

Death of A Parent: Understanding Vulnerabilities and Challenges of Young Adults Using Thematic Apperception Test

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ABSTRACT

The loss of a parent is a traumatic event in a person's life which can affect physical, psychological and emotional well-being. Grief due to the death of a parent intensifies vulnerabilities in individuals. This paper explores challenges faced by young adults between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five years who have lost their parent in the last two years through Thematic Apperception Test and Case study. The participants for the research included 15 individuals, 5 male (group 1) and female participants (group 2) who had lost one of their parents and 5 females (group 3) who did not experience the loss of a parent. Procedure of Analysis for interpretation of summaries of individual stories was done with the help of Dr. L. P. Mehrotra's Manual. The interpretation was carried out separately for males' and females' stories, then common themes were extracted. Males who had lost a parent figure exhibited predominant needs for achievement and acquisition. They tried to overcome the feelings of dejection through counteraction and repression. Females who had lost a parent figure exhibited predominant need for succourance which is in conflict with their loss of a parent. They compensated for the loss of a parent by seeking love from other people in their lives. The results of the study are discussed and limitations and contributions are highlighted.

Keywords: *Grief, Death, Vulnerabilities, Thematic Apperception Test*

Loss of a parent is a devastating experience which affects our emotional, social, and personal lives. The loss increases vulnerabilities which stays for a longer duration than most people in our society will acknowledge (Gentry et al., 1995) and hence, death of a parent can be hard hitting causing a period of stress and sadness for surviving individuals (Figley et al., 1997). We are transformed by the death of a parent, as it feels like our anchor is being snatched away (Umberson, 2006). It can be understood as one of the most significant events of an individual's life. A loss of a constant and continual thread to the past, a relationship with someone we have known all of our lives, is something which is lost forever.

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After losing a parent, one starts to see life with fragility and looks at death with certainty, which is bound to happen. Hallucinations of the deceased parent are a common feature and while going through the phases of grief as it is understood as the parent's return leading to severe anxiety in an adult's life (Black, 1998). Research suggests that bereaved individuals are a vulnerable population, at increased risk for social impairment and psychopathology (Fain-Leslie et al., 2002). It affects individual's current mood states, needs, motives, feelings and the way they perceive their environment.

Men and women experience death of a parent differently as women seek out support while going through the grieving process than men who try to displace their grief by focussing more on work rather than their emotions (Umberson, 2006). There is anxiety about the survival of the remaining parent and hence, grieving individuals may protect the parent from knowing their distress (Black, 1998). The grief process involves attempting to re-order and adjust life without the deceased parent (Horwitz, 1997).

Umberson (2006) found that individuals need to deal with the death of a parent by grieving in their own way; relying on relationships with others and resolving issues with parents before they die. The feelings of guilt need to be given up as grief is experienced in our own time. They are being held safely for us until we're ready (Kübler-Ross, 2000). The experience of losing someone makes it difficult to imagine anything good coming out of the loss. Accepting the loss helps in finding a deeper meaning of life which is called the "sixth stage" to Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief (which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance), (Kessler, 2014). The ability to find meaning after the loss of someone significant seems to have a major impact on the quality of future life. However, the process of meaning-making is not static and appears to evolve through the grief experience (Lydall, Pretorius, & Stuart, 2005).

The process of ending one phase of life (being an adult child with two parents) and beginning a new one (becoming motherless/fatherless or both) creates upheaval for most people but provokes a period of intense self-reflection (Umberson, 2006). Death leads changes in an individual's values, beliefs, the way they behave, how they view themselves, and their goals/ambition. While the death of a parent is a common life event (Winsborough et al. 1991), prior research on how the death of a parent affects young adults. Some research has indicated that parent loss in childhood is associated with loss of self-esteem because the parent represents a part of child's personality (Furman, 1974). Recent study (Scharlach, 1991) reveals that death of a parent is much more stressful, lingering and difficult than had been assumed by both the general public and mental health professionals.

Looking at the dearth of prior research in Indian context, the present research is an unique endeavour to understand the emotions, needs, anxieties and ways of coping of young adults who have lost their parent by administering Thematic Apperception Test (Morgan and Murray, 1935) as death of a parent causes vulnerabilities in individuals and imposes great challenges on them.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The participants for the research included 10 individuals, 5 males (group 1) and females (group 2) who had lost one of their parent in not more than 2 years (3 months- 2 years). Out of 10 participants, 8 participants had lost their fathers which included all the five male

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participants. To facilitate the understanding of needs and motives, emotions of grieving participants' vis-à-vis those who have not experienced death of a parent, 5 females (group 3) were included who had not lost a parent. The participants were young adults from the age group of 18-25. It was taken care that all the participants belong to the same socio-economic level with comparable educational levels. Purposive Sampling was used in order to gain information for the research.

Measures used

Thematic Apperception Test and Case study method were employed to get an in- depth analysis of the participants. TAT was given by Henry Murray and Christina Morgan in 1935. TAT is a well-known and widely used projective test and has also been of perennial interest to researchers (Cogan et al., 2002; Phelps, 2003; Morgan, 2004). TAT assesses a person's patterns of thoughts, feelings and emotions, needs (both overt and covert), conception of the physical and social environment, defense mechanisms and nature of anxieties on the basis of her/his responses to ambiguous picture cards. 11 Cards were used with themes such as, family relations, relationship with parental figure, depression, male-female relationship, sexual conflicts, relationship with authority figures, mother/father – child relationship, death and one blank card was used to understand future plans of participants. 7 cards were common for both males and females while 4 cards were gender specific. These cards were chosen in order to understand the various emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, guilt enabling participants to express their vulnerabilities and challenges.

Case study of each participant was taken in order to facilitate understanding of the TAT results. The areas of post-test inquiry included demographic information, emotions and feelings related to self, family dynamics, interpersonal relations with others, specific incidents related to childhood, and conflicts and challenges experienced in the recent past.

Procedure of data collection

Information about a brief outline of the research was communicated to the personal acquaintances and potential participants through social media. Individuals who were interested in sharing and opening up about their experiences contacted the researchers. 2-3 sessions were dedicated to building rapport with each participant. Case history was taken to understand their biographical history and presence of significant life events. In the fourth session, TAT was administered in a one-to-one setting. The atmosphere at the time of administration was quiet and free from any external disturbance. Instructions were given to the participants as per Dr. L.P Mehrotra's manual. A total of 11 cards were presented to the participants. The data was collected in the form of written/verbal stories. The enquiries based on the stories collected from the respective participants were carried out within 2 days of the administration. The enquiries were made in case of incomplete stories (if either past, present, future and feeling and thinking of the hero of the story was missing) instructions, plot, level of identification, omissions, introduced contents and other ambiguities presented in the stories. Participants were debriefed, given space to attain closure after finishing the process of sharing their stories and were thanked for their cooperation and support in the study. Analysis of the summaries of individual stories was done as per Dr. L.P. Mehrotra's TAT Manual; Analysis on the basis of forms, content and dynamic structure of content and dynamic clues was carried out. Analysis of the integrated summaries of the stories was used separately for males' and females' stories and common themes were extracted. These themes were used to find salient differences in needs, press (conception of the environment), thema

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(need-press interaction), significant conflicts, defense mechanisms and emotions and feelings of male and female participants.

Method of Analysis

The first step of the analysis was taking demographic data such as sex, age, parents (alive or dead), and other details regarding social and emotional adjustment of the participants. The method of analysis for TAT stories was taken from Dr. L.P. Mehrotra's TAT manual (Indian Adaptation) which caters to reading the stories multiple times carefully in order to understand the hidden psychological processes behind the projections made by participants. The Analysis of Forms of the stories was done by looking at power of plot, organisation, fantasies-imagination, language and verbal richness and observation of the details of the stories. Analysis of Content was carried out where type of content, the hero and other characters as well as Thema (Need-Press outcome) and Interpersonal relations (family and social relations) were identified. Analysis of Needs was done on a five point scale on the basis of their intensity, duration and frequency. The ego structure was understood through the interaction between id and superego, significant conflicts, defense mechanisms and emotions and feelings of the hero of the individual stories. Other than these parameters, some dynamic clues from reaction time and best and least liked pictures were also taken into consideration. The integrated summaries were based on emotional maturity, personal, social and emotional adjustment, dominant needs, conflicts, defenses, adequacies of the ego of every participant.

The death card (15th card) along with two gender specific cards assessing parent-child relationship (cards 7(M/F) and 8M/9F) were chosen for in-depth analysis. Once these parameters were known, the integrated summaries of each individual was analysed to find common themes and patterns. This analysis was done separately for the three groups vis-a-vis 5 males who lost a parent, 5 females who lost a parent and 5 females who didn't lose a parent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the stories of five male participants (group 1)

The analysis revealed a strong need for achievement due to their ambition. The nature of obstacles mentioned by the male participants were taking care of their parents, financial issues and distress regarding future as one of the participants confessed in his story, "In the future, she will have the strength to move on from the setbacks she has seen in her life and find a purpose". Need for achievement was fused with need for counteraction as they wanted to fill a void (prevailing environment of death of a parent) in their life by working hard to support their families. For instance, one of the participants revealed, "Someday, he will get what he deserves and someday he'd be happy and be able to put all these setbacks behind." They filled the void not just in their lives, but also in the lives of their family members by assuming responsibilities. They dealt with the loss in their lives by nurturing people in their environment like friends and family. Nurturance often fused with the acquisition need as going through a loss of their parent made them act as the sole bread winner of the family. In the process of providing for their families, they had anxieties of failure and fear of giving up and of not being good enough. A similar finding was witnessed in a research study, by Munsch (2016) who found that men's psychological well-being and health were at their worst when they were their families' sole breadwinner.

The environment of dominance pushed them to acquire economic mobility which made them burdened with responsibilities. One of the participants revealed in his story, "He came

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to the city to earn money for his wife and three kids, but sadly that didn't happen". Due to this, they wished to break free from all bondages. However, they chose to repress their anger as it is socially unacceptable for men to feel emotions. Research study suggests that men suppressed their emotions more than women (Gordon et al., 1998). They experienced self-pity as they felt they were inadequate to handle financial responsibilities. They had fear and anxiety when faced with uncertainty towards their next move in life. They felt dejected with a sense of constant hopelessness however, they also exhibited feelings of ambition like a silver lining to overcome all the present difficulties. One of the participant's quoted, "In the future, I hope he regains his love and passion for things in life and moves on to build the life he wanted."

While assessing father-son relationship, male participants exhibited need for deference and succourance as they felt both love and respect for their deceased fathers. Upon closely observing death card, feelings of hopelessness could be understood to the extent that they were inclined to have suicidal thoughts (need for intra-aggression). One of the participants admitted having suicidal tendencies in his stories, for example his story read: "he's lost some people he loved a lot and for him life without them is not worth living and he is trying to end it." The conflict was evident between need to be loved vis-a-vis present environment (press) of loss of loved ones.

Summarizing the male participants' analysis, their need to accomplish and overcome problems through compensation showed their feelings of ambition. Loss of a parent generated feelings of helplessness so participants tried to overcome by showing support to their families. The environment is conceptualised by the participants as compelling and demanded responsibilities for them. For example, conflict was seen between need for autonomy and their press of imposed tasks such as providing for their family, giving emotional support to the remaining parent and other members of the family. Added responsibilities led them to feel anger, which was largely repressed leading to feelings of self-pity, fear and anxiety.

Table 1 Summary Table of needs, press, emotions – feelings and defense mechanisms of 5 male participants who had lost their fathers. (Group 1)

Needs (in descending order of importance)	Description
1) Achievement	Need for achievement was exhibited to achieve one's dreams and for acquiring financial stability.
2) Nurturance	Nurturance was provided to loved ones including their significant others and family members.
3) Counteraction	Counteraction from setbacks was seen in academic area and (if working), they worked harder at their jobs.
4) Autonomy	Autonomy was present because they wanted to release the responsibilities and pressures they had experienced.
5) Aggression	Aggression was exhibited as they felt burdened by excessive responsibilities upon them.
6) Acquisition	Acquisition was seen as they wanted to acquire resources to ensure financial stability for their families.
Press (environment)	Description
1) Dominance/Imposed Task	The environment of dominance/imposed task was seen when it placed demands on the participants to fulfil their responsibilities.
2) Loss of loved one	The environment expressed when their loved ones were not present.

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Need Press Conflict with Outcome	Description
1) Need for achievement Vs Press of Lack of Opportunities	Need for achievement was expressed freely over lack of opportunities.
2) Need for Autonomy Vs Press of Dominance	Need for autonomy was hampered and could not be expressed over hampering environment.
3. Need for Succourance Vs Press of loss of loved ones	Need for succourance could not be expressed due to loss of loved one.
Dominant Emotions-Feelings	Self-pity, Dejection, Fear, Anxiety, Ambition.
Dominant Defense Mechanisms	Repression and Compensation

Analysis of the stories of five female participants (Group 2)

The analysis showed a strong need for achievement as they wanted to make their remaining parent proud and provide for their families. One of the female participants revealed in her stories, “People here are feeling that by their hard work, they are able to help their children grow, get educated and provide them with best facilities.” Even after the death of their parent, they still haven’t lost hope, which could be attributed to the reason that Pratt (1992) found the intense energy the daughters invested in caring for their parent. Their need for achievement was in conflict with their conception of press which consisted of dominating authority figures who interfered with their goals. For instance, one of the participants revealed, “The boy is frustrated by his teacher as to why can’t he stop taking classes of sitar. He knows this instrument is not the one for him, he is made to do something he doesn’t want to. His heart is somewhere else.” They wanted independence from their dominating environment of authority figures like in this case it was the teacher.

They had a need to affiliate or to form bonds with their loved ones which was in conflict with their loss of parent. They tried to overcome the loss by providing love and support to others. One of the females who’d lost her mother expressed in the story, “Kadambari is a 50-year-old widow who lost her husband to cancer, and goes to a NGO where she spends time with elderly people” which goes with the study, females dealt with the conflict by seeking love from other people and expressing gratitude for the people they had lost. Women appear to be more concerned about the emotional well-being of the people they provide care for. This attachment often motivates them to engage in caregiving (Montgomery et al., 1989). They compensated the loss in their lives by showing the need for counteraction and this helped them gain resilience. They rationalized their emotions by finding meaning in their loss.

While assessing the daughter-parent relationship, females exhibited needs of autonomy and affiliation as they felt loved and they expressed how valued they felt in the presence of their remaining parent however, some of them also exhibited need for autonomy as their freedom was restricted by their remaining parent. Upon observing the death card, females expressed need for love, attachment and connection from their parents and expressed gratitude as well as appreciation for other people in their lives by seeking love from other people. One of the participants revealed, “He is missing her. He wishes he could live the last few days again. He is putting flowers on her grave. He’ll be more grateful of people and life in future.”

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Summarizing the female participant's analysis, females exhibit primarily the need for achievement. The authority figures present in their environment often placed restrictions on their need for autonomy by blocking their feelings of independence. Females had a strong need to seek love which was seen in conflict with the environment of loss of loved ones as they tried to overcome the loss by compensating. In conclusion, females seem to overcome the loss through seeking love and expressing gratitude for the time they had experienced with their lost parent.

Upon comparison of group 1 to group 2 analysis, it was found that males tend to overcome the loss by taking responsibility and earning resources for family while females dealt with the loss by seeking love from others and rationalizing their emotions by searching for meaning in their suffering. A large Danish study by Elklit and Jind (1999) found significant links between gender and the experience of meaning in death. The results of this study suggested that women are more likely than men to find meaning in the loss of their loved one.

Table 2 Summary Table of needs, press, emotions – feelings and defense mechanisms of 5 female participants who had lost either of their parent. (Group 2)

Needs (in descending order of importance)	Description
1) Achievement	Need for achievement was exhibited to make one's remaining parent proud and provide for their families
2) Affiliation	Need for affiliation was exhibited to form bonds with our loved ones.
3) Counteraction	Counteraction from setbacks was seen when they gained resilience to adapt to difficult situations.
4) Succourance	Need for Succourance was expressed to seek love from our near and dear ones.
5) Autonomy	Autonomy was exhibited to express their feelings of independence.
6) Nurturance	Nurturance was provided to loved ones including the significant others and family members.
Press (environment)	Description
1) Dominance/Imposed Task	The environment of dominance/imposed task was seen when it placed restrictions on the participants.
2) Loss of loved one	The environment of loss of loved ones was expressed when their loved ones were not present.
Need Press Conflict with Outcome	Description
1) Need for achievement Vs Press of Lack of Opportunities	Need for achievement was expressed over lack of opportunities.
2) Need for Succourance Vs Press of loss of loved ones	Need for succourance could not be expressed due to loss of loved one.
Dominant Emotions-Feelings	Self-pity, Confidence, Ambition, Independence, Dejection and Love-Affection.
Dominant Defense Mechanisms	Projection, Rationalization, Repression and Compensation

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Analysis of the stories of five female participants who did not experience loss of a parent (Group 3)

The analysis suggested that they wanted to be loved by others through seeking reassurance and approval. They were afraid of losing their loved ones and they covered feelings of apprehension by repressing them. The participants wished to create a change in society by working hard. They were internally driven and wanted to achieve all their dreams to help people around them. But there were obstacles observed in their environment in the form of nagging voices and restrictions from the society. One of the female participants revealed, "She was taught very early the differences in the society and what her destiny was.

Little could she do about the scenario and started living as directed by others." They tried to overcome the societal pressure by standing up for themselves and bouncing back. Females who had not lost a parent figure were cautious about the topic of death and scared to lose their loved ones.

While assessing daughter – parent relationship, they exhibited needs of deference and autonomy. There was a heavy societal influence as mothers both loved and reprimanded their daughters in accordance with societal laws. Their need for freedom was seen in conflict with the environment which restricted their freedom, "Ashish wanted to go study abroad but due to financial pressure from family he could not go."

Summarizing the female participants' analysis who did not experience loss of a parent, it can be inferred that their need for achievement was in conflict with societal norms. They had a need for love and that's why they sought reassurance and approval. One of them narrated in their stories, "Akash was sleeping, and he lost his mother when he was young. He is dreaming that his mother is around, blessing him. He is missing her. At present, he is peaceful as his mother's love is helping him grow."

By comparing females who had lost their parent with females who did not experience parental loss, it was found that, females who had lost a parent felt restricted by their environment of dominance, for instance, they wished to be independent from the dominating environment of the remaining parent. Whereas females who did not experience loss were not bound by their immediate environment, however, they were compelled to follow societal norms by the parents/environment. Females who experienced loss had a need to seek love from their remaining parent. On the other hand, females who didn't experience loss had a need to seek love and approval from the outside world. Females who experienced loss were much more vulnerable and exposed their true feelings readily knowing the transience of life, whereas females who didn't experience loss were slightly reluctant to share their true feelings. "Vijay goes through near-death experience and hence visits the graveyard to confess his true feelings to the people he couldn't while they were alive."

In conclusion of the stories reflected, the death of a parent is equally devastating for males and females however, the way they cope and try to overcome differs between men and women. Males try to overcome by fulfilling responsibilities on the financial front and females make peace with death by finding deeper meaning or deriving deeper insights from their personal trauma and seeking love from their environment. As one of the studies by Spaten (2011) found that upon death of a spouse, men expressed anger, the sense of unfairness, the rupture in their life-worlds that resulted in a rage that potentially disconnected them from others who may have been able to offer comfort and support, which

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signals that men are unable to express their compound emotions and prefer to act out in anger.

The loss of a parent is likely to threaten the basic security and stability of the adolescent's world (Cohen et al. 2002). The way males and females cope after the loss depends on what they feel is missing from their lives and their lives, then revolve around trying to connect the missing piece from the puzzle of their lives.

In the present paper, the usage of Thematic Apperception Test is unique in a way that it had never been included in a research which sought to understand challenges and vulnerabilities of young adults after loss of a parent. While assessing participants' stories, the data revealed that some of them may require professional help. They are struggling to overcome their fears and anxieties and, in future, it will be insightful to understand their needs and emotions after considerable time has passed to understand their healing process.

The study is not without limitations. As the study is only cross-sectional, the participants were not assessed over a period of time and, only female participants who had not lost their parents were considered for the comparison with female participants who had lost one parent. The limitation with the usage of projective technique like TAT is the assumption that the affect management and internal organizing principles as revealed through the test will also hold in some form in other situations. This research could have been enhanced by taking interviews from the participants. Nevertheless, this research has been a challenging and enriching experience which has a scope of being carried forward by other researchers.

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Conflict of Interest

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