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## Family situation during childhood and adolescence and script activities in the light of transactional analysis. Research report

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### Abstract

The article is a research report based on the transactional analysis concept. The author looks for the answer to the question about the significance of the family situation during childhood and adolescence for script entries of a man at the threshold of adulthood. The study was conducted on a sample of 190 people aged 19–25 and using questionnaire techniques. Research tools (adaptation of Z. Łęski's questionnaire, 2018) were based on the concept of miniscript by T. Kahler and H. Capers (1974). The main conclusion of the study indicates the dominant importance of the nature of the relationship between parents for the development of the child's script entries. However, the relationship between script entries and whether the family functioned as full or incomplete was not disclosed.

**Keywords:** transactional analysis, script, family situation, childhood, adolescence, relationships.

The data of the Main Statistical Office (GUS – Polish acronym) show that due to divorce cases conducted in 2020, in Poland, 44 008 children are being brought up in incomplete families, whereas further 720 minors are living in the families that have undergone the formal process of separation (GUS Demographic Yearbook, 2021). Certainly, there is no information on the number of children actually brought up in incomplete families, whose parents have not decided to for-

mally dissolve their marriage or have never legalized their relationship and currently are not living together. Although the number of divorce cases in Poland has been steady for the last fifteen years, it is hard to regard it as insignificant. One marriage out of three gets dissolved. At the same time, the number of solemnised marriages is the lowest in history – about 190 thousand of couples decide to get married every year (Demographic Yearbook, 2021). In this article, the author decided to determine the importance a fact of growing up in an incomplete family may have for certain behaviours falling within the scope of script activities complying with the assumptions of transactional analysis (TA) as far as an individual at the threshold of adulthood is concerned.

## **Transactional Analysis and the concept of the script**

Transactional analysis is a humanistic concept, yet its sources date back to the assumptions of psychoanalysis (Jagięła, 2016, pp. 232–238). Its founder, Eric Berne, pointed to the far-reaching importance of early experiences for the functioning of an individual in adulthood. A relationship with significant people – mainly one's parents – is important here for developing one's personality in the areas of the Parent ego state and the Child ego state. These are two ego states storing the patterns of feelings, thinking and acting in particular situations convergent with the ones experienced in the past. The Parent ego state reflects direct influence of significant people – ways of thinking, values and views inherited from them. On the other hand, the Child ego state contains patterns of emotional reactions developed in one's childhood, including primarily those based on signs of recognition (feedback information) from significant people. Both of the aforementioned ego states shape one's mindset, what they pay attention to, what is important to them (the so-called frames of reference) and their life position, i.e. a generalized image of oneself and other people. Further on, they contribute to one's script entries.

For transactional analysis, a script is a certain life scenario, more or less consciously acted out by an individual. E. Berne (2005, p. 476) defined a script as “a programme moving forward, created in early childhood under one's parents' influence, which determines an individual's behaviour in important aspects of their life.” In his opinion, a script is one of many possible ways of human behaviour and a form of submissiveness towards one of the forces influencing an individual, which is often negative parental programming. Other possible forces are: constructive parental programming resulting in anti-script behaviour in one's adult life; external forces described by Berne as “destiny” directing a man to a forced path; and independent aspirations offering an opportunity of acting in an independent way (Berne, 2005, p. 76). However, the most frequent way of

functioning is acting in accordance with a plan determined in early childhood (after: Pankowska, 2010, p. 73). It means that TA includes a conviction that human life is determined by certain events and feelings resulting from them, as well as unconscious decisions taken in early childhood.

As it has been already mentioned, script development takes place thanks to parental influence. A child gets to know their vision of the world, other people and themselves, and at a certain moment, unconsciously accepts some messages as true ones and starts functioning in accordance with them. It is a moment of the so-called script decision (James, Jongeward, 2003, p. 61). Parental programming takes place here via three types of messages: orders, programmes and bans (whose opposite is consent) (Cierpiątkowska, Nowicka-Gawęcka, 1992, pp. 110–114). Orders come from the parents' Parent ego state and are usually conscious and verbal, they push a child towards a certain action. In contrast, bans coming from the parents' Child ego state are emotional and non-verbal in nature, and are conveyed by the tone and timbre of one's voice. The aforementioned consent constitutes their counterbalance. The third type of messages, i.e. programmes, sent from the level of the parents' Adult ego state, inform what and how something should be done to be done "correctly" and how to cope in life taking into account orders and bans.

It is worth mentioning that transactional analysis divides scripts in a particular way, showing among all that a script does not always have a solely destructive dimension. There are winning, non-winning and losing scripts. The first ones let an individual realise their goals efficiently. The non-winning ones characterize the functioning of people who neither get very successful in life nor fail spectacularly. The losing scripts somehow sentence an individual to failure and lost life. Yet, one has to remember that no matter which script we take, functioning within its framework is always conditioned by a certain pattern of entries, which excludes autonomous activity and imposes certain limitations. E. Berne (2005, p. 243) claimed that "a script – no matter whether it is a losing or a winning one – is a way of structuring time between the first greeting at one's mother's breast and the last farewell over her grave. This time of life is filled and emptied by acting and non-acting, never-acting, always-acting, not-acting-before, not-acting-after, acting-and-acting, acting-till-there-is-nothing-else-to-do." Following this way of thinking, he distinguished a few types of scripts, referring them to Greek mythology (ibidem, pp. 243–245):

- "Never" – /the myth of Tantalus/: people possessing this type of script cannot do what they would like to do the most as they received a parental ban in their early childhood, which makes it impossible to act and, at the same time, they are exposed to temptations all the time.
- "Always" – / the myth of Arachne/: people possessing this type of script have been "sentenced" by their parents to the continuous performance of activi-

ties that fascinated them in their childhood, following the rule “if you like doing it so much, spend the rest of your life in this way.”

- “Until” or “Before” – /the myth of Jason/: people possessing such scripts cannot reach a given goal if they do not meet a certain requirement.
- “After” – /the myth of Damocles/: an individual can enjoy their life only for some time, afterwards various problems occur.
- “Again and again” – /the myth of Sisyphus/: this type of script makes one unable to complete an undertaken task. Usually, just before reaching a planned goal something happens and it cannot be obtained.
- “Open”/ “Open ending” – /the myth of Philemon and his wife Baucis, who were changed into laurel trees in recognition of their good deeds/: this type of script concerns people who have completed their script instructions and do not know what to do in their life, spending it idly.

It is characteristic that an individual does not have to act in accordance with only one abovementioned script, however, usually one of them is of a dominant nature.

### **Not-OK miniscript drivers and their alternative**

This paper constitutes a report from the research determining a potential correspondence between one’s family situation during childhood and script entries. Recognising script entries and mechanisms of acting in a given script requires a thorough, often long-lasting analysis of one’s thoughts, feelings and ways of acting. It is favoured by undergoing a therapeutic process which facilitates such an insight. However, within the assumptions regarding a given script, there is a concept that can be submitted to scientific analyses with the use of questionnaire techniques. This concept is a miniscript, more precisely not-OK miniscript and OK miniscript that follow the assumptions of T. Kahler and H. Capers (1974). Not-OK miniscript shows destructive ways of functioning, corresponding to losing scripts. It demonstrates thoughts and feelings preceding certain behaviours that constitute a prelude to entering the script. The authors of the concept made a list of five such sequences, calling them drivers (after: Stewart, Joines, 2009, p. 155). These drivers were assigned to particular script types.

An alternative for functioning in not-OK miniscript is adopting a conscious attitude showing acceptance for oneself and others. It means choosing a developmental path oriented towards conscious, intentional change of oneself. This conscious attitude can be expressed through the so-called allowers forming part of OK miniscript. They correspond to particular drivers from not-OK miniscript.

Table 1  
Drivers and script processes corresponding to them

DRIVER	SCRIPT PROCESS
Be perfect	Until – “I can’t enjoy myself until I reach perfection.”
Please me (Please others)	Next – “It is nice when others are happy thanks to me, but later on I shall suffer from not fulfilling my own needs.”
Be strong	Never – “Never show your weakness”
Try hard	Always – “You have to constantly try hard and work hard.”
Please me (Please others)+ Try hard	Again and again Type I – “I’ve tried so hard and almost done it”
Please me (Please others)+ Be perfect	Again and again Type II – “I have to do more.”
Please me (Please others)+ Be perfect (in a more intensive way)	Open ending – “I’ve completed my task and I don’t know what I shall do next.”
Hurry up	It does not correspond to one particular script process, but if it occurs with any other driver (a set of drivers), it intensifies the whole process.

Source: based on: Stewart, Joines, 2009, pp. 159–162; Pankowska, 2010, p. 91.

Table 2  
Drivers and allowers corresponding to them

DRIVER	ALLOWER
Be perfect	You are good enough the way you are
Please others	Please yourself
Be strong	Be open and show what you want
Try hard	Do it
Hurry up	You have time, don’t rush

Source: Stewart, Joines, 2009, p. 163.

In this paper, the concept of miniscript was adopted as a foundation for scientific research.

## Methodological assumptions of the research

Forming research assumptions, the main research problem took a form of the following question: *Is there, and if yes, of what kind, any correspondence between the respondent’s family situation during their childhood and adolescence and realization of script behaviours in the light of transactional analysis?* Thus, the authors attempted to answer the question whether a certain family situation shall influ-

ence one's functioning at the threshold of adulthood in accordance with entries limiting their autonomy (understood as not-OK miniscript drivers) or whether it should favour one's self-acceptance (according to OK miniscript). For the purposes of this paper, the term "family situation" is understood in terms of defining a given respondent's family as complete, incomplete, reconstructed and (in case of incomplete and reconstructed families) stating at which stage of the respondent's life their family situation changed. Additionally, the respondents' subjective opinion on the nature of the relationship between their parents was taken into account.

The research used questionnaire research tools. The first of them was an adaptation of the questionnaire studying dominant script orders by Z. Łęski (2018). This questionnaire, initially consisting of 25 statements, was shortened to 4 items for each driver (20 items in total), and completed with allowers corresponding with the given orders. *Cronbach's alpha coefficient* was defined for this new tool and in this case it equalled 0.69. The respondents were asked to show which of the two statements (in the driver/ allowers dyad) characterizes them better. The rest of the questions in the questionnaire related to the respondents' family situation. The research was conducted in electronic form, inviting people at the threshold of adulthood (aged 19–25), students of Polish universities to participate. Those were the students from the following institutions: Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa, the University of Silesia in Katowice, Rzeszów University, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, the Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw, the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw, and Opole University of Technology. In total, 271 people participated in the research, however, the responses of 190 people were qualified for the final analysis (the rejected questionnaires were partially filled in and/ or the respondents' age did not match the research criteria). 151 women (79.5%) and 39 men (20.5%) took part in the research. The table below presents the characteristics of the research sample group taking into account the family situation.

Table 3

*Characteristics of the research sample – the respondents' family situation N (%)*

The respondents' family situation			
Coming from complete families		144 (75.8)	
Coming from incomplete families	46 (24.2)	Incomplete families	33 (17.4)
		One parent passed away	13 (6.8)
TOTAL			190 (100)

Source: own research.

As it can be noticed, the sizes of particular respondent groups are significantly different – people growing up in incomplete families constitute only one

quarter of the research sample. The aforementioned disproportions and using Likert scale, which should be treated as a measurement scale, in the questionnaire were the foundations of the decision to use non-parametric tests in the analyses, mainly the Spearman's rang correlation coefficient and a non-parametric counterpart of ANOVA test, i.e. the Kruskal-Wallis test.

## Analysis of research results

The first research problem was in form of the following question:

*Is there, and if yes, of what kind, any correspondence between the respondent's family situation during their childhood and their current script entries?*

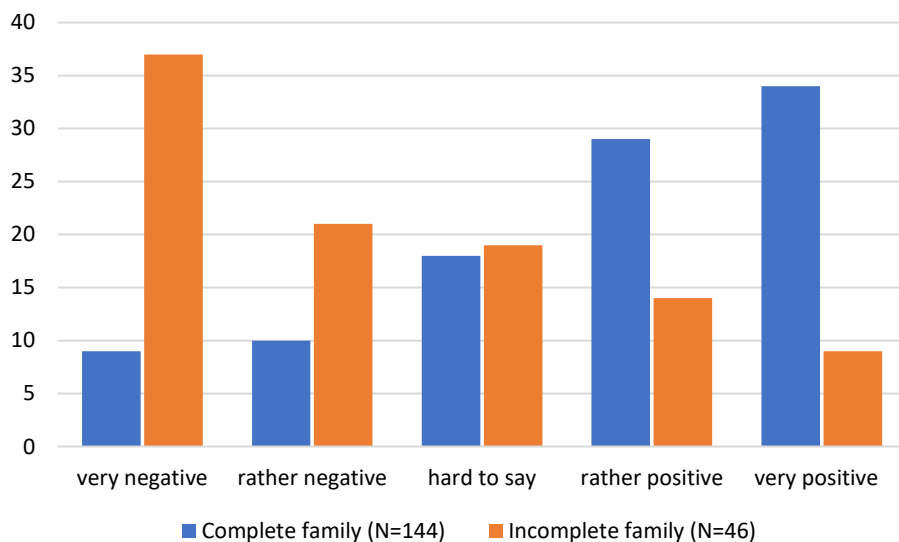
It should be reminded that the family situation was understood as growing up in a complete or incomplete family. At the same time, the reason for a given family being incomplete was given and understood as: 1) parents breaking up (not necessarily formalized but exercised by living separately), and 2) death of one parent. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used in the analyses with its significance level  $p < 0.05$ . The significance level was not obtained in any of the subsequently conducted tests, which does not allow for drawing conclusions about the relationship between the variables.

Due to a low representation of people coming from incomplete families, supplementary calculations were made and it was decided not to distinguish reasons for a given family functioning in this way. Thus, it was assumed that the fact of a single parent taking care of a given respondent shall be crucial. It should be emphasized that out of all the respondents coming from incomplete families only one person stated that despite their parents' break-up, they evenly participated in their upbringing. The Spearman's rang correlation coefficient was also used in the analyses, adopting the significance level  $p < 0.05$ . And that one did not show any crucial relationships either.

It means that on the basis of the conclusions drawn, it shall be stated that there is no correspondence between the respondents' family situation in the past and their current script entries in accordance with the way the variables are defined in the research. These conclusions are seemingly in conflict with the theoretical assumptions of transactional analysis, where significant attention is paid to early-childhood experiences in script development. However, this research took into account one more variable which might be important for script development during childhood. The authors looked for correspondence between script entries and the respondents' subjective opinion on the nature of the relationship between their parents. Therefore, the following research problem was formed:

*Is there, and if yes, of what kind, any correspondence between the respondent's subjective opinion on the nature of the relationship between their parents and their current script entries?*

A working hypothesis was adopted, saying that the quality of the parents' relationship may be of more importance than the fact whether these child minders lived together or separately. The parental relationship was assessed on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant very negative assessment, and 5 very positive one. Graph 1 displays the summary of the respondents' answers.



*Graph 1*

The respondents' subjective opinion on the nature of the relationship between their parents (data in %, N = 190)

Source: own research.

The respondents growing up in incomplete families assess their parents' relationship way more negatively than the respondents coming from complete families. Yet, in the second group there were also individuals who assessed this relationship negatively or very negatively – 19.47% in total. On the other hand, in the group of people growing up in incomplete families, there were some who assessed their parents' relationship as positive or very positive. There were altogether 21.74% of such respondents.

Describing the correspondence between the assessment of one's parents' relationship and script entries was performed with the help of the Spearman's rang correlation coefficient, adopting the significance level  $p < 0.05$ . The results are shown in Table 4.



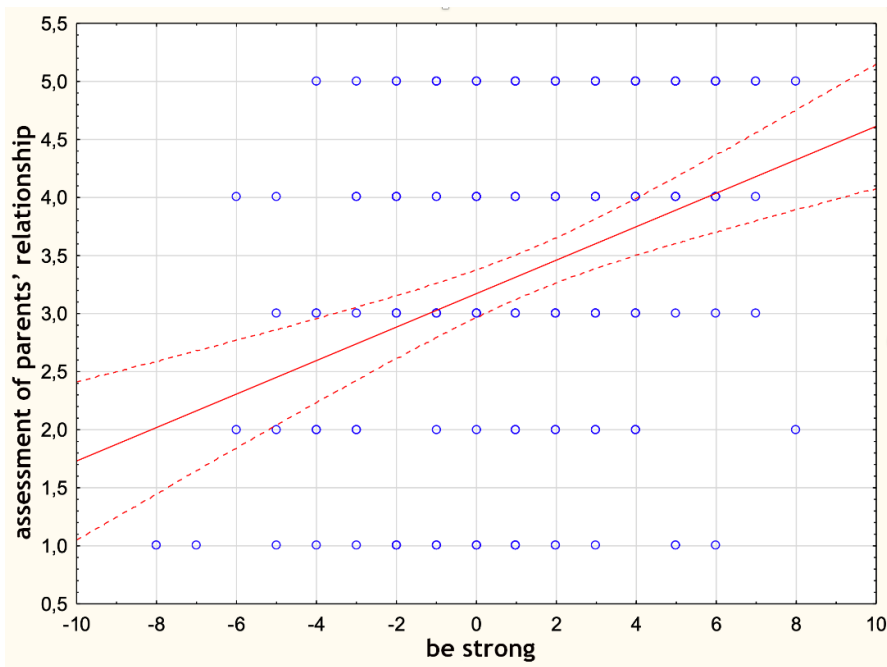
Table 4

The correspondence between the assessment of the respondents' parents' relationship and the respondents' current script entries (N = 190;  $p < 0.05$ )

	Assessment of one's parents' relationship
Be perfect	0.08
Be strong	0.34
Try hard	0.06
Please	0.08
Hurry up	0.31

Source: own research.

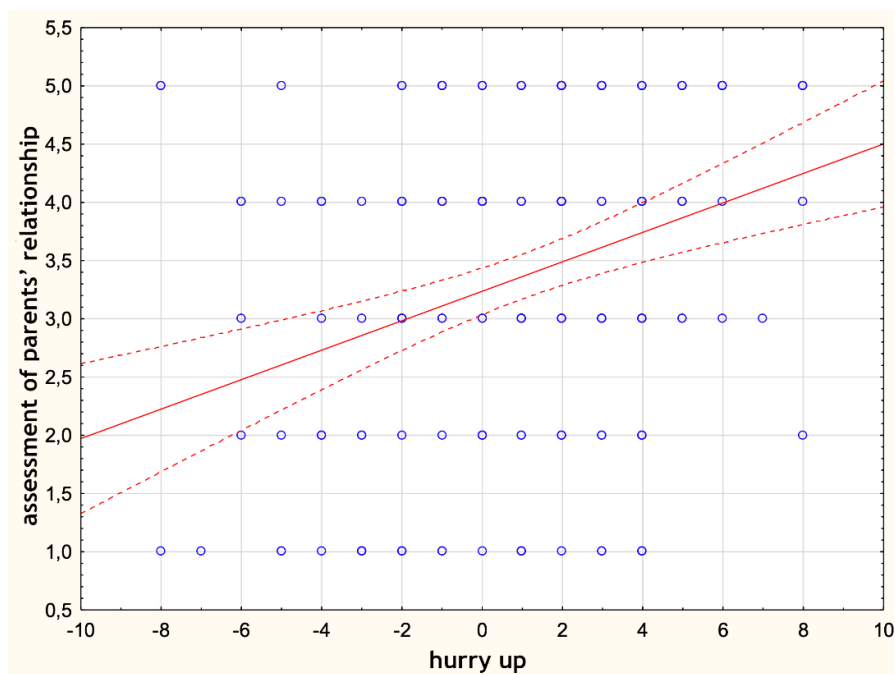
In case of the assessment of parents' relationship in comparison with script entries, there were some correspondences, not very strong but still significant. It means that there is a correspondence between the assessment of parents' relationship and the drivers "Be strong" and "Hurry up". The direction of this correspondence can be determined in this case on the basis of scatter plots presented below.



Graph 2

The correspondence between the assessment of parents' relationship with the driver "Be strong" (N = 190)

Source: own research.



Graph 3

The correspondence between the assessment of parents' relationship (ocena relacji rodziców) with the driver "Hurry up" (N = 190)

Source: own research.

On the basis of analysing the images above, it can be stated that the worse the assessment of the respondents' parents' relationship is, the stronger their script entries concerning the drivers "Be strong" and "Hurry up" are. In accordance with the assumptions of transactional analysis (Stewart, Joines, 2009, pp. 157–158) it can mean that people who grew up in the families where (in their opinion) the relationship between parents was not good, more often possess strong script entries forcing them to hide their emotions (the driver "Be strong"). It is characteristic that often the aforesaid act of hiding emotions does not concern only one's environment. Such people have a tendency to discount (i.e. to disregard and not to recognise) their own emotions. At the same time, they have an issue with asking for and benefiting from others' help. They strive to be independent at all costs, which might result in difficulties in interpersonal relations as they seem distanced and cold. Due to lack of contact with their own emotions, they happens to react disproportionately to a situation. It happens among all as not recognizing the first symptoms of anger, they bottle the whole pressure up till they explode. It should be also reminded that the driver "Be strong" often occurs accompanied by the script entry "Never" which forbids one to show any weakness.

On the other hand, possessing a strong driver “Hurry up” might result in intensifying script processes in general – as it has already been mentioned, this driver strengthens script entries. In accordance with the assumptions of transactional analysis (Stewart, Joines, 2009, pp. 158–162), a person possessing an order to hurry up constantly finds it difficult to relax and rest. They are task-oriented, act all the time, simultaneously experiencing the feeling of threat due to passing (“ending up”) time. It does not concern only simple everyday activities or professional tasks. People with such script entries have a feeling of time “running away”, which may show in very different aspects of their lives. Some of them will climb the professional ladder at all costs, including their health, concluding that there is time for that right now, and soon this opportunity may be gone. Others, for instance, will have a strong urge to set up a family (“because it’s time”, “because others have already done it”). In this case, an unconscious value shall be the fact of solemnizing one’s relationship and not the way in which this relationship functions and how spouses feel in it. Frequently this feeling of forced rush is transferred to next generations, which makes it impossible for children to develop at their own pace (e.g. “this child should already walk”, “this child should already know how to read”, etc.).

## Conclusions and summary

The research results presented above point to a certain significance of early childhood experiences and adolescence for forming script entries in accordance with the assumptions of transactional analysis. Taking into account the variables included in the analyses, it seems that the most important thing is not whether a given respondent’s family functioned as a complete or incomplete one, but the nature of their parents’ relationship seems to be crucial. People who assess that relationship as harmonious are characterized by weaker script entries. In accordance with the assumptions of transactional analysis, such people are able to recognize their own feelings and needs to a greater extent, they can act in harmony with themselves, define boundaries and build positive and engaging relations with others.

Therefore, it seems that it would be worth organizing social prophylactic activities directed towards family so that they focus not on keeping the family together, but on making parents aware of the value of their positive relationship not only for them but for their children. It happens that once their child is born, young people direct their whole energy towards it, forgetting about their own relationship. Caring about it is the key to healthy functioning of the whole family and the foundation for harmonious and optimal development of the next generation. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that the research undermines

a common view on a complete family as the best upbringing environment for every child regardless of its situation, and an incomplete family being always dysfunctional. In both cases, a central point is the quality of the relationship between parents. Its positive dimension shall be a protective factor in every case, regardless of the fact whether a given family is complete or not. Thus, if due to difficulties in their own relationship, parents decide to go separate ways but they keep respecting each other and cooperating amicably in the context of raising their children, they shall offer them a solid foundation for healthy functioning regarding script limitations in the light of transactional analysis.

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## **Sytuacja rodzinna w okresie dzieciństwa i dorastania a działania skryptowe w ujęciu analizy transakcyjnej. Raport z badań**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł stanowi raport z badań prowadzonych w oparciu na koncepcji analizy transakcyjnej. Autorka szuka odpowiedzi na pytanie, jakie znaczenie ma sytuacja rodzinna w okresie dzieciństwa i dorastania dla zapisów skryptowych człowieka u progu dorosłości. Badania przeprowadzono na próbie 190 osób w wieku 19–25 lat, z wykorzystaniem technik kwestionariuszowych. Narzędzia badawcze (adaptację kwestionariusza Z. Łęskiego, 2018) oparto na koncepcji miniskryptu T. Kahlera i H. Capersa (1974). Główny wniosek z badań wskazuje na dominujące znaczenie charakteru relacji pomiędzy rodzicami dla rozwoju zapisów skryptowych dziecka. Nie ujawniono natomiast związku pomiędzy zapisami skryptowymi a tym, czy rodzina funkcjonowała jako pełna czy niepełna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** analiza transakcyjna, skrypt, sytuacja rodzinna, dzieciństwo, dorastanie, relacje.