL into the search bar of your web engine and fill in the short questionnaire that appears:  
<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/DivorceStudy2017>

**Ethics:** The study has ethical approval from Birkbeck University and my supervisor is Jonathan A. Smith. To find out more email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com)

*"Thank you for listening to my story so well. You seemed genuinely interested and I really appreciated having the chance to talk to someone who did not judge what I was saying. Talking to you actually helped me see how far I have come over the past 2 years"* **Research Participant, Feb, 2017**

**THIS SURVEY IS NOW CLOSED. 1.1.18**

How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Middle Marital Breakdown?

**Participant Selection Questionnaire**

Sun Godson PhD Research

*"Thank you for listening to my story so well. You seemed genuinely interested and I really appreciated having the chance to talk to someone who did not judge what I was saying. Talking to you actually helped me see how far I have come over the past 2 years"* **Research Participant, February, 2017**

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this short questionnaire. It has been designed to ensure that participants meet the specific research criteria for my study. If you are selected for the study and you agree to participate, you will be interviewed twice; once when you join the study and again, a year later.

The primary aim of the study is to understand the experience of middle divorce for women whose children are adults. The study will also compare the experience of using mediation against the experience of using lawyers to negotiate a divorce agreement. This will provide much needed insight into the benefits or challenges of each path to divorce. The study has ethical approval from Birkbeck university and my supervisor is Jonathan A. Smith.

1. Are you female?

- Yes
- No

2. What is your date of birth?

DD/MM/YYYY

Date

3. What is your ethnic group?

4. Are you currently in the process of getting divorced?

- Yes
- No
- Thinking about it

5. Was this your first marriage?

- Yes
- No

6. How long were you married for?

7. How many children do you have?

8. How old is your youngest child?

9. Are there any other details that you would like to add about your marriage?

10. Did you initiate divorce proceedings and are you the petitioner?

- Yes
- No

11. Did your husband initiate divorce proceedings and are you the respondent?

- Yes
- No

12. Have you attended a Mediation Information Assessment Meeting (MIAM)?

- Yes
- No

13. Have you spoken with a lawyer?

- Yes
- No
- Not yet, but I intend to

14. Have you received Decree Nisi?

- Yes
- No
- I am in the process of applying for Decree Nisi

15. Have you received Decree Absolute?

- Yes
- No

16. Are you currently employed?

- Yes
- No

17. What is your annual salary?

18. Do you intend to use lawyers to negotiate your divorce agreement?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

19. Do you intend to use mediation to negotiate your divorce agreement?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

20. Would you be willing to take part in a study which will assess your experience of the divorce process?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

\* 21. If you would like to know more, or are willing to participate, please provide contact details so that I can get in touch with you.

Name \*   
City/Town   
County   
ZIP/Postal Code   
Email Address \*   
Phone Number

If you would like to find out more about the study email: [sun.godson@birkbeck.ac.uk](mailto:sun.godson@birkbeck.ac.uk)

22. What is your approximate average household income?

- \$0-\$24,999
- \$25,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000-\$124,999
- \$125,000-\$149,999
- \$150,000-\$174,999
- \$175,000-\$199,999
- \$200,000 and up

Done

## Study 2. Recruitment Survey

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**INFORMATION SHEET FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Marital Breakdown, And Does A Legal Or Mediated Path To Divorce Impact Experience, Or Outcome: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. A member of the research team can be contacted if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The purpose of this study is to explore how middle-aged women make sense of midlife marital breakdown, and considers whether taking a legal or mediated route to divorce impacts the experience or the outcome. The study will also consider the merits and challenges of taking a mediated or a legal route to divorce and will evaluate both experience and outcome. The research is important because between 1991 and 2011, there was a 73% increase in the number of UK divorces awarded to people over the age of sixty. This unprecedented escalation demands more research so that we can identify potential causes and predictors of mid life divorce. It will also help to clarify how marital breakdown is experienced and managed when the needs of younger children do not need to be given priority, an aspect that is particularly pertinent to women.

You have been chosen to take part because you are a female, aged between 55 and 65, have adult children and are going through a divorce. If you take part in the study you will be required to spend about one hour answering questions about your experiences on two separate occasions. The interviews will be tape recorded and then transcribed and anonymised, at which point the original interview will be erased. Your name and that of other people you mention will be replaced with pseudonyms. The interview will take place in your home or a café, somewhere quiet and comfortable that is convenient for you.

The benefits of taking part in this study are that you will be adding to psychological research into the experience of divorce for women with adult children. The disadvantages are that you may find it difficult to reflect on a difficult experience. Please note that the researcher is not in a position to give advice or relationship counselling.

The results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences, or written up in journals, but any published data will be totally anonymous and there will be no means of identifying you, or any of the participants involved. The audio recordings that will be made during the interview will be transcribed, coded and then destroyed.

You have a right to ask any questions regarding the study and even after you consent to taking part, you have a right to withdraw at any time during the interview process and up to 2 weeks after the interview.

The project has received ethical approval from the Department of Psychological Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Birkbeck University of London

Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com) Telephone: 07767815835  
Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: [ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk)

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**CONSENT FORM FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Marital Breakdown, And Does A Legal Or Mediated Path To Divorce Impact Experience, Or Outcome: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

I have had the details of the study explained to me and willingly consent to take part. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I understand that I will remain anonymous and that all the information given will be used for this study only.

I understand that I may withdraw my consent for the study at any time during the interview and for up to two weeks afterwards without giving any reason I also understand I can decline to answer particular questions.

I understand that audio recordings will be made during the interview and then transcribed. I understand that the transcript will be coded so that I remain anonymous and the original audio recordings will be destroyed.

I understand that all information given will be kept confidential and stored in a password---protected computer or in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher Suzi Godson and the supervisor, Professor Jonathan A. Smith, will have access to the data.

I understand that the results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences or written up in journals. However I also understand that published data will be totally anonymous.

I confirm that I am over 16 years of age.

There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one retained by the researcher for records.

Name (participant):  
Date:

Signature:

Name (researcher):  
Date:

Signature:

Contact details of a named investigator for further information as well as the primary applicant (if investigator is a student or research assistant)

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: suzigodson@mac.com Telephone: 07767815835  
Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk

**DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES, BIRKBECK UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

**DEBRIEF SHEET FOR: How Do Women With An Empty Nest Make Sense Of Midlife Marital Breakdown, And Does A Legal Or Mediated Path To Divorce Impact Experience, Or Outcome: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this study. Be assured that everything that you have said in the interview will remain anonymous and confidential. The audio recordings will be transcribed and anonymised and once that task is completed the recordings will be destroyed.

The results of the study will be used in a PhD thesis and may be presented at conferences or written up in journals. However any data will be totally anonymous and there will be no means of identifying any of the participants involved.

The purpose of this study was to explore how middle-aged women with an empty nest make sense of the experience of divorce and whether the path to divorce affects the experience or the outcome. The results of this study will help us to understand whether divorce is experienced and managed differently when is not mediated by the needs of younger children. Thank you very much for contributing to this important research.

**CONTACTS YOU MAY FIND USEFUL**

**DIVORCE CLUB**

Divorce Club organise meet ups around the country for people going through the experience of divorce  
[www.divorceclub.com](http://www.divorceclub.com)

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact the researcher or supervisor.

Researcher: Suzi Godson Email: [suzigodson@mac.com](mailto:suzigodson@mac.com) Telephone: 07767815835  
Birkbeck Supervisor: Professor Jonathan A. Smith: [ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ja.smith@bbk.ac.uk)

Alternatively, the departmental address is: Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, Malet St, London WC1E 7HX, TEL: 020 7079 0868.

Once again a big thank you for taking the time to take part in this research.

### Questions about the marriage

Tell me about how you met your husband

When did you decide to get married?

### Questions about children

How did you decide to have children?

What impact did having children have on your relationship?

### Questions about conflict

What went wrong in the marriage?

Who made the decision to end the marriage?

If you could go back in time what would you do differently?

How did deciding (or not deciding) to end the marriage impact how you felt?

### Questions about the route to divorce?

What was the experience of divorce like for you personally?

How do you feel about the route you took to divorce?

Do you think that it was the best route for you?

### Questions about age

How did being older impact your experience of divorce?

Did having an empty nest affect the divorce outcome?

Have your children been supportive?

### Questions about expectations for the future

How did the divorce meet your expectations in terms of financial settlements, housing or pensions?

How do you feel about the future?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

### *Study 2. Interview Schedule Time 1*

### The Divorce

How did deciding or not deciding to end the marriage impact how you felt?

What has the experience of divorce and like for you personally?

How do you feel about the route you took to divorce?

What do you think it could be done to improve the experience of divorce?

How did you make the decision to go to court if applicable?

### The Outcome

How did the divorce meet your expectations in terms of financial settlement, housing or pensions?

If you could go back in time what would you do differently?

### Impact on Relationships

How has the divorce affected your relationship with your children?

How has to divorce affected your relationship with your extended family?

How has the divorce affected you as a person?

### Moving on

How do you feel about the future?

Do you feel you have moved on?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

### *Study 2. Interview Schedule Time 2*



### The Experience

How are you feeling now?

How does it feel to be divorced?

How has your life changed since the divorce?

Is there anything you miss about your marriage?

### The Divorce

How do you feel about the divorce process?

If you could go back in time what would you do differently?

How do think the divorce process could be improved?

### Relationships

Have you met anyone else/Would you like to meet someone new?

Does being older impact how you feel about the future?

Is your ex in a relationship?

How have your children coped with everything?

### Settlement

Has your ex-husband met his obligations in terms of financial settlements, housing or pensions?

Do you feel that the outcome was fair?

### The Future

How do you feel about the future?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

*Study 2. Interview Schedule Time 3*

Valerie. Time 1 Themes. High Income Group

- Her health is a problem
- She doesn't want to lean on her children
- Her friends are not being supportive
- She has no qualifications and doesn't want to get a job because it might impact the settlement
- She is petrified about money
- She believes she would not have had an affair if her husband had been nicer
- Her lover will not leave his wife

Her health is a problem	I have arthritis in my ankles that's a problem. I mean I don't want to be poor. So money is a huge consideration. Huge. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L39)
She is afraid of being a burden on her children	I'm worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I'm very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I'm not terribly successful as they are that you know. I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we're very close to that. It's all based on fear (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L63)
her friends don't want to listen	I talk to my friends but they don't really want to hear that much. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L3)
She has no qualifications and no experience	I've got no qualifications <-> I've not worked for 30 years. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)
But she doesn't want to work because it might negatively impact her settlement	I'm not getting a job until this divorce comes through <-> cos there's no way that I'm having a job of mine taken into a divorce settlement. <-> even if I was lucky enough to be offered a job now I certainly don't want it to be part of the divorce. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L25)
She is petrified about money	With all of the of the good fortune that I'd had, in inheriting half of it from my mother and winning, winning that money, albeit David was going to get it off me in different ways. I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L59)
She blames her husband for being so abusive that she was driven into the arms of her next door neighbour	I'm very angry with him that he's lied and put me in this uncertain position. That's where my anger comes. I'm angry at him for putting me in the position that he destroyed all our love. I know I had an affair. He's angry at me for cheating because I cheated on him for 10 years allegedly. I understand that.  But as far as his future relationships are concerned, that's not part of my anger. My anger is because of what he's done to me. And because I was in the position that I allowed an affair to happen, and because he was so controlling and mentally abusive and financially abusive. I am angry at him. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L17)
Her lover will not leave his wife	he doesn't want to leave his life. Whereas I wanted to, His life with Lucy was not so horrendous as mine was with David. Therefore he didn't want to leave his life. I know he loves me. You know, really, I love him but maybe just not enough. Yeah maybe not enough. <-> Then we missed each other so much we started again in May. And I decided I don't have to look at it like that. Yeah I can look at it from, well I'll see him where, see him when we both can. And if I meet someone that I really kind of, you know, maybe there's something there. Then I would sever ties. It is just a different way of looking at it. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P19, L1)

Study 2. Themes for Valerie Time 1

Valerie. Time 1 Themes. High Income Group

- The not bad enough marriage: she wanted to leave but she was worried about her kids and the financial consequences
- Winning the lottery when her kids were older gave her the courage to divorce
- Financial fear: Her husband has lied about his finances
- Uncertainty: She can't afford to take him to court
- Her future feels very uncertain

**She married too young**

I feel, I feel, I got married too young. That I do feel.  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P20, L13)

**The not bad enough marriage**

I just remember thinking <-> how nice it would be if I had enough money, you know, to sort of, leave him. But it wasn't money that was the issue. It was, but obviously my kids were young and that was always the priority. I wasn't going to break up my family. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P5, L21)

**Money matters: Wining the lottery gave her the confidence to file for divorce**

I'm afraid money is a huge consideration in my wanting to leave and my situation now. *The money gave me the freedom.* It gave me the freedom to have the power over him in that I wasn't going to be controlled by him and the money. *When I left it gave me the power to be on top of finances, know I was going to be okay. Therefore I could finally leave him.* So it does come down to money. Aside from when my kids were younger and not wanting to break that down, it has come down to money. Unfortunately.  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P24, L18)

**Financial stress: Her husband has lied about his financial situation**

*my husbands done me up like a kipper with the finances.*  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P14, L9)

I'm very scared now. You know I am scared now. I wouldn't have been scared had I not been lied to about the money. The money has taken on a whole new difference to me. <-> Because of the financial situation I'm now terrified. And I didn't think I was going to be. With all of the of the good fortune that I'd had, in inheriting half of it from my mother and winning, winning that money, <-> I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now, I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L55)  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L55)

**Fear of what is coming: The decree absolut feels like an accident waiting to happen because she is running out of money**

I feel like I can see, see this collision coming. And it's just getting nearer and nearer.<-> I think it has to be resolved within the next year because I can carry on this overdraft facility till next November. And I'm and obviously this is guaranteed against my investment. So I'm not, I'm not at the dangerous stage that I don't have any money at all and how am I possibly going to pay off this off without a job (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L41)

**Uncertainty: She feels like she is in limbo because her future is now so uncertain**

*I'm in limbo.* I need to know what's going to happen even though I'm terrified of what that might be and that I don't know what to say. The expectations are that I'm going to have to sell this flat because I can't, I won't be able to afford to live here and have a life. That's what my expectations are. But I'm desperately hoping against everything that that doesn't happen.  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L46)

## Valerie. Time 2 Themes. High Income Group

- She is relieved that she doesn't have to spend the rest of her life with her husband
- She rejects victim stereotypes
- She feels more independent and empowered
- She has started a business
- She has grown in confidence and has no regrets about divorcing her husband
- She has days where she feels depressed and she still doesn't know what the future holds

<b>From fantasy to reality</b>	I still wake up in the morning relieved that I don't have to spend the rest of my life with David, (Valerie High Income, T2, P40, L43)
<b>Rejecting victim stereotypes and becoming more independent</b>	<p>I'm not the stereotypical angry embittered woman because of emotional reasons because I wanted the divorce for many, many years (Valerie High Income, T2,P31, L33)</p> <p>I'm not angry and bitter, as in the angry and disgruntled woman who's been left for another woman kind of thing (Valerie High Income, T2,P35, L39)</p>
<b>She is more independent and empowered</b>	<p>I'm more independent and that's quite empowering isn't it, you know, to sort of just be independent and make your own decisions and do things that work out and it's just empowering it's a lovely feeling, it's a lovely feeling (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L60)</p> <p>I found the confidence who'd have thought I could tackle obstacles that have been thrown my way (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L50)</p>
<b>She is now an entrepreneur</b>	I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence I've launched this business which has excelled all expectations (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)
<b>She is living the dream</b>	I think I feel like I've been repressed for many, many years and of course living here is a dream back in town it's lovely I'm definitely changed as a person (Valerie High Income, T2, P39, L54)
<b>She has no regrets</b>	<p>there's no regrets whatsoever about leaving my husband, (Valerie High Income, T2,P29, L55)</p> <p>I still maintain it was the right thing to do under the circumstances, at the time, before I left, there's a lot to be said about hindsight, (Valerie High Income, T2,P31, L29)</p>
<b>But there seems to be a tension between her emotional state and her determination to make divorce the right decision</b>	I've certainly turned into a different person and life away from him, I've enjoyed every minute. I mean obviously there's been real deep depressive days, but that's nothing to do with not being with him, it's all been financial (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L62)
<b>Certainty eludes her still</b>	I don't know what the future's going to hold you know, (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L26)
<b>Certainty mixed with ambiguity</b>	I didn't want to be with him, why go to counselling. I didn't want to be with him. I wanted to leave him. I couldn't stand him anymore, so from that point of view I did the right thing, from the point of view at the time, financial, at the time I think I did the right thing. In hindsight not such (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L54)

## Study 2. Themes for Valerie Time 1

A longitudinal IPA Study exploring how women make sense of the experience of divorce in midlife?	
<b>Valerie. Time 2 Themes. High Income Group</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She is relieved that she doesn't have to spend the rest of her life with her husband</li> <li>• She rejects victim stereotypes</li> <li>• She feels more independent and empowered</li> <li>• She has started a business</li> <li>• She has grown in confidence and has no regrets about divorcing her husband</li> <li>• She has days where she feels depressed and she still doesn't know what the future holds</li> </ul>	
<b>From fantasy to reality</b>	I still wake up in the morning relieved that I don't have to spend the rest of my life with David, (Valerie High Income, T2, P40, L43)
<b>Rejecting victim stereotypes and becoming more independent</b>	<p>I'm not the stereotypical angry embittered woman because of emotional reasons because I wanted the divorce for many, many years (Valerie High Income, T2,P31, L33)</p> <p>I'm not angry and bitter, as in the angry and disgruntled woman who's been left for another woman kind of thing (Valerie High Income, T2,P35, L39)</p>
<b>She is more independent and empowered</b>	<p>I'm more independent and that's quite empowering isn't it, you know, to sort of just be independent and make your own decisions and do things that work out and it's just empowering it's a lovely feeling, it's a lovely feeling (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L60)</p> <p>I found the confidence who'd have thought I could tackle obstacles that have been thrown my way (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L50)</p>
<b>She is now an entrepreneur</b>	I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence I've launched this business which has exceeded all expectations (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)
<b>She is living the dream</b>	I think I feel like I've been repressed for many, many years and of course living here is a dream back in town it's lovely I'm definitely changed as a person (Valerie High Income, T2, P39, L54)
<b>She has no regrets</b>	<p>there's no regrets whatsoever about leaving my husband, (Valerie High Income, T2,P29, L55)</p> <p>I still maintain it was the right thing to do under the circumstances, at the time, before I left, there's a lot to be said about hindsight, (Valerie High Income, T2,P31, L29)</p>
<b>But there seems to be a tension between her emotional state and her determination to make divorce the right decision</b>	<i>I've certainly turned into a different person and life away from him, I've enjoyed every minute. I mean obviously there's been real deep depressive days, but that's nothing to do with not being with him, it's all been financial (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L62)</i>
<b>Certainty eludes her still</b>	I don't know what the future's going to hold you know, (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L26)
<b>Certainty mixed with ambiguity</b>	I didn't want to be with him, why go to counselling. I didn't want to be with him. I wanted to leave him. I couldn't stand him anymore, so from that point of view I did the right thing, from the point of view at the time, financial, at the time I think I did the right thing. In hindsight not such (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L54)

Valerie. Time 2 Themes. High Income Group

- She resents that the fact that her husband now has a wealthy partner and his life seems better than hers
- Worrying about money has left her contemplating suicide
- She feels left out as her children spend time with their father and his new partner
- She has lost her relationship with his extended family and her friends have not been terribly supportive
- She is lonely
- She feels guilty about breaking up the family but is, at the same time, defensive
- She believes that meeting a new man would solve all her problems.

<p><b>She feels resentful about the settlement and angry that her ex husband's life seems better, not worse</b></p>	<p>Angry, I'm angry and resentful &lt;-&gt; the fact is he's moved in with someone who's quite well off, that's fine, that's not the issue here, the issue, it might be a little bit actually &lt;-&gt; The financial aspect, not the emotional aspect you know that all of a sudden he's going away on holidays he's cut down working two days a week really, a year ago this was never the case, (Valerie High Income, T2, P32, L47)</p>
<p><b>Financial fear has impacted her mental health</b></p>	<p>you think to yourself how many pills have I got in my drawer not obviously going to do anything about it but I've had quite a few days thinking I can't get out of bed I just want to go back to sleep that's for sure because of financial fear (Valerie, High Income, T2, P41, L57)</p>
<p><b>Exclusion brings up unexpected feelings of sadness and loss.</b></p>	<p>it's just things happening in a new life that I'm not part of, it's not a big thing, it was and it's part of divorce you know, they're still in touch with their father, so therefore if it's their father's birthday, or his girlfriends birthday, they're going to be there, it's quite normal, it's just that I didn't expect it to hit me with such a blow the first time, but now what can I do it's part of the divorce (Valerie High Income, T2,P37, L27)</p> <p>I don't know what the word is, sadness, loss, sense of loss, jealousy that he should spend time, it's not jealousy it's not, it's not jealousy, but it's a sad sense of loss, than a weird feeling that I'm not part of this new life, that they'll have when they spend, when they're celebrating with them, that's not jealousy, it's not 'I wish it was me and I want to be there', it's just a sense of loss (Valerie High Income, T2,P37, L53)</p> <p>it's just the fact that my kids have got this other life that I don't that I'm not part of and that's quite weird that was quite weird (Valerie High Income, T2,P35, L61)</p>
<p><b>The extended family has also been split down the middle</b></p>	<p>it's not just you and his relationship breaking up, it's the whole family.(Valerie High Income, T2,P33, L49)</p>
<p><b>She feels excluded from her social circle</b></p>	<p>I knew that the society would be completely different, they haven't disowned me, but it's hard, it's hard I don't expect them to think what's Valerie doing on a Saturday night (Valerie High Income, T2,P40, L26)</p>
<p><b>Life in an unhappy marriage was less lonely than living alone</b></p>	<p>I can't say that I'm not lonely, being alone and being lonely are two completely different things there's been the odd Sunday afternoon certainly in the early stages when I thought mmm, I've always been somebody who could always occupy myself, but when you don't have a house, even a husband who you can't stand, it's a completely different scenario. I was told it would be, I wasn't under any illusions, it wasn't going to be utopia when I left and there would be moments of loneliness rather than being alone &lt;-&gt;so the moments of loneliness are there (Valerie High Income, T2,P40, L1)</p>
<p><b>Her arthritis has flared up in response to stress</b></p>	<p>my arthritis has now decided to take a huge downturn for the worse and I'm really going to require surgery in the next few months so that's another and not part of the divorce thing but I do get angry because whatever I seem to be doing to try and you know sort myself out, I'm being zapped back in the face again with obstacles but that's something that I need to sort out (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L8)</p>
<p><b>She feels guilty</b></p>	<p>there's a lot of guilt on my part because of it, because I'm the one who caused all this, but they also knew that it was not right between us at home, they knew that (Valerie High Income, T2,P36, L25)</p>
<p><b>But she is also defensive</b></p>	<p>I'm not the first person to cause chaos, to leave a marriage and have an affair and cause immense collateral damage. I'm not the first person to do it and I won't be the last and everyone says everybody deserves to be happy, is what people say, if you're not happy in a marriage then you should leave, it's not fair to be in a miserable marriage (Valerie High Income, T2,P34, L62)</p>
<p><b>Another man would solve all her problems</b></p>	<p>I have hooked up with an old boyfriend of mine who I'm extremely keen on, who's got nothing, typical, typical, typical but I've never gone for men because of their money. My heart's always ruled my relationships, but of course it would answer all my problems if I met someone in the next few years which is not beyond the realms of possibility, (Valerie High Income, T2,P35, L35)</p>

Study 2. Themes for Valerie Time 2

Valerie. Time 3 Themes. High Income Group

- Her decision to divorce has had far reaching consequences
- She thought it would be easier when her kids were older but it has affected them badly
- Her eldest son is angry with her
- She realises that she has shattered their security and they have all been hurt
- Her husband has not been materially or even emotionally affected
- Divorce is a painful choice between making herself happy and keeping the family intact for the benefit of her kids
- Her friends validate her decision to leave

<p><b>Her decision has had far reaching consequences</b></p>	<p>I've made my decision to end my marriage, there's been an awful lot of collateral damage here, and I know that there is in many marriages, but with the affair, his family, and my kids, and everything, it was all conscious life changing decisions more or less from when I won the money. (Valerie High Income, T3,P54, L15).</p>
<p><b>The fact that her children are older made it easier for her to leave, but it has affected the children badly</b></p>	<p>for me having older children it made it easier for me to leave because the boys had left home but emotionally I don't think, I think it's had a bad affect (Valerie High Income, T3,P47, L53)</p>
<p><b>Relationship with eldest son is particularly complex</b></p>	<p>my eldest son has an issue with the way I did things, (Valerie High Income, T3,P48, L16)</p> <p>he can only see that I won a million quid and didn't give him any, well I've got three children and that money was my escape fund, had I been happily married of course he'd have had a load of money, so would all of my kids, but that's not the way it was and he can't accept that, so at the moment he's throwing everything back at me, (Valerie High Income, T3,P47, L40)</p>
<p><b>She has broken the family unit and is now being held to account</b></p>	<p>I've shattered their security and that's some huge guilt on my part. I realize that (Valerie High Income, T3,P48, L44)</p> <p>I am held to account, it shattered their security, even if you've got adult children and they've moved out, they can always run home to mummy and daddy, that's what I always had, you know, somewhere to go on a Sunday, somewhere, it's that security of your parents, when they're there, and all of a sudden, even though I'm still alive, and my husband's still alive, the fact that I broke the family unit, even though they know why it happened, and I understand that it's very hard for them to come to terms with, (Valerie High Income, T3,P48, L35)</p> <p>they've all been hurt and damaged by it (Valerie High Income, T3,P47, L47)</p>
<p><b>Her ex-husbands life has not been affected in any meaningful way</b></p>	<p>basically he's still got the company so he can have all that still, whether his company is running at a profit or not .but I can't so, all that's all gone for me, the lifestyle, &lt;-&gt;meanwhile he can still live off the company like we were still living, but I can't because I don't have that company, I'm not part of that anymore, but he's still putting all those expensive flights through the company and it just disappeared (Valerie High Income, T3, P49, L58)</p> <p>He's living with somebody, he's had a succession of women since I left, which is how I expected it to be, and each one he kept talking about moving in with, and this one he did, and if it wouldn't have been this one, it would have been the next one, (Valerie High Income, T3, P49, L65)</p>
<p><b>Retaliation and justification</b></p>	<p>but also how many times do you read in magazines and television that you should never stay at home for the sake of the kids, they'll never thank you for it anyway, and I can see that's exactly the case, my eldest would rather I'd have stayed at home in a miserable marriage while he goes on with his life and goes here, there and everywhere, which is exactly what he should be doing, but I'm only fifty, I'm not ninety five and ready to be pushed into a home, (Valerie High Income, T3,P47, L44)</p>
<p><b>She is better company now</b></p>	<p>I can only go on what my friends have said and my friends have said my goodness you should have left him years ago, which they used to think anyway. I think I've become much more amusing better company I'm not moaning about my husband all the time which is a huge thing I think my friends over the years have been really, really bored about you know moaning no one wants to be with a couple who is unhappy or moaning and I was certainly guilty of that so I think I've just become a more interesting person (Valerie High Income, T3, P44, L1)</p>

Study 2. Themes for Valerie Time 3

Valerie. Time 3 Themes. High Income Group

- Her settlement is smaller than she hoped but it brings enormous relief
- She is running her business and has met a new partner
- She feels like a different person
- Her arthritis has deteriorated and sthis impacts how much work she can do
- Her worries about the future and not having anyone to look after her
- Even though she has a new partner she is still seeing her lover
- She realises that she may have commitment issues

<p><b>Even though it is not enough, settling alleviates some of the dread but she remains anxious</b></p>	<p>once the settlement was sorted, even though I knew it wasn't going to be enough, once it was sorted and it was enough for the immediate years, five or six, it was an immense relief that I had made the decision, that I wasn't going to spend another hundred thousand pounds to go to court and that we had finally reached a decision and all of a sudden it was like this huge relief, &lt;-&gt; the minute David said 'yes I can accept that, let's move with that one', it was like oh my God it was just unbelievable, even though it hasn't taken away all the fears I have now, it really took away that terrible feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning (Valerie High Income, T3,P53, L67)</p>
<p><b>She has started a business and met a new partner</b></p>	<p>now I can say it's the best thing I've ever done, because I've done, I'm through the end, I'm still here, and I've started a business and I've met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but if I hadn't known all of this obviously, I didn't at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn't have had the guts to leave (Valerie High Income, T3,P50, L10)</p>
<p><b>She feels she has found herself and a whole new world has opened up for her</b></p>	<p>it's hugely changed and I won't use that cliché that 'I found myself' but I have and I'm certainly going in that direction and it's opened up a whole new world, and fending for myself, survival, aggravation I never had to deal with, (Valerie High Income, T3, P43, L50)</p>
<p><b>Her arthritis has deteriorated and she needs an operation, but she can't afford to take time off work</b></p>	<p>It's arthritis in my ankle which started in my left ankle which is now in my right ankle as well and both feet it's spreading to because I can feel it it's in both feet and I have good days and bad days so from an age point of view &lt;-&gt; so that is putting me, is frightening me and I need to do something about it and I'm sitting here in this chicken and egg situation. This week I've had no business and that's how it goes, last week I worked nearly every day and I have to work every day for it to sustain me in the years to come, but it's catch 22 so yes age is a big thing at the moment ,not that I feel old, but I feel fearful of it (Valerie High Income, T3, P46, L48)</p>
<p><b>She worries about the future</b></p>	<p>I've been putting it off &lt;-&gt; I'm in constant pain, which is under pain management, so the answer to your question is I think about it almost every day, several times, thinking if I'm having a really bad day with my feet and I'm only fifty three what's it going to be like when I'm sixty three heaven forbid (Valerie High Income, T3, P46, L37)</p>
<p><b>She worries about ageing and not having anyone to look after her</b></p>	<p>I'm very fearful about my health you know, I did think before I left, one of the big things is you know who's going to look after you when you're older. (Valerie High Income, T3, P53, L27)</p> <p>and of course I'm not married anymore, so I've no one to look after me (Valerie High Income, T3, P41, L2)</p>
<p><b>Her new boyfriend is part of her pre-marital identity</b></p>	<p>he's part of my past, and he's part of everything I was before I met my husband (Valerie High Income, T3, P45, L32)</p>
<p><b>Her new boyfriend is helping her to get over Joel, her affair partner</b></p>	<p>he's definitely helping me get over my affair for the fact that I don't want to sleep with Joel anymore, (Valerie High Income, T3,P54, L67)</p>
<p><b>But Joel is still her backup plan</b></p>	<p>I am very guilty of wanting to keep Joel as an available option if things don't work out with Ian. I'm not proud of that, (Valerie High Income, T3,P55, L7)</p>
<p><b>She is still in the same triangular relationship as she was in her marriage</b></p>	<p>it's a terrible attachment still, I don't know that it's love though, it's terribly compcated, I'm not sleeping with both of them (Valerie High Income, T3, P55, L58)</p> <p>I might have commitment issues (Valerie High Income, T3,P45, L7),</p>

Study 2. Themes for Valerie Time 3



**Positive Change**  
Valerie: High Income

<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From unemployment to empowerment</b></p> <p><b>No qualifications and no experience</b></p> <p>I've got no qualifications &lt;-&gt; I've not worked for 30 years. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p><b>She is now an entrepreneur</b></p> <p>I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence I've launched this business which has excelled all expectations (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)</p> <p>the euphoria of people looking at me and ringing me up and me doing a good job and then being asked to do another job you know to come back again the euphoria is fantastic for me it's really kept my spirits up no matter how nerve wracking it is (Valerie High Income, T2, P41, L12)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p><b>Empowerment and increased self worth</b></p> <p>now I can say it's the best thing I've ever done, because I've done, I'm through the end, I'm still here, and I've started a business and I've met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but if I hadn't known all of this obviously, I didn't at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn't have had the guts to leave (Valerie High Income, T3,P50, L10)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From passivity to agency</b></p> <p><b>In limbo</b></p> <p>I'm in limbo. I need to know what's going to happen even though I'm terrified of what that might be and that I don't know what to say. The expectations are that I'm going to have to sell this flat because I can't, I won't be able to afford to live here and have a life. That's what my expectations are. But I'm desperately hoping against everything that that doesn't happen. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L46)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p><b>Holds both positive and negative feelings about her current state</b></p> <p>I've certainly turned into a different person and life away from him, I've enjoyed every minute. I mean obviously there's been real deep depressive days, but that's nothing to do with not being with him, it's all been financial (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L62)</p> <p>I didn't want to be with him, why go to counselling. I didn't want to be with him. I wanted to leave him. I couldn't stand him anymore, so from that point of view I did the right thing, from the point of view at the time, financial, at the time I think I did the right thing. In hindsight not such (Valerie High Income, T2, P31, L54)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p><b>Feels she has found herself</b></p> <p>it's hugely changed and I won't use that cliché that 'I found myself but I have and I'm certainly going in that direction and it's opened up a whole new world, and fending for myself, survival, aggravation I never had to deal with, (Valerie High Income, T3, P43, L50)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From anxiety to relief</b></p> <p><b>She is petrified about the financial outcome</b></p> <p>I'm very scared now. You know I am scared now. I wouldn't have been scared had I not been lied to about the money. The money has taken on a whole new difference to me. &lt;-&gt; Because of the financial situation I'm now terrified. And I didn't think I was going to be. With all of the of the good fortune that I'd had, in inheriting half of it from my mother and winning, winning that money, &lt;-&gt; I didn't think I was going to have to worry about money in a big way. And now, I'm now I'm petrified. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L55)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p><b>Financial fear has impacted her mental health</b></p> <p>you think to yourself how many pills have I got in my drawer not obviously going to do anything about it but I've had quite a few days thinking I can't get out of bed I just want to go back to sleep that's for sure because of financial fear (Valerie, High Income, T2, P41, L57)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p><b>Settlement brings immense relief</b></p> <p>once the settlement was sorted, even though I knew it wasn't going to be enough, once it was sorted and it was enough for the immediate years, five or six, it was an immense relief that I had made the decision, that I wasn't going to spend another hundred thousand pounds to go to court and that we had finally reached a decision and all of a sudden it was like this huge relief, &lt;-&gt; the minute David said 'yes I can accept that, let's move with that one', it was like oh my God it was just unbelievable, even though it hasn't taken away all the fears I have now, it really took away that terrible feeling of not wanting to get out of bed in the morning (Valerie High Income, T3,P53, L67)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From social isolation to social validation</b></p> <p><b>Her friends dont want to know</b></p> <p>I talk to my friends but they don't really want to hear that much. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P22, L3)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p><b>Her friends are not supportive</b></p> <p>I knew that the society would be completely different, they haven't disowned me, but it's hard, it's hard I don't expect them to think what's Valerie doing on a Saturday night (Valerie High Income, T2,P40, L26)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p>I can only go on what my friends have said and my friends have said my goodness you should have left him years ago, which they used to think anyway. I think I've become much more amusing better company I'm not moaning about my husband all the time which is a huge thing I think my friends over the years have been really, really bored about you know moaning no one wants to be with a couple who is unhappy or moaning and I was certainly guilty of that so I think I've just become a more interesting person (Valerie High Income, T3, P44, L1)</p>

Study 2. Themes across time for Valerie (positive valence)

**TIME 1**

**From minor problem to major concern**

**Her health is a problem**

I have arthritis in my ankles that's a problem. I mean I don't want to be poor. So money is a huge consideration. Huge. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L39)

**TIME 2**

**Her arthritis has flared up in response to stress**

my arthritis has now decided to take a huge downturn for the worse and I'm really going to require surgery in the next few months so that's another and not part of the divorce thing but I do get angry because whatever I seem to be doing to try and you know sort myself out, I'm being zapped back in the face again with obstacles but that's something that I need to sort out (Valerie High Income, T2, P38, L8)

**TIME 3**

**Her deteriorating health is impacting her business and making her fear for her future**

It's arthritis in my ankle which started in my left ankle which is now in my right ankle as well and both feet it's spreading to because I can feel it it's in both feet <-> so that is putting me, is frightening me and I need to do something about it and I'm sitting here in this chicken and egg situation. This week I've had no business and that's how it goes, last week I worked nearly every day and I have to work every day for it to sustain me in the years to come (Valerie High Income, T3, P46, L48)

I'm in constant pain, which is under pain management, <->I'm only fifty three what's it going to be like when I'm sixty three heaven forbid (Valerie High Income, T3, P46, L40)

**TIME 1**

**From protecting the family to destroying it**

**She is afraid of being a burden on her children**

I'm worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I'm very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I'm not terribly successful as they are that you know. I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we're very close to that. It's all based on fear (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L63)

**TIME 2**

**She feels excluded from the relationship her children have with their father**

It's just things happening in a new life that I'm not part of, it's not a big thing, it was and it's part of divorce you know, they're still in touch with their father, so therefore if it's their father's birthday, or his girlfriends birthday, they're going to be there, it's quite normal, it's just that I didn't expect it to hit me with such a blow the first time, but now what can I do it's part of the divorce (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L27)

I don't know what the word is, sadness, loss, sense of loss, jealousy that he should spend time, it's not jealousy it's not, it's not jealousy, but it's a sad sense of loss, than a weird feeling that I'm not part of this new life, that they'll have when they spend, when they're celebrating with them, that's not jealousy, it's not 'I wish it was me and I want to be there', it's just a sense of loss (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L53)

it's just the fact that my kids have got this other life that I don't that I'm not part of and that's quite weird that was quite weird (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L61)

I can't say that I'm not lonely, <->so the moments of loneliness are there (Valerie High Income, T2, P40, L1)

**TIME 3**

**She is now being held to account by her children and she feels guilty**

I've shattered their security and that's some huge guilt on my part. I realize that (Valerie High Income, T3, P48, L44)

I am held to account, it shattered their security, even if you've got adult children and they've moved out, they can always run home to mummy and daddy, that's what I always had, you know, somewhere to go on a Sunday, somewhere, it's that security of your parents, when they're there, and all of a sudden, even though I'm still alive, and my husband's still alive, the fact that I broke the family unit, even though they know why it happened, and I understand that it's very hard for them to come to terms with, (Valerie High Income, T3, P48, L35)

they've all been hurt and damaged by it (Valerie High Income, T3, P47, L47)

**TIME 1**

**From love triangle to love triangle**

**She still sees her lover but as soon as she meets someone else she will drop him**

I'm not looking for a man to come and save me. But it would be nice to have a. It would be nice to have someone in my life. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P18, L59)

he doesn't want to leave his life. Whereas I wanted to, His life with Lucy was not so horrendous as mine was with David. Therefore he didn't want to leave his life. <-> Then we missed each other so much we started again in May. <-> And if I meet someone that I really kind of, you know, maybe there's something there. Then I would sever ties. It is just a different way of looking at it. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P19, L1)

**TIME 2**

**She has met someone she likes, but he has no money so she is still looking**

I have hooked up with an old boyfriend of mine who I'm extremely keen on, who's got nothing, typical, typical, typical but I've never gone for men because of their money. My heart's always ruled my relationships, but of course it would answer all my problems if I met someone in the next few years which is not beyond the realms of possibility. (Valerie High Income, T2, P35, L35)

**TIME 3**

**She is still in a love triangle**

I am very guilty of wanting to keep Joel as an available option if things don't work out with Ian. I'm not proud of that, (Valerie High Income, T3, P55, L7)

it's a terrible attachment still, I don't know that it's love though, it's terribly complicated, I'm not sleeping with both of them (Valerie High Income, T3, P55, L58)

I might have commitment issues (Valerie High Income, T3, P45, L7),

Study 2. Themes across time for Valerie (negative valence)

<p><b>Positive Change</b> Lindsay: High Income</p>		
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From obstacle to opportunity</b></p> <p>She had no qualifications I haven't got any qualifications &lt;-&gt; so that was a big regret for me. Real big regret. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P7, L12)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p><b>An opportunity for self improvement</b> I have thought about going back to college and doing O level, is it an O level &lt;-&gt; so I've thought about going to, I like English, I used to love English, and English literature at school, so I thought well I'll do that one (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P43, L30)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p><b>Free education offers her a lifeline</b> I would like to go and get the (GCSE) qualification but I can't, if I do English or Maths or both. I can do that for free cause the government pay for you for do that. So I'm going to do that when I can enroll for that. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P75, L29)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From anxiety to agency</b></p> <p>I am very confused, all the time I was confused. When I think about it now I am sort of glad he's gone now because I have started to feel a bit different. I've started to feel more value in myself. I'm more, I'm getting a bit more confident. Because at one time I couldn't even change a light bulb, I couldn't, I wouldn't even think of it because I'd say Frank that light bulbs gone and I'd be all anxious and worried about a light bulb. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P9, L31)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p>you know where I was thinking oh you know he's going to wrap me round his little finger he's going to do this, Frank knows all, because I'd convinced myself, cause Frank always handled the money that I'd get myself in a knot, and I did at first, and I still do a little bit, but that's because, that's partly because of me illness, because I get a lot of fuzzy brain fog, you know, but I can do anything he can do, you know, he's no better than I am. He's had no different education than me and in fact, in fact I would, I would hazard guess, I'm more intelligent than he is, (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P47, L58)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p>I think the change is that Frank's gone. I think he made me feel I was useless I couldn't do anything (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P62, L5)</p> <p>I was scared, I was scared of everything. I am now scared but I'm not as scared how can. When I was married I was scared of everything the littlest of things could scare me. I wouldn't drive I wouldn't drive a distance on me own I wouldn't plan a route and go and drive somewhere. Now I put me satnav on me phone and I can find places and go places ( Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P61, L67)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From sick to well</b></p> <p>You have to learn to live with it really does affect my health because. When I get in them stages I'm in bed two in three days. I can't. I can't get out of bed to go to the bathroom. Don't get me wrong, but I can't function. Because I'm in. I'm in agony and pain all over my body and I'm on medication. I can't sleep, I can't eat. I can't drink. I did, I've lost three stone so was bigger but I lost three stone like that (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P29, L35)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p>I think obviously living with Frank and living in that atmosphere, him being violent at times and what have you and me having jobs I hated it and everything else I think that affected me health and that's the one thing I have thought to meself you know I am thankful for, at least at the moment it hasn't made me worse, other than the depression (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P51, L49)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p>Well I think generally my health is a bit better. Yes I do and I think it's now this is all over all since Frank's been gone even I think I've had a bit better health yes I do &lt;-&gt; perhaps some of the stress of living with him. I'm convinced I became ill because of my marriage I'm convinced of that you know about being knocked about causes. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P69, L48)</p> <p>I don't think as much as I get depressed sometimes I don't think I'm as stressed even though I'm worried about the finance bit now. I feel I was living on a knife edge before I was on pins all the time. And I used to dread if I'd been out I used to dread coming back to the house&lt;-&gt; I don't feel I'm all stressed out all the time (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P59, L28)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From suicidal to coping</b></p> <p>I still think about killing myself. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P23, 60)</p> <p>this counselling I've had, is to, the times when I feel desperate when I have the bad thoughts is what do I do then. And what I can do to stop those thoughts. But I've told her it never stops the thoughts because I still think, I still think about killing myself. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P23, L58)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p>I will say, I haven't told Tina but I have thought to meself a couple of times I might as well just be dead, I might as well just kill meself &lt;-&gt; Some days I just think what what's the point, I have got this and I have got the house and I think there's Frank with his happy life and I've had it all taken away you know (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P52, L5)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p>at that time when I told you I was thinking bad thoughts again but I've come through it because I've learned you know coping strategies and things so I'm alright (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P53, L8) Counselling teaches you coping strategies (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L16)</p> <p>I've got the I've got the mechanisms there I have to be. I have days where when I'm not it's when I'm not feeling well in myself as well, that makes a difference (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L30)</p>
<p><b>TIME 1</b></p> <p><b>From losing her identity to creating a role for herself</b></p> <p>I always thought it was Frank, Lindsay and Tina. And now its just Lindsay. And I didn't know how to, even now. I don't really know who Lindsay is, I don't know who I am, because who I thought I was has been taken away, being a wife. And being the person who was the homemaker, even though I went to work. And the person who liked to look after people. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P30, L28)</p>	<p><b>TIME 2</b></p> <p>I'm lost. I'm lost. I'm totally lost because I've lost that family unit which which was so important to me because of the life I had (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P465, L45)</p> <p>There surely are times when I wouldn't say I feel lonely, I feel like something's missing, something's missing in me life, I don't think it's Frank as such, I think it's the family life. (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P35, L36)</p>	<p><b>TIME 3</b></p> <p>You know because it would be a little family again in a way won't it?. It would become a family unit again. That's what I miss and &lt;-&gt; yeah I do see it as a role. I suppose that's the hope. I've got, if you're saying about the future, perhaps that's it, you know. Well that will make me happy, having that family unit, you know, won't it, (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P51, L10)</p> <p>we have discussed between us me and Tina about a sperm donor(Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P72, L40)</p>

*Study 2. Themes across time for Lindsay (positive valence)*

		<b>Negative/No Change</b> Lindsay: High Income	
<b>TIME 1</b>		<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>
<b>From wanting for nothing to having very little</b>	<p>We didn't want for anything. Except I suppose love. And that sort of thing, but got material things Franks very material. He thinks he thinks he's em Looking after you cos he's supplying the money and the material stuff which he is, (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P19, L36)</p> <p>at the end of the day me and Tina can't complain because. We had new cars. We had. We had everything we wanted. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P28, L2)</p>	<p>known I could have managed or, done something, but it would be to give up my home, a car. Okay they're all material things but for me they were really important because of my background I'd come from, if I would have lost them, I mean, I don't know. I mean I've lost em now to a degree, haven't I? (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P38, L15)</p>	<p>I've got be careful of it's all money I have to pay £7 go yoga I have to pay £3 go the choir so that's that's £10 that's £40 a month. If I start joining all clubs me money's dwindling down so I'm a bit limited because I don't know (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P75, L24)</p> <p>I had a couple weeks recently where I was starting I mean I can cut back on food, I need to, but I didn't go and get any food other than a loaf of bread and some eggs and I thought right, I'm going live off the toast and egg, boiled egg, and all that for a bit no till I you know because I don't want to spend any money (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P57, L18)</p>
<b>TIME 1</b>		<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>
<b>From guilt to regret</b>	<p>he won't see her unless she sees the woman. Well, Tina won't because of me, and now I'm carrying some of that guilt round a bit. So now I think this is my fault now because I have reacted like I have to this woman and I might have imprinted that on Tina's brain. Because I don't like, do you know what I mean. But she says "I'm an adult Mum and I never want to see him ever again in my life. Never." (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P4, L31),</p>	<p>The only thing I'm truly thankful for is I've got Tina but there's a sting in the tail isn't there because Tina's had to lose her dad, that's the thing. I've got Tina, but I don't care about him not having Tina but I care that Tina hasn't got him. (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P46, L58),</p> <p>He's eradicated his daughter, (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P326, L59)</p>	<p>I think Tina struggled. She's had counselling as well (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P72, L2)</p> <p>I just want Tina to be happy and have a dad you know I mean and I've said that to Tina but she won't have and he won't have it so what do you do. He should be the bigger person and keep trying with Tina he's just give up on her hasn't he that's the heart breaking thing. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P71, L38)</p>
<b>TIME 1</b>		<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>
<b>From abandonment to invisibility</b>	<p>I don't think I can explain it. It's just like a loss. You've lost yourself. You've lost your. You've lost everything you've worked for, everything you've been through. And somebody just walks away. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P270, L1)</p> <p>It was our little family unit and he's just taken mine away, made his life with somebody else identical to" bought a three piece suite and a gas cooker, a new fire, a hot tub, he's done all that, they go on cruises and I think, what am I left with, nothing. &lt;-&gt; I've been nowhere, (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P6, L38)</p> <p>I've just been left on, on an island, or a raft floating somewhere, where there's no land, that's how I feel and nobody to rescue me. So I've got to rely on me now, (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P30, L32)</p>	<p>I think there's Frank with his happy life and I've had it all taken away you know and had to fight tooth and nail. (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P52, L16)</p> <p>Why, when I haven't the. I'm not the one who's had the affair. This is something I'll never, never ever understand or get in me brain. I think there isn't a day that goes by that doesn't think about that. I don't think I'll ever have a closure and it dri.. it does, sometimes it drives me bonkers thinking about it. I can wake up thinking about it. I wake up nearly every morning, well I do every morning thinking, what am I doing here. Why am I in this situation? What happened? You know. (Lindsay T2, P32, L12)</p>	<p>why should he be having this like fantastic life you know because I do know we saw going on cruises it's just like for me it's not particularly the perhaps the material thing of it it's like the thing that he's sharing them things with somebody else he's doing all that stuff. He's disregarded me and Tina (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P61, L37)</p> <p>it's just this thing he's just living his life and it seems to have had no detrimental effect on him really life to what it's had on me and Tina (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P73, L13)</p> <p>it felt like I was a piece of rubbish and Tina was a piece of rubbish and we were like that rubbish in the garbage and when we were doing the skips and throwing stuff out you know I almost felt like throwing myself in &lt;-&gt;and we were classed the same. We were nothing we meant nothing. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P66, L30)</p>
<b>TIME 1</b>		<b>TIME 2</b>	<b>TIME 3</b>
<b>From anger to impotence</b>	<p>I feel like how dare you, how dare you just get up and walk out with no explanation, no nothing. It's, I feel really angry (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P8, L2)</p>	<p>I'll always be angry. I'll always be angry. I'd love to go and kick all the windows in. I'd love to speak to her sons and give them a few home truths but I'd never have. I've respected the fact that, well that's it, (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P503, L20)</p>	<p>I'm sad but I think now, its more well more anger. I can't get, I feel so angry and I've got nowhere to vent that anger. You know what I mean. (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P60, L35)</p>

*Study 2. Themes across time for Lindsay (negative valence)*

## High Income

Tessa	Valerie	Angela	Rachel
<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in agency From powerless to autonomous</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From deception to honesty</p> <p>Positive change in Relationship status From single to co-habiting</p> <p>Positive changes in financial security From financially insecure to financially secure</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in Agency From passivity to agency From unemployment to empowerment</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From anxiety to relief From social isolation to social validation</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in Agency From filling time to active self-help</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From self doubt to self esteem (Counselling) From crisis management to ongoing support From holding on to letting go</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in Agency From persecuted to creative</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From desperation to relief From victim to survivor</p>
<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From primary parent to person at fault From avoiding the pain to hiding the truth</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From certainty to regret From clarity to confusion</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From protecting the family to destroying it</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: Health: From minor problem to major concern</p> <p>No change in relationship status From love triangle to love triangle</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From fragile to broken - her relationship with her son</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From lack of confidence to lack of confidence From optimism to pessimism</p> <p>Negative changes in Identity From a role she loved to a label she hates</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From support to lack of support</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From bitter to horrible From trapped to immobilised</p>

## Low Income

Lisa	Lindsay	Eva	Mandy
<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in agency From insecure to in control</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From friendship to one upmanship From unwilling to uncompromising</p> <p>Positive change in Identity From who she is to who she was</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in Agency From obstacle to opportunity From anxiety to agency</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From suicidal to coping From sick to well</p> <p>Positive change in Identity From losing her identity to creating a role for herself</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in agency From passive to agentic</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From insecure to secure</p> <p>Positive changes in financial security From financial conflict to financial security</p>	<p><b>Positive Change</b></p> <p>Positive change in agency From passive to agentic From protecting him to protecting herself and kids</p> <p>Positive change in emotional state From weak to strong</p> <p>Positive impact on children or on relationship with children: From maternal gatekeeping to paternal alienation</p> <p>Positive changes in financial security From poverty to wealth</p>
<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From victimhood to alienation From concern to disdain</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From optimism to cynicism Mental health: From controlled to uncontrolled</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From guilt to regret</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From anger to impotence From abandoned to invisible</p> <p>Negative changes in Financial security From wanting for nothing to having very little</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative impact on children or on relationship with children: From ambivalent to incapable.</p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From anxiety to uncertainty From dormant emotions to active distress From getting what she wanted to missing what she had</p> <p>Divorce Process From protection to aggravation</p>	<p><b>Negative/No Change</b></p> <p>Negative changes in emotional state: From avoidance to preoccupation From pessimism to suspicion</p> <p>Negative changes in Identity From a clearly defined role to a search for a new identity From reluctance to denial</p>

## Study 2. Cross Case Themes

## From Self-Doubt to Self-Esteem: High Income

### Valerie

**TIME 1**

Valerie has not had a job since before she got married so she is in a very vulnerable position:

"I've got no qualifications <-> I've not worked for 30 years".  
(Valerie, High Income, T1, P17, L32)

**TIME 2**

She has launched a business and her confidence has increased

"I'm completely different I've really, really grown in confidence, I've launched this business which has exceeded all expectations"  
(Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L6)

**TIME 3**

Now she looks back and knows it was the right thing to do but realises that she wouldn't have had the guts to do it if she had known how hard it would be.  
now I can say it's the best thing I've ever done, because I've done, I'm through the end, I'm still here, and I've started a business and I've met someone and we might be able to make it work together, but if I hadn't known all of this obviously, I didn't at the beginning, and I was told the money you have won is going to evaporate anyway in terms of the settlement then the truthful answer is I probably wouldn't have had the guts to leave (Valerie High Income T2, P50, L10)

### Tessa

**TIME 1**

Tessa feels that she has had enough of doing all the work and getting none of the power

"actually I feel as if I've been doing two full time jobs for 25 years, <-> I've been making 50 percent of the effort and getting 20 percent of the power. And that's what this is all about. That's what this is all about, I've just had enough of putting all the effort in and getting none of the power" (Tessa, High Income, T1, P1, L57)

**TIME 2**

She has moved on

"the point is I have moved on. Because I moved, and because that's a final, literally closing the door, I feel that, that, kind, I'm now thinking ahead, in terms of, what's next for me, And the answer is well I can do any job I like, I can move abroad if I want to, I can let my house out and I can, I can go, you know I could, I could save some money and take a year off, You know, I could do an extra bathroom, I could have a lodge, You know, I could do something at the City Lit or something at Birbeck, I can do whatever I want, full of opportunity,  
(Tessa, High Income, T2, P27, L1)

**TIME 3**

She feels she is now in control of her life.

I feel much ...<-> I feel much less, I feel in control of my house, in control of my bills, in control of my finances, and my future in that sense, my pension, and everything else, you know, I feel that I, you know, that I'm not worried about my financial future, which I, which was, and I'm I so that feels good.  
(Tessa, High Income, T3, P34, L46)

### Angela

**TIME 1**

She would definitely go back to him if he wanted her even if he said now, even though we are waiting for our Absolute now, um, if, if, if, even now if he said that he would like to try again I would be up for that, definitely, because now, I feel now, as if I'm much more the sort of partner he would have liked actually, and also, um, I feel I understand what went wrong um, (Angela, High Income T1, P8, L19)

**TIME 2**

She is beginning to accept that he is not coming back  
He's not coming back so I've just got to accept it  
(Angela, High Income T2, P16, L53)

**TIME 3**

She has moved on and is no longer talking out her ex husband all the time in therapy  
Yeah definitely I've definitely moved on. <-> I might think, talk about him in my counseling from time to time if I'm reflecting back, but on a day to day basis, yeah I would say I'm thinking about him less and less. (Angela, High Income T3, P32, L54)

### Rachel

**TIME 1**

She cannot get past the injustice of it all  
I go up and down. It's the thought of facing the court (cries again) <-> And the viciousness of it, I've got. He wants maintenance, you know. You answer him. It's crazy. He's a fine figure of a man, it's just crazy, he's sitting at home". (Rachel, High Income, T1, P27, L21)

**TIME 2**

She is becoming more confident and recognises that she is actually very tough

I'm actually, I'm really, I've got a brilliant. I mean I'm tough and I've got a brilliant temperament you know, (Rachel, High Income, T2, P21, L41)

**TIME 3**

She is beginning to envisage a different kind of future

I have started mosaic classes and I have absolutely unbelievably taken to it like fish to water. First time I did it I couldn't believe it and I'm going to have a studio and I'm going to do portraits of women (Rachel, High Income, T3, P40, L60)

## From Self-Doubt to Self-Esteem: Low Income

### Lisa

**TIME 1**

She is, or was, a very nervous person  
I mean I'm very, I'm quite, I am, or I was, I'm not so much now, but I was a very like nervous person.  
(Lisa, Low Income, T1, P2, L52)

**TIME 2**

She has always felt insecure and that she is not good enough  
I always had insecurities and never maybe felt, <-> Yeah I think I've I always felt not good enough but I don't know why but I should I don't know why but yeah I kind have always felt that I'm not good enough  
(Lisa Low Income, T2, P38, L25)

**TIME 3**

She is now happy with her life and feels that she is stronger and more capable

I'm happy with, you know, my life as it is at the moment, I'm happy with it, I know I couldn't, I wouldn't go back, partly because I wouldn't be the same, I wouldn't be, I'd be a different person going back and I don't think he'd like. It's made me stronger which I suppose is a, um and I've, cost to live on my own. I never thought I'd be able to live on my own. God I was such a wimp. (Lisa Low Income, T1, P16, L26)  
I'm just kind of I'm happy where I am and yeah it's just you know this is what life is at the moment and it's good (Lisa Low Income, T3, P39, L18)

### Eva

**TIME 1**

She had a very traditional idea about what her life would be  
I think I've been brought up on this, oh you have to find your handsome Prince and marry them to be happy. (Eva T1, P11, L56)

**TIME 2**

She now realises that she is a stronger and more resilient that she thought  
It's made me realize I'm much more resilient and tough than I thought I was, I don't think you know how tough you are until you've been tested do you and God knows I've been tested. It's made me realize I can be quite independent. I shouldn't be such a door mat I'm a nice person. I should stop feeling guilty and beating myself up about everything which is what I did all the way through marriage I thought everything was my fault and actually wasn't so that's better I've learned to be a bit kinder to myself I think and I just think I'm a stronger person I'm in a better place much better place much better place than I was.  
(Eva, Low Income, T2, P36, L49)

**TIME 3**

She is happy and feels liberated and free to focus on herself  
I'm generally fairly happy now, I wake up in the morning and I feel good and I've got the bed to myself and I can please myself and do what I want. I don't have to worry about anyone else and what they think, or whether they're feeling okay or not, I don't have to give a toss about any of that, which is lovely. Life is much more free and liberating and I don't have to pretend to be interested in any job because I'm not interested in his boring bloody job. <-> so I just feel I know my mother's died I don't feel I've got responsibilities anymore I'm just worried about me and that's just quite nice really (Eva, Low Income, T2, P31, L24)

### Lindsay

**TIME 1**

She had no qualifications  
I haven't got any qualifications <-> so that was a big regret for me. Real big regret. (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P7, L12)

**TIME 2**

An opportunity for self improvement  
I have thought about going back to college and doing O level, is it an O level <-> so I've thought about going to, I like English, I used to love English, and English literature at school, so I thought well I'll do that one  
(Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P43, L30)

**TIME 3**

Free education offers her a lifeline  
I would like to go and get the (GCSE) qualification but I can't, if I do English or Maths or both, I can do that for free cause the government pay for you for do that. So I'm going to do that when I can enroll for that.

### Mandy

**TIME 1**

Knowing he would have to pay her legal costs was a boost for her he had to pay the divorce cost which to me was a gain, a mega goal, because normally they split the cost and you pay your own costs, but for me, at least I have got something a little bit more of what I classed as fairness,  
(Mandy T1, P12, L48)

**TIME 2**

Money was always tight but now she is a millionaire  
I've always had to worry because anything we've wanted we can't afford we cannot afford it, so my whole 35 years of my life has been no we can't have that because I can't afford it. (Mandy T2, P33, L33)  
I ended up with one point three million  
(Mandy T2, P32, L24)

**TIME 3**

Money gives her the freedom to live like a normal person  
I'm very happy that I can look after my children and I'm not going to be worrying about money at all yeah I'm very happy that I can have a new kitchen and I can have a new car and I know it sounds stupid but I can live like a normal person (Mandy T3, P51, L51)  
I gave Tash a healthy amount towards her house and I will do the same for Toby when the pension money comes through (Mandy T3, P48, L40)

## Study 2. Theme 2 across time for all participants

## Negative impact on adult children: High Income

**Valerie:** From vulnerable to accountable

TIME 1

I'm worried about being a burden on my kids in the future. I'm very conscious about trying not to talk about things in front of my daughter. But I'm not terribly successful as they are that you know, I get very, very bad days when I'm in tears most of the time. Not, not for regret, not from, because I've left, but for fear. Tears of fear. Tears of not wanting her to see me upset. I mean we're very close to that. It's all based on fear. (Valerie, High Income, T1, P21, L53)

TIME 2

It's just things happening in a new life that I'm not part of, it's not a big thing, it was and it's part of divorce you know, they're still in touch with their father, so therefore if it's their father's birthday, or his girlfriends birthday, they're going to be there, it's quite normal, it's just that I don't expect it to hit me with such a blow the first time, but now what can I do it's part of the divorce (Valerie High Income, T2, P37, L27)

TIME 3

I've shattered their security and that's some huge guilt on my part. I realize that. (Valerie High Income, T3, P46, L44)

**Tessa:** From primary parent to person at fault

TIME 1

She is the primary parent  
I'm definitely the primary parent but I was talking to someone about this yesterday. My children are, they're all boys, they're the youngest is 10 the oldest is 23, I brought them up to love I haven't brought my children up to be my things. So they're all, they're, they're quite, they love me and they love their dad. They know us both very well. They're very conscious of their Dad's, sort of, limitations in the nicest possible way. And of mine of course. So, I don't feel that they're my babies, or my boys. They're definitely, no, their dad had a big part in it, but I suspect, if there was a, real problem they'd come to me first. Probably. (Tessa, High Income, T1, P2, L53)

TIME 2

Her kids lives are carrying on without her  
It feels as if they're just carrying on without me. And that was my fear. You know, nothing for them has changed. Their bedrooms are the same. The dogs are the same. --> Anyway so, I do sort of feel slightly sad about the fact that they're all or, I'm imagining that they're all they're round the kitchen table having a roast chicken without me. But they're probably not. (Tessa, High Income, T2, P23, L32)

TIME 3

She is now being blamed for breaking up the family  
They had a long discussion and the middle one told me that the youngest one is really kind of struggling you know --> basically saying you know it's all mum's fault. She's left Dad. I'm really, really worried about Dad, you know. (Tessa, High Income, T3, P31, L47)

**Angela:** From a fragile to a broken relationship

TIME 1

Her relationship with her son is very fragile  
His main thing is that he doesn't want me to be dependent on him and to show any signs of vulnerability with him, so I don't talk to him about John. I don't ask him about has he seen his dad really --> I don't want to sort of make it more complicated (Angela, T1, P6, L47)

TIME 2

They might just, I might just disappear (Tessa, High Income, T2, P19, L45)

TIME 3

there's unfinished business with my youngest --> he's had this conversation about Mum, she left, she left him and it's her fault with the other children. (Tessa, High Income, T3, P28, L5)

**Rachel:** From support to lack of support

TIME 1

They have been supportive but they have suffered because I have not done what I should have done and got out. And my daughter has a story of her own to tell about her father because of his aggression from the time that they were small you know. And I never really understood that, as they were growing up. The effect that it's had on him, so his is both furious with me, and furiously protective of me.  
And that's I believe you know that because she's just human. Toby until recently, his attitude has sort of been. What you know that because she's not like. You don't want it we don't like it. But you know he's entitled not to love you and to want to get out. (Rachel, High Income, T3, P19, L64)

TIME 2

When he goes head to head with lines all over these years, he won't back down and neither will she, so it's absolutely and there's always the knife box behind them, you know in the kitchen, it's always in the same place. Terrifying. (Rachel, High Income, T2, P29, L28)

TIME 3

don't speak to me about it mummy, the children, because I don't want to be involved. (Rachel, High Income, T3, P43, L46)

## Negative impact on adult children: Low Income

**Lisa:** From victimhood to alienation

TIME 1

Because the way I see it, I see I'm the victim and I'm the innocent party. So I should be prioritized over him. That's how I see things. And they don't. (Lisa, Low Income, T1, P15, L14)

TIME 2

Because I haven't done anything wrong. He was in the wrong and so yes, they should, they should be on my side (Lisa Low Income, T2, P26, L7)

TIME 3

Oh gosh I'm gutted that he's moved up near them. I do feel that they're up there so nice family and I'm the one who hasn't done anything yet I'm the one left here (Lisa Low Income, T3, P40, L50)

**Eva:** From ambivalence to ill health

TIME 1

the children, you know, I've told them I've got this illness. I would never have wanted to, not shield them from things, but I don't want to blurt things out, so I did say this is the thing that ultimately will, but I'm going to be ok for a bit, but they've never talked about it, they've never shown any interest in whether I've gone to the hospital or not really and I think, is that because that's the way, uh left ignore all this and then it won't bother us, or is it just that it doesn't bother them, if it doesn't bother them that's fine, they don't open up about things. I don't know, my brother was like that. (Eva, Low Income, T1, P15, L3)

TIME 2

I don't know, but my two boys don't talk about emotions and they find that hard that a sign of weakness talking about how you feel whereas women can talk about how they feel and I think men can't talk. (Eva, Low Income, T2, P25, L33)

TIME 3

I'm living with the younger one --> he's lovely I adore my older son I love both my sons but my younger son's much more beautiful really he's more empathetic he's going through a bad time at the moment he's been signed off work with stress. --> I don't know he's feeling really bad, he's got heart palpitations he's had all these ECG's and there's nothing wrong he's had loads of blood tests and we're waiting on the results he's really wired up all the time and he's not sleeping that's another thing to worry about --> the older one I haven't seen for

**Lindsay:** From guilt to regret

TIME 1

he won't see her unless she sees the woman. Well, Tina won't because of me, and now I'm carrying some of that guilt round a bit. So now I think this is my fault now because I have reacted like I have to this woman and I might have imprinted that on Tina's brain. Because I don't like, do you know what I mean. But she says "I'm an adult Mum and I never want to see him ever again in my life. Never". (Lindsay, Low Income, T1, P4, L31)

TIME 2

The only thing I'm truly thankful for is I've got Tina but there's a sting in the tail isn't there because Tina's had to lose her dad, that's the thing I've got Tina, but I don't care about him not having Tina but I care that Tina hasn't got him. (Lindsay, Low Income, T2, P46, L58)

TIME 3

I think Tina struggled. She's had counselling as well (Lindsay, Low Income, T3, P72, L2)

**Mandy:** Maternal gatekeeping to paternal alienation

TIME 1

He was never there. And I mean I don't know also whether he didn't put that gap there himself --> So I wasn't that I didn't allow him. You know he would never have bathed children. But he would never have put himself in that position anyway. (Mandy Low Income T1, P26, L18)

TIME 2

I was so lucky with my kids, because it was always going to be a one sided relationship. You know I know my kids are 100 percent behind me. I don't know how I would have coped if they were 50/50. (Mandy Low Income T2, P30, L46)

TIME 3

He's going further and further away from the family unit. (Mandy Low Income T3, P44, L52)

## Study 2. Theme 4 across time for all participants