



REBUILDING LIFESCRIPTS: ADAPTING WITH PARENTAL LOSS

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Abstract: A lifescrript is the bed stone of narratives of how we see things, of who we become in this magnanimous world. It is the result of our parents' nurturance and the exposure we have to various social stimuli around us. According to Transactional Analysis, a lifescrript is a powerful factor of our behaviours and our reactions to any crisis. A lifescrript manifests our aspirations as well as our vulnerabilities. Parents are the most important messengers who influence our lifescrript, be it a negative message or a positive one, it is bound to be a guiding light for us. But what happens when we lose one of the parents? Does our lifescrript change? Does the family dynamics change? These are the few questions that this study aims to answer. The qualitative method of research has been used to assess 18 semi structured interviews (10 females, 8 males) of young adults. After a thorough thematic analysis, 2 main themes and 8 sub themes have been found which talks about the parent- child relationship in childhood and how that relationship changes after losing a parent.

Index Terms: Lifescrript, parental loss, trauma, parent- child relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

Lifescrript

A very prominent concept of Transactional Analysis, lifescrript refers to the course of action that we choose as children, and that is upheld and even modified by later experiences. From the time we are zero to five, we all develop a script. The narrative of our lifescrript is based on the notion that in order to feel safe or loved, we must "be" a particular way. When a small child is in trouble or is afraid and wants to make sure they are safe, this is when they produce a lifescrript, which helps them adapt to any situation. Eric Berne defined lifescrripts as choices we make regarding who we are, the world we live in, and the people we interact with. Berne has stated that a negative life script is the product of constrictive choices that a child made in order to overcome any hardships. (Berne, 1961)

Parenting

A parent is the adult who is responsible for taking care of their child. A parent can be biological or foster, but either way they become legally responsible to raise a child and fulfil all their needs. A parent shapes us into the kind of people we are today, they are the first source of our exposure into this world and our safety net, unless and until we are ready to move out into the world on our own. APA Dictionary of Psychology describes parenting as all the actions that a parent is supposed to do to raise their kid. (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.-c) Parenting begins long before the birth of a child, and eventually, parents take on the role of their children's alter ego. Nobody can mould a child's behaviour and development quite like parents, especially in the early years. The majority of theories of human development either expressly or implicitly stress the importance of adult interaction in the growth and maintenance of a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. (Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky)

Role of Parents in Lifescript

Lifescript is a path, an unconscious plan that a child begins to follow right from the age of 0 to 5 years. (Berne, 1961) Lifescript is a learned judgement that a child picks up on and that becomes the basis of their understanding and interpreting who they are, what kind of world they are a part of and what they feel about the people they interact with. (*Key Concepts in Transactional Analysis / International Transactional Analysis Association*, n.d.) A concept of Transactional Analysis, lifescript is a product of a string of messages we receive from our parents or any significant people. The role of parents in the formation of a lifescript is explained through the concept of ego states. (Berne, 1961)

Erskine (2009) which studied Bowlby's attachment theory and Berne's lifescript theory together. Attachment theory talks about the impact of closeness that an infant shares with their parents and how that closeness adds onto their emotional and social development. (Bowlby, 1979) Bowlby identified different kinds of attachment style like: secure attachment, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, disorganised attachment and isolated attachment. When we study these attachment styles in context of lifescripts, this can be seen: Erskine (2009)

- Children with secure attachment have a positive self-image and that makes their lifescript healthy and adaptive.
- Children with anxious attachment portray themselves as very close to their parents and this constant reliance on their parents makes their lifescript very stringent.
- Children with disorganised attachment lead their scripts to be very chaotic.
- Children with isolated attachment show signs of very little social interactions, and that makes their lifescript have themes of loneliness and estrangement.

Therefore it can now be clearly understood that parents play a very important part in how a child's lifescript forms and how a child navigates through the various patterns and themes of their lifescript.

Rationale of the Study

This study aims to understand the role of parents in formation of a lifescript and how a lifescript gets affected post the loss of one of the parents. In India, family is a very integral unit of a person's life, lifescripts also are influenced heavily by families only. So how does parental loss affect a person's lifescript and their family dynamics is what this study aims to study. This has been a very understudied topic in India, making it even more necessary to know about more. A lifescript affects every choice we make. The findings of this study will aid in a better comprehension of the subject. The study is crucial because we can only overcome lifescripts and create healthier coping mechanisms if we are aware of what our script is and how it may be hindering our progress to cope in life.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a qualitative method of research which explored the lifescripts of young adults aged between 20- 35 years, who have lost one parent. The participants were given a consent form which gave an overview of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw. They were guaranteed confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses. All audios of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and then manually transcribed by the researcher. 18 semi-structured interviews (10 female, 8 male) were taken to better understand the notions, ideas, or experiences of the participants' lifescripts, keeping in mind the research questions that needed to be answered: Does the lifescript change after the death of one parent and what changes can be seen in the family dynamics post the loss of a parent? Thematic analysis was then used to help identify themes and sub themes and interpret the findings in terms of the research questions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Pre Loss Lifescript Themes

Pre Loss Lifescript		
PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP	Maternal Bond	<i>In 11- 12th, I had some romantic crushes. And at that age, I was quite rebellious, then my mother was there with me like a friend. I think if I had a child like me, at that age, I don't know how I would have handled that. But she handled it pretty well.</i>
	Paternal Bond	<i>I think he neglected my brother and I a lot at that time, because he had a lot of work tours. Plus he was the only earning member. so he did not have time for us.</i>
	Parental Role Expectations	<i>I think that he should be available, he should balance his work life with children, family life. That he should not create drama and all that, something like that. Like normal things like a father does. Not have fights in the family, training us emotionally or morally, giving us values to inherit.</i>
		<i>she is very traditional in her ways of life, always in kitchen, taking care of my brother, doing household chores. she did not spend much time with me as such which she should have.</i>
	Parental Dispositions	<i>I have started noticing some patterns in her. She always says that she isn't angry. But I have noticed that she is passive aggressive. She won't talk to you, she'd make faces, she would pass comments, do some sort of emotional manipulation. And it is actually making me like her. I am also becoming this person, I also tell people that I don't get angry and then i get passive aggressive. I also stop talking and suppress my anger.</i>
		<i>With my sister, i can day that she actually became my father. She's like my father now, she has a child now. She didn't want to ever, but she's like him only like she is also short tempered and everything.</i>

Table 2: Post Loss Lifescript Themes

CHANGES IN FAMILY DYNAMICS	Strengthened Parental Bond	<i>it has gotten a lot better. I think I see our humanity. I feel that because as you grow old, the power dynamic also shifts. So I think we are equals now. I think we just start seeing your parents as normal people, so that changed.</i>
	Fraternal Relationships	<i>I feel like me and my brother, we go through phases. And at some point, we are just too loving to each other. Then we are not able to digest that, then we fight. It's very weird. I love it. Of course, after my mother passed away, he has been very protective of me. He has become my second mother. Whenever someone says i don't have a mother, i tell them that my brother has become my mother now, I still have two parents.</i>
	Extended Familial Support System	<i>I think I felt let down by my support system at a very crucial juncture of my life. And that sort of like, shifted my attitude towards support systems. So yeah I have been let down. There's less reliance now</i>

	Social Circle	<i>I told my friends much later about dad's illness, and they were pretty upset. Why didn't you tell us? We have been talking pretty much every day, we are school friends. We wanted to be there for you. We were going through so much alone, how could i not tell them.</i>
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Pre Parental Loss Lifescript

The pre- parental loss section covers the childhood of each participant, when they had both their parents in their life. This part of the study entails how an individual views and perceives their childhood experiences and who were the important messengers in their childhood who contributed to their lifescript. The results have identified mother, father, and school teachers as the pivotal messengers who influenced the individuals and formed their lifescripts.

The main theme and sub themes of this are:

- 1. Parent Child Relationship:** Lifescripts are the unconscious pathway that a child takes up and that becomes like a line on stone for them, they feel that what they learn from their parents and the society is the ultimate truth and can never be undone. The messages that we receive from our parents and other influential figures early in life, is how we form our lifescript and that eventually shapes all of our decisions. Parental influence on a child's growth is fundamental. Therefore, parents have a significant influence in lifescripts. (Counsellor Tutor Ltd, 2021) All participants talked about what kind of a bond they shared with their parents, where they felt the parents lacked and what they feel they have taken from their parents in terms of her character traits. 4 sub themes can be seen in this domain:

- 1.1 Maternal Bond:** This refers to the connection a child feels with their mother. 10 participants shared how having a positive and good bond with their mother in childhood made them connect closer and have a fulfilling relationship.

MO: *It's always been very positive and, what do you say, affectionate, warm, and loving, and that very cool, warm attitude, she's always like that.*

In terms of lifescript, we can evidently see that a message a person receives from their mother becomes a part of who they are. It can also be seen that individuals with good maternal bonding show a higher calming approach to any crises they undergo, in comparison to the ones who do not share a good bond with their mothers while growing up. (Dalsant et al., 2015)

- 1.2 Paternal Bond:** This sub theme covers how a father's absence in a person's childhood formed their relationship and how the connection never got deeper.

SS: *It was just a formal relationship. He knew nothing about my life, just related to my studies and marks and here and there, but not actually what's going on in my life.*

12 participants talked about the lack of paternal bond they felt while growing up because of their father's unavailability. This also correlates to a study done by Sarkadi et al. (2008) which stated that a father's availability and engagement in a child's life does have positive outcomes. When done in collaboration with the mother, the child is less likely to show lesser behavioural, cognitive and emotional deficits. A father's role is also important in formation of lifescripts, as what the child sees in him, will be what they put to practise in their own life.

- 1.3 Parental Role Expectations:** This sub theme covers how parents are expected to be, in terms of their duties and behaviours regarding a child's care. Participants shared how they felt neglected when both parents were working, and how they expected them to be more present for them in their childhood. 9 participants shared their views on what they expected from their folks, examples like:

F: *she had long working hours and for the most part of the day she was not at home. Like I'd come back from school and she'd be at her evening duty or morning duty. I used to tell her that, you know, why are you doing such long hours of work? Why can't you be at home?*

SK: *I think that he should be available, he should balance his work life with children, family life. That he should not create drama and all that, something like that. Like normal things like a father does. Not having fights in the family, training us emotionally or morally, giving us values to inherit.*

From these verbatims, we can see that the participants expected more from their parents, in terms of their quality time with them when they were young. It can be seen through research that if a mother is working, a father can cover up in her absence and that way, the child will not be worrying about the quantity, but focus on the quality. (Hsin & Felfe, 2014) Parental role expectations can also be an important determinant in formation of lifescripts.

- 1.4 Parental Dispositions:** Parental disposition refers to the characteristics shown in parents which influence the child and the child might even pick up on them and make them a part of their personality. 6 subjects were able to recognise what traits they have started to inherit from their parents, and how it is affecting them.

SS: *I have taken after my father in terms of anger.*

SM: *She's always been very calm. She took all the changes. She has had a very difficult life, but there's always a sense of calm. She just carries on, like she accepts it and then is like let's move on, what's next. I think I have adapted to this calmness from her.*

It can be seen through various studies that indeed parental behaviours impact a child's emotional regulation, their psychological adaptiveness to environment, and personality traits. A parent does influence what traits a child takes on, thus further influencing their lifscript too. (Jaffe et al., 2010 ; Khaleque, 2013)

Post Parental Loss Changes

The second part of the research covers the questions: how does losing a parent change a person's lifscript and how does that affect their family dynamics. It covers themes of how the individual adjusted to their new reality and now how their perception of things have changed since childhood, hence indicating a shift in their lifscripts.

The main theme and sub themes in this are:

1. **Changes in Family Dynamics:** This theme covered the network of people who contributed to the grieving process of these young adults who had lost their parent. The support system provides emotional support and a safe space for the individual to process everything and make them feel comfortable during the difficult times. In the interviews, the author tried to study how the social network of people helped a young adult and how their presence or absence impacted their coping mechanisms. 4 sub themes were found under this theme:

- 1.1 **Strengthened Parental Bond:** Post loss, the young adults got closer to the parent who is alive and saw better bonding.

AP: *It has changed drastically. Can I say the word 'care?' like i did not really care about him as a child. Because he was one caring for me right. But now I'm thinking about caring for him, providing for him. Because like, you know, even though he does not show it, I can see that he must be lonely now when all his kids are away from him.*

PK: *as of now, it's my mom who is my best friend. I have started to communicate everything to her, I have to tell her even the minutest, even the smallest things I'll be doing. Even if I'm about to get scolded for something, I would still go and tell her.*

SM: *Did not have the knowledge that having a deep relationship with parents is also something. But after my father died, then of course dynamics changed. Before this, I don't think I used to pay a lot of attention to what kind of a dynamic I should have with my family, how I should talk to them, all that. After that, it definitely brought us closer to each other.*

Post the loss of one parent, the child and the parent they are survived by tend to get closer, this betterment in relationship also indicates healthier adjustment to loss. The coping skills that the parent and child develop together are interdependent and the support they give to each other becomes monumental in better coping. (Jiao et al., 2021)

- 1.2 **Fraternal Relationships:** This theme is about how the loss of one parent impacts the bonds of siblings. A rather understudied topic, research has found that in case of losing one parent, the siblings tend to come closer, they undergo the emotional process of healing together and there is a reduction in conflicts as well. (Hank, 2021) 7 participants shared how parental loss changed their bond with their siblings.

SM: *My relationship changed with my brothers. My brothers didn't talk to me a lot earlier, because they used to be jealous of me, because I was the pampered child. But now they see themselves as my father, that i am their kid. They have become very sensitive and possessive.*

KM: *Me and my mother used to be flooded with our emotions. My brother would try to balance. He would be like, life is unpredictable, what is supposed to happen, always happens, there is nothing we can do about it. And now I am glad that we had him to balance it out, because he would not have been there, I really don't know how we'd have coped and moved on in life. He gave us hope to look forward to life.*

- 1.3 **Extended Familial Support System:** This refers to finding support beyond your immediate family. 10 subjects shared post the loss of their parent, the extended family's support for them has been negative and how they felt about it.

AS: *I was in a big denial. It came as a huge shock. It almost felt like propaganda. So for me it got very difficult with them. It was like if we lived according to them, they would be nice to us.*

SM: *Not like I expected a lot, I did expect the basic courtesy. After my dad, they just showed their true colours. And I always say to my mom, my dad was the only thing that connected us from that paternal side and now he is not there, I do not even mind breaking everything.*

Support of extended family comes from beyond our parents and siblings, and it is seen as an important source of support for an individual, especially in times of need. Extended family support is an integral system of support. People who receive adequate support from their extended family show lesser signs of depression symptoms than people who receive no support. (Dressler, 1985) What can be understood through verbatims is that lack of support from their kins can take a toll on the individuals in future.

- 1.4 **Social circle:** This sub theme talks about the role of friends in dealing with loss.

MO: *Actually, I have a very good friend circle. We all just talk and we all just chat for a while. I'm closer with my friends now.*

F: *my best friend was the one who really, really helped me with my dad's death. I mean, she sort of like, she used to call me every day, and ask me about how I was doing and sort of cheer me up. She used to send me quotes like.. like obviously she used to tell me religious stuff and like about the Bible and she used to just share me stuff, tell me verses. So that was really encouraging at that time.*

Graber et al. (2016) analysed how close bonded relationships within friends can contribute to a plenty of positive factors. A good friend circle makes a person more resilient and better able to deal with hardships. Verbatims in the interview proved how individuals got more support from their friends than extended family post the loss. This theme refers to how the structure of a family changed after losing an important member of the family. After losing one parent, the individuals in the study reported getting closer to the parent they are now survived by. 14 participants reported this finding.

Conclusion

This in- depth study of 18 semi- structured interviews carried out on young adults covered the topic of changes in lifescipt after one parent's loss and how does that loss affect their family dynamics. It was seen through thematic analysis that there are 2 main themes which are prominent in both pre- parental loss stage and in post- parental loss stage, which are: parent- child relationship and changes in family dynamics.

As young children, the participants shared how the presence or absence of any parent impacted them, and how their perception of how their parents should have been with them now makes them want to do things better. The subjects were also able to recognise what predispositions they received from their parents which have shaped their personality now. Changes were seen in the social support system of subjects and in their family dynamics after the loss of a parent. Their bond with the parent who they are survived by now, got better. The dynamics enhanced and showed more closeness within them. Same was observed in fraternal relationships and friendships too. Disappointment was experienced from extended family's side.

Therefore, what can be concluded from these findings is that an individual's lifescipt did change after encountering parental loss themselves and it did make them have a broader view of things, their own life experiences started contributing to their previous knowledge of concepts and restructuring their ideologies as per what suited them.

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