

## **Parental Loss during Childhood — Biographical Research Based on the Qualitative Paradigm**

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### **Introduction**

Parental loss during childhood is a critical life event (Inglehart 1991), which may even result in a trauma because of its pronounced experience of loss. This happens when images and thoughts about this experience emerge recurrently, limiting the concerned person's capacity of taking any action. In such a case, a flood of emotions builds up, which keeps the affected person from including this event of loss in his or her realm of experiences, both biography-related and everyday experiences. The same is true for the person's scope for action: an experience of parental loss during childhood may lead to actual diseases, limit the person's personal development or have other undesirable effects. Thanks to the school of psychoanalysis, we know about unpleasant experiences being relegated into the sphere of the «unconscious». In this sense, the loss of a parent may be repressed and might be very hard to consciously remember in all detail because it puts too much strain on the person's psyche. Keeping this event in an unconscious part of our psyche might seem to be a defence mechanism. However, events that have not been processed will surface again at some point. The failure to cope with this event may lead to phenomena such as regression, denial, or even phobias. As a consequence, the person may suffer from dysfunctional relationship patterns, avoid intimacy, experience fear of attachment, and show other symptoms related to distressful experiences in his or her life.

After a parent passes away, the child left behind faces two challenges: one is to cope with changes and the other one is to continue its psychological and cognitive development. Even though mourning and coping processes dominate life after such an event, the cognitive and occupational development of affected children is not necessarily merely a negative one. One example for this is a study that shows that approximately 25% of historical figures with outstanding abilities lost one parent before the age of ten. The authors of this study explain this phenomenon mainly with the fact that children faced with such a situation become especially conscious of their own identity and develop a creative approach allowing them to master their lives. Findings in creativity research have also shown that persons who experienced critical life events during childhood have an especially high potential for creativity (cf. Huber 2002: 62ff.).

Now, coping processes not only depend on a person's personality. Social components also play an important role here. For example, if children succeed in developing good relationships with other persons that are important to them, talk about their loss and receive information about their parent's passing, they may cope better with the loss than others who do not have this type of support. Social expectations, such as wanting



to keep suffering to a minimum and shielding children from mourning also have an influence on the way children cope with their loss.

The topic of «parental loss during childhood» can be studied using different approaches. One option is a biographical method as used in sociology<sup>1</sup>. For a short overview of underlying assumptions, please see the following chapter. When choosing this perspective, it is interesting to see how coping strategies evolve in the course of a person's life. Hence, I have used biographical narrative interviews for this study. These interviews focus on coping strategies and life strategies used by adults who experienced the loss of a parent during their childhood. Thanks to this data, I was able to analyse what the actual coping strategy was and how a person's biography changed after this critical life event. This study<sup>2</sup> is based on ten interviews of individuals with the following characteristics:

— Female: 35 years of age; lost her mother at the age of 14; was first raised by her father and grandmother, then went to live by herself at the age of 17;

— Female: 40 years of age; lost her mother at the age of 8; grew up at her grandparents';

— Female: 42 years of age; lost her mother at the age of 5; spent a lot of time with her grandmother (3 years), but remained living at home with her father;

— Female: 40 years of age; lost her father at the age of 1; grew up at her mother's, sharing a flat with her grandmother and mother who worked full-time, until she turned 12;

— Male: 45 years of age; lost his father at the age of 10 ½ years; grew up at home with his mother who worked full-time;

— Female: 38 years of age; lost her mother at the age of 6; grew up at her grandparents;

— Male: 47 years of age; lost his father, who committed suicide, at the age of 8; grew up at home (living with his mother and, subsequently, with a stepfather and a stepbrother);

— Female: 46 years of age; lost her father at the age of 8; her mother was self-employed, taking over her late husband's (small) business after he passed away;

— Male: 48 years of age; his father died while his mother was pregnant with him; his mother lost custody of all six children: they all went to live in children's homes; his oldest sister is 16 years his senior;

— Female: 46 years of age; mother and father lost custody when she was 4 (she saw her biological mother and father again when she was 14 and 21, respectively); grew up in a children's home together with a sister who is one year her junior.

To sum this data up: individuals interviewed for this study are between 35 and 48 years of age today, and lost either their mother or father<sup>3</sup> between the ages of 0<sup>4</sup> to 14 years<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to these interviews, two qualitative interviews were held with experts in the field, one of them a therapist and the other one a social worker. They both work for organizations that take care of children who have lost one or both their parents. One of

<sup>1</sup> In English-speaking countries, works by Roberts (2002) and Chamberlayne et al. (2000), among others, provide insight into biographical research.

<sup>2</sup> This article is a preliminary report of an ongoing research project.

<sup>3</sup> One of the interviewees «socially» lost her father and mother, because she was removed from her family and grew up in a children's home.

<sup>4</sup> The father died when the mother was pregnant.

<sup>5</sup> None of the persons was persecuted or experienced a war.

these interviewees has experienced such a loss herself: she grew up in a foster family<sup>6</sup>. In this article, four specific cases will be discussed in detail. All conclusions drawn in this analysis are based on subjective construction used by these adults, their experiences, and memories.

The detailed discussion of these cases is followed by general conclusions resulting from the comparison of these cases.

### **Biographical Research — Assumptions and Theoretical Background**

Biographies are the result of a succession of social relationships in which meanings and experiences are structured. Even when believing that they follow a predetermined pattern, the influence of social factors and social interactions cannot be denied. Personal biographies not only describe individuals, but also the relationships the person has with society and other persons. Their construction and the resulting biographical accounts are embedded in concrete social processes, including processes involving social origins, class and changes. Therefore, biographical material can enable us to reconstruct social structures (e.g., those of organizations or professional associations) and the construction of biographies as people's own social reality.

Nevertheless, individuals need a biography in the (post) modern society we live in, because it serves as guidance in a complex world. To build this biography, individuals need to combine different events and meanings. Biographical accounts are the result of the choice for a sense, which can be more or less forced, and the reflection of experiences. Hence, a biography acts as an interface between objective and subjective episodes experienced in the social world. Social mechanism is just one of several elements that have a determining influence on individuals. Social research must therefore take into consideration individuals' ability to interpret social facts. If society's structural logics were the only determinant, there would be no need for interpretation and no room for actually determining the course of one's life.

Biographical work stems from the need to reflect upon experiences within the scope of one's biography, and consists of organizing one's self and of finding a coherent relationship of meaning independently of time and systems. People create a comprehensive biographical concept. It is only within this concept that events are assigned a specific meaning. Oftentimes, when an experience is lived, people are oftentimes unaware of whether or not it will even have a major impact on their lives. It is not until an event has far-reaching consequences that it turns into a key event worth remembering and consequently into an essential episode of our lives (cf. Kotre 1998: 119). A sense of coherence is introduced by establishing a sequence for these events. Any discontinuities are associated with one's life, either as sudden events, sequences limited in time or as ongoing developments (cf. Linde 1993: 127ff.) A certain amount of coherence is also required for biographies to offer guidance patterns suitable for everyday life which, in turn, provide guidance for possible action. However, biographical research scholars do not believe in a rigid coherence and consistency approach to the concept of identity, based on a stable, uniform and relatively inflexible structure of the «self». Due to its normative character, this approach does not take into consideration the life-long dimension of «becoming» (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995).

All concepts of biographical work and/or structures (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000a) are embedded in reflections on social phenomenology and on sociology of knowledge (Schütz

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<sup>6</sup> Besides, her foster mother died when she was five years old and she eventually grew up with her foster father.



1972, Schütz/Luckmann 1973, Berger/Luckmann 1991). It is from this perspective that experiences and «biographical articulation» are structured in our everyday world. Our everyday world is our most important sphere of meaning. It is in this world that an unequivocal, unquestionable, and self-explanatory idea of reality establishes itself, just like the construction of one's meaningful biography. This is achieved by looking back and by integrating experiences into a global horizon. Whenever there is a reason for reflecting upon our biography, we stop to look back. One of the things we do when we arrive at such turning points, is that we (re)interpret the past. Those turning points separate the «before» from the «after». Rosenthal (1995) distinguished between turning points that are relevant from the perspective of developmental psychology, status transitions and interpretation points<sup>7</sup>. In his book «Mirrors and Masks», Strauss (1997) primarily focused on turning points experienced during adult life. He analysed events such as migration, regulated status passages (e.g. within organizations) or religious conversions that need to be evaluated and which may lead to new patterns of orientation and understanding. Life events experienced during childhood were barely taken into consideration for this analysis of turning points. Childhood is a very special situation when it comes to «turning points», because one's (core) identity is still being developed. As a consequence, conditions for evolvment are different than for adults experiencing turning points.

Experience-making is inextricably intertwined with the dimension of time. Biographies build upon a unique sedimentation of subsequent events. They are built step by step, meaning that biographical structures predominantly rely on time (and space) for their constitution. Our current realm of experiences and our biographical accounts are determined by the entire field of presence — the «moment of now», the sphere oriented towards the past, and the forward-looking one. Therefore, all current biographical constructions are connected to our past and to our future. Any biographical structuring process is therefore a «time sensitive» and «time constituent» process (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000b).

Biographical knowledge and biographies refer to socially prescribed and predetermined structures. Our previous life and history, our generation, the generations before us as well as structures of space and time all have a determining influence over all our experiences (Schütz/Luckmann 1973). Hence, there are predetermined social categories for all biographical accounts. It is only against the background of a fixed framework provided by the social structure that the life plans of individuals and, consequently, their priority structures, take a specific shape. This point can also be argued by relying on the structuring theory (Giddens 2004). If we understand biographies as constructions that evolve from social practices and pools of knowledge and that their structure is reproduced over time and space in a recursive manner, we find rules that guide these structures of biographical actions and knowledge. These rules are, while related to limited reflexivity and decision-making by the individual, embedded in the context of society's norms, family structures, or working environments.

These rules of biographical structuring do not need to be available in speech<sup>8</sup>, but people are partially aware of them when putting them into practice and people use this knowledge to shape their lives. Biographical structuring therefore has, according to Giddens, a specific property: it is part of a self-feeding circle, where the consequences

<sup>7</sup> Such interpretation points are usually events that people experience as particularly tragic, leading to a reinterpretation of their past (e.g. divorce, death of a parent).

<sup>8</sup> In this context, one of the goals of biography research becomes evident: it can contribute to the expansion of discursive knowledge and can therefore control practical knowledge in a reflective manner.

of any action are generally required for their continuation (cf. also Fischer-Rosenthal 2000a). The recursive characteristic of biographical structures is weakened by the fact that preconditions for actions and consequences of actions are not only intentional and self-produced.

For the reconstruction of biographical structures, biographical research relies on one essential starting point: biographical accounts. According to the main thesis, relationships between experiences become apparent mostly when they are talked about, because this is the best way of expressing how spheres of meaning and time have been structured. In narrative psychology, it is also a given that narrations are an ideal way of expressing one's biography<sup>9</sup>. According to that field, people have a cognitive predisposition to narration, meaning that experiences are arranged in our systems of thought and interpretation to favour narration. It seems that expressing the process of «becoming» is not possible without accounts that structure meaning. These considerations find their practical application in narrative interviews, which have become one important procedure in the field of biographical research (Schütze 1983; cf., among others, Küsters 2006). Narrative interviews allow the narrator to introduce him or herself as an active actor, to elaborate on correlations between structures, persons, historic events and expectations and to reflect upon his or her past experiences. Stories are told and continued; implausible parts are related in more detail with the goal of disclosing one's entire life story. Just like all other qualitative and open interviews, narrative interviews give participants a high degree of autonomy when selecting the topics they want to discuss. Interviewees are in a position to focus on the topics of their choice. With this interviewing technique, the stream of memories is stimulated to lead to detailed accounts.

When analysing these interviews, it is assumed that narrative interviews do not provide an obstructed view of the «actual» biography. The biographical outline delivered «today» provides the researcher with a basis for reconstructing biographical structures. On the one hand, interviews provide, thanks to manifest information given by the interviewee, an «inside point of view» of complex biographies. On the other hand, latent structures that are not evident at first sight need to be taken into account as well. Interpretation techniques are needed to reveal them<sup>10</sup>.

In this article, I will not discuss the entire biographical structures of life stories, but I will focus on subjective constructions in four single cases with regard to the loss, the childhood afterwards and the individuals' lives past childhood. There are certain similarities when it comes to the external circumstances of the four biographies introduced below: all interviewees remained living with their families and did not grow up in social education-oriented children's homes or foster families.

## **Biographies of Adults Who Lost a Parent — Four Specific Cases**

### *Ms. J.'s Biographical Account*

Ms. J.'s mother died in 1986, at the age of 40. At that time, the interviewee was 14 years old and had a sister who is six years younger. Her mother was ill for five

<sup>9</sup> McAdams (1993) and Eakin (1999) are considered representatives of narrative psychology. See Crossley (2000) for an overview. Works by Bruner (2000) and Holstein/Gubrium (2000) in this field are also interesting.

<sup>10</sup> A book of reference for interpretative social research and the qualitative paradigm is «Grounded Theory» (cf. Strauss/Corbin 2001, among others), where the concept of data-based theory was developed.



years and her disease sometimes required hospitalisation. What are the biographical structures into which the potentially traumatizing event is embedded, and how did the interviewee cope with this event?

One important aspect is that the interviewee focuses on her mother's biography at the beginning of the interview. She knows a myriad of details about her mother's biography and it becomes apparent that she is her very close. At some points, one gets the impression that the interviewee didn't gather certain information until her adult life. It seems that she has dealt with her mother's life and reconstructed her life partly through therapy. One remarkable fact is that the interviewee regards her mother as a person in her own right, not limiting her to the role of the mother she needed and lost. Sometimes, her accounts about her mother are rather an analysis of her mother's life course, problematic situations, and experiences. The interviewee describes her mother as a very lonely person, rarely happy and withdrawn in some situations. She pointed out one important characteristic in her mother's biography: the fact that her mother grew up without her father and without a sibling. According to the interviewee, maybe her mother's depression was also caused by her disease, and these depressions made her sad attitude.

Her father was the opposite of her mother: he was always active, and he loved life. She describes herself as «daddy's girl» who was especially close to her father. Although both her parents took very good care of her, she did not enjoy life as a family. This feeling was exacerbated by decisions that were made against her own will. One example is that, after attending primary school, her parents made her attend a music-oriented secondary school in a village close to her native village. And she often had the feeling that she took the blame for things when her parents had nobody else to blame. This happened with her mother's second pregnancy: her parents said that her mother because she, the first-born, had always wanted to play with other children and that is why there would soon be a sister for her. Another personality trait that was used to describe her, especially by her mother, was that she was little warm-hearted. Apparently, she behaved in a way that gave her mother the impression that she was not loving towards her. As a consequence, she got the impression that her mother would never be happy with how she behaved towards her. After her mother's passing, she experienced two feelings: one was that she had lost her mother, and the other was that she generally welcomed the possibility of change, because she no longer had to deal with a life situation she had experienced as unsatisfactory. However, the interviewee pointed out that these developments might also have taken a negative turn. This situation was hard for her and was sometimes very difficult to handle. Her puberty, during which teenagers usually weaken ties to their parents, had come to an abrupt end. One specific example is that after her mother's passing, her father gave her a lot of freedom to do the things she wanted to do. The interviewee was for example allowed to stay out until early morning.

She pointed out that she had to instantly grow up when her mother passed away. Sometimes, she even took care of her father, while it should have been the other way around. Her father did not handle his grief very well and his daughter occasionally heard him complain about his situation. She went almost as far as to become what she called a «substitute wife», even doing some work for her father's business, which had previously been done by her mother. Thanks to this role, she gained insight into the dark side of her parents' marriage; her father having loved the good life, as she called it. Her grandmother came to play an important role in her life, doing most of the caretaking for both sisters, but especially the younger one. At the age of seventeen, she moved into a flat of her own that belonged to her father. She said that she no longer wanted to hear



her father's whining and complaining. At that point, her father's financial situation was very good, but she then realised that he lived beyond his means. His business ultimately went bankrupt when the interviewee was an adult.

Affected by her mother's death and her unusual life situation, the interviewee started experiencing problems at school. She had to repeat a year, but ultimately managed to graduate from a business-oriented high school, which allowed her to go to university. Her subsequent educational and professional life was highly varied and included many changes in direction. She enrolled in different majors in the area of cultural and social sciences, but had not graduated from any of these majors at the time of the interview. She sometimes works for art and culture projects or takes on small jobs to make a living. To her, this instability in her professional life goes back to the uncertainty in her childhood and her experiences of frailty, leading to a lifestyle of living one day at a time. More than anything, she lives in the present, refusing the notion of stable career paths and consistent education. This unstable and sometimes spontaneous way of life was exacerbated by yet another painful event: a close girlfriend of hers had cancer and ultimately passed away. Even though her professional and educational life were anything but stable, she had very close, intense, and long-lasting personal relationships, showing the commitment she lacked elsewhere. One particularly remarkable friendship is the one she had with a girlfriend who felt like a mother to her, who let her live in her house for a longer time.

For many years, the interviewee avoided dealing closely with the issue of her mother's death. This changed when she started therapy at the age of thirty. For many years, she had lived with the impression that her mother described her as not warm-hearted. Thanks to her therapy, she was able to develop a loving relationship with her late mother. However, even today, her mother's death seems like an abstract and intangible event to her. She pointed out that to her, normality feels like an artificial construction that is out of her reach forever. When interacting with other people, she often finds that there is a difference between people who have experienced the death of a close one and those who have not had such an experience. As a consequence, she is not always receptive to expectations society has for people to lead a «normal life». Her efforts of staying connected to deceased loved ones, including her mother and her deceased girlfriend, is an important pillar for her orientation in life. Her therapy, during which she recreated experiences, helped her establish a close relationship with her mother. Today, she accepts her periods of mourning and accepts that her life will most likely not follow a normal path. The frailty of life she experienced as a child predominantly affected her professional path, making it inconsistent and unsteady. However, remembering her mother and giving her an important place in her heart has a high priority for her.

#### *Ms. C.'s Biographical Account*

Ms. C.'s mother died from the consequences of asthma at the age of 28. She was diagnosed with several diseases, one of them being lung cancer. Two years before her passing, she had major surgery because her lungs differed in size. When her mother passed away, the interviewee was 8 years old, and her sister was 6.

One important aspect for the interviewee is that her mother's death was caused by a medical mistake. After receiving (incorrect) information from the hospital, her family physician used the wrong drug for an injection that ultimately made her mother suffocate. This made the interviewee become highly critical of conventional medical treatment and hospitals in general. However, she also blames her mother, saying that she should



have looked out for herself — not only in this situation — and that she should not have accepted this treatment.

She sees her mother's death as a turning point for her personality: before her mother's passing, she was joyful, lively and adventurous. After her mother's passing, she became a person who did not have a lot of energy, cried often, and was sometimes easily hurt. She no longer was the happy child she used to be. This period, during which she also repeatedly suffered from bronchitis, lasted for about three or four years, during elementary school and the first few years of secondary school. She relived this traumatic experience recently, when her daughter was the same age as she had been when her own mother died. The interviewee's daughter experienced symptoms similar to those she had had herself as a child. Until recently, she seldom addressed her mother's death and she was able to talk about certain experiences and situations only. For a long time, as a child, she clung to the idea that her mother had not died, but had gone to live with another family in Rome. Previous trips to Italy with her mother in early childhood had prompted her to live in denial of her parental loss.

Both children left home and went to live with their paternal grandparents. They also started going to a different school. Her maternal grandparents wanted the children to be taken care of in a children's home. It was related to her that her father had wanted to take a leave of absence, but his employer did not grant him that wish. He frequently visited the grandparents' house, especially on weekends. Both sisters trusted their grandfather, sharing their thoughts and feelings with him. Their grandmother, on the contrary, was often very harsh to them. Her grandparents offered the interviewee many educational choices, including sports (she played top-league volleyball), music (she took piano lessons and played in a band until the age of 18), and arts (she temporarily enrolled at the University of Applied Arts to study painting, but later graduated with another major). As a consequence, the interviewee developed a positive self-image of someone who has many talents. Today, she works in physical therapy. Even though her grandparents provided a lot of support in developing her skills, she was very hurt and preferred not to share her problems. Later, she expressed her pain by painting ugly, distorted faces. According to the interviewee, she created an inner voice, a sensitive position and an «external view», even though (or precisely because) life with her grandmother was «full of tension», as she described it. She remembers her father coming to the house to take her for an excursion or to a café as delightful moments. They once went on an extensive trip together. In her view, her relationship with her father has always been a good one. He remarried twice, and during his second marriage, his wife's child lived with him and his new wife. She shows a loving attitude towards her father, even though some parts of her autobiographical account show that she had to live with some of her father's problems. She said that sometimes her father drank a lot and that he was in deep mourning, making her feel like she was a «valve» for his problems. Some of the memories she shared also made it clear that he did not relate always a lot to his daughters, especially when they were adults. She developed a very close relationship to her sister, trying to live up to her sister's expectations of her being something like a mother.

The interviewee's grandmother always said that she was very similar to her mother, not only physically. As a consequence, she thought she would also die at the age of 28, just like her mother. Living with this idea in her head made her let down her guard and live life intensely. Between the ages of 20 and 30, she travelled extensively, visiting many Asian countries. Concurrently, she also went to university. She spent a long period of time in Asia, painting, making music, and completing therapeutic training. On the day



of her 28th birthday, she was in Asia as well, close to the ocean, waiting to see what would happen. Evidently, she did not die.

Ms. C. got involved with esoteric and alternative concepts of medicine and their underlying principles. She also developed a strong attachment to continents such as Asia, where frailty and uncertainty are an everyday fact of life. During the interview, she went as far as to say that she has learned to be much more empathetic than others. Looking back on her life so far, she refers to a lot of experiences as being «thrilling and exciting»; she developed new perspectives on life and on awareness-building and made new experiences thanks to her extensive travelling.

Regarding her process of coping, she regrets that her parents did not tell her the truth about how serious her mother's disease had actually been. This left her feeling that their parents lacked honesty towards their children. One incident she remembers is when they visited her mother at the hospital. Her mother behaved like her normal self, like nothing had happened, talking about trivial things, including her long and beautiful nails. At that point, the interviewee was not prepared for losing her mother. When this actually happened, the event was traumatic for her, followed by repression, mourning and unrealistic ideas.

#### *Ms. S.'s Biographical Account*

Ms. S, a 40-year-old woman, lost her mother when she was five years old. Her mother was 33 years old and had stomach cancer. Approximately three years after her mother's passing, her father remarried. She grew up with her father and her stepmother and, later, with her stepsister.

Her subjective experience consists of fragments of memories of her childhood and of her mother. She has memories of the doctors who treated her mother because she was afraid of them. She also remembers the day her mother died: on that particular day, her mother was not in the room where she usually was when her daughter came to see her. The windows were wide open and Ms. S. was told, by way of «explanation», that her mother «had gone to the angels». Being a child and as such, somewhat helpless, she accepted this explanation and asked no further questions. Her relatives did not give her a lot of information that would enable her to hold on to memories about her mother, which gave her the impression that people in general do not like to talk about the dead. For a long time, she was even unaware of the exact day of her mother's passing, thinking that she had been only three years old at that time. One of the few memories of her mother is that she once got a cake and she cuddled up to her mother's legs. Other memories are based on photos and films. However, the interviewee pointed out that she did not really know her mother and that she does not have much information about her personality or about her life. Therefore, it is almost impossible for her to have an actual picture of her mother.

She explains this lack of memories of her mother and of the critical life event also with the fact that everyday life did not change completely after her mother's passing. Her parents ensured that she enjoyed a certain amount of continuity: before her mother's death, she spent a lot of time with her grandmother during the day, which did not change after her mother died. She lived in a small village, where her parents had a business and her grandparents lived close-by. It was especially during her first one or two years at school that her grandmother assumed responsibility for her schooling, even though the interviewee lived with her father. She describes the time she spent with her father as a very good one, e.g. she was allowed to sleep in the same bedroom and her father often took her with him on trips.



Her father's second marriage was the beginning of a new phase, which she was not happy about. She felt that her (future) stepmother did not understand her, but she concedes that she took her «maternal role» seriously and that she ensured that she received good education. As early as elementary school, she would put her stepmother's name on documents, and would later come to call her «mom».

When Ms. S was pregnant with her first child at the age of 32, she experienced a phase of serious distress, because there was not her mother she could share her situation with, and who shared her feelings. Another critical situation arose during a training course, where she was requested to come up with a mental picture of her being consoled as a child. She was, however, unable to come up with such a picture.

One important characteristic of her account — and also of her manifest narration — is a strong orientation towards a «normal» course of life. This is reflected by her successful middle-class life course: high school graduation, university, job, marriage, three children, built a house, went back to work, hiring an au pair girl to help her.

### *Ms. E.'s Biographical Account*

Ms. E. is 36 years old. Her father died when she was one year old. He probably committed suicide, but his family never talks about the circumstances surrounding his death. After his passing, both her grandmother and her mother lived with both children (Ms. E. and her sister).

Since the interviewee was one year old when her father died, she has no memories of this event. In addition to that, she has no recollection of changes or even mourning. After her father's passing, her mother started working full-time. During her childhood, she received little and ambiguous information about her father's life, a situation that continues to this day.

The reason for this secrecy might have been that her father was an ill fit for her mother because of his — or his family's — political views that were a sharp contrast to their Jewish origins. Ms. E. said that she often envied children she saw at the playground who were accompanied by both their parents. Primarily, her grandmother took care of her, but they did not have a good relationship. The loss of her father seems to have had little impact on Ms. E.'s personal development and on her skills. She obtained a university degree in science and subsequently wrote her doctoral thesis. There are no (negative) consequences regarding her abilities or other aspects of her life. After separating from her first boyfriend, she is now in a new relationship and has a child with her current boyfriend.

A specific moment of coping in this case is that her father's death occurred during her early childhood and she does not see his death as a turning point, even in retrospect. Living without her father was something she was used to and she has no memories or oral accounts about mourning or related problems. It looks like Ms. E. didn't even notice her mother's mourning. Her relatives make something of a mystery of her father, but this does not seem to lead to any serious problems within the family. She experienced her family situation as being different, but, this was, according to the interviewee, mostly due to the fact that she spent less time with her mother than other children.

### **Comparing Specific Cases — Some Generalized Hypotheses**

In scientific literature, it is assumed that the coping processes for critical events depend on the level of cognitive development corresponding to the children's age.

According to this line of reasoning, the pain of losing one parent should be proportional to the child's age: the younger the child, the greater the difficulties, because the image of their self and of objects is still a very simplistic one. This study does not confirm the above-mentioned hypothesis.

When looking at these four women's biographies, it is not easy to say which one of them experienced the greatest amount of difficulties<sup>11</sup>. They have all experienced parental loss differently, finding different ways of coping. However, it is apparent that in the first two cases, the parental loss is more present in their biographies and the two women reflect on these experiences more than the others. In the other two cases, Ms. S. and Ms. E., the women's biography and especially their work history is a more linear one and there seems to be a smaller need for coping with their parental loss, even though they experienced it in early childhood. One possible explanation is that a parental loss during early childhood affects the person to such a degree that he or she has to put a great distance between him or herself and the critical event, or else he or she would be unable to live with it. Even though both Ms. S. and Ms. E. showed some avoidance and denial, there are no signs of coping problems, except for the phase of distress experienced by Ms. S. Therefore, data obtained from this study does not validate the hypothesis according to which age and cognitive/emotional development shape the coping processes to a great extent.

A factor that is more important in the coping process and for life strategy is the children's upbringing and their caretaking after the death of a parent. The cases under review show different patterns of upbringing and caretaking for which continuity in surroundings, home, persons and caretaking relatives seems to have a positive influence. Very often, grandparents take on a large amount of responsibility in this process: their role in the caretaking process seems essential to the biographies under review. In case there are no family members or friends to take care of the child in question, he or she experienced a double loss in his or her caretaking, losing the deceased parent and, to some extent, the other one as well, because he or she is often deeply affected emotionally or even professionally, as the cases have shown.

Other coping problems arise when children grow up in children's homes. They have to cope with the fact that no relative was willing to take care of them and have often experienced violence or other major problems in their biological families. They often search for their family roots after leaving the children's home behind to lead a life of their own; having a much deeper longing for these roots than the two interviewees whose situations were described last.

Children who lose one parent, especially those who ultimately grow up in a children's home, sometimes try to find someone to replace the lost parent. Ms. J., for instance, found this person in her relationship. On the other hand, these children are often hostile towards their other parent when he or she starts a new family or at least experience this as a difficult situation. In either case, the process of coping with parental loss is often a lifelong process. It seems that coping processes are not limited to childhood or early adulthood. Certain important events in life, e.g. pregnancy or a disease, may revive a past experience of parental loss. Living with parental loss means that this experience needs to be incorporated into one's life at some point.

Another finding of this study is that concerned persons analyse the circumstances of this critical life event, even reflecting upon the fact that they were not allowed to attend the funeral. Hence, people reflect upon their parental loss and interpret it at different

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<sup>11</sup> In some of the other cases, the problems are more evident.



stages during their life. However, there was no evidence that parental loss leads to an idealization of the deceased. Rather, individuals search for the lost parent's identity when they reach adulthood, also in the hopes of shaping their own identity with the help of their roots.

To summarize these findings, it can be said that persons who have experienced parental loss find different ways of living with this experience and, generally speaking, with the experience of death in their immediate family. There is not just one structural pattern of coping and of shaping biographical processes. Affected individuals rely on different ways of living with parental loss. In the case of Ms. J. and Ms. C, individualized coping strategies were used, accompanied by self-reflection, leading to highly individualized biographies: their parental loss led to out-of-the ordinary lives and they assimilated the critical life event and its consequences. On the other hand, there are cases where the critical event is somehow incorporated into the normal «course of life», both in terms of family life and professional life, except for the fact of having to live with the loss of one parent.

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