

The Life Script Heptagon

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Editorial Note: This is an example of the saying 'great minds think alike' – this version of a heptagon was being developed over several years and the author was unaware that Benedetti, Benelli and Zanchetta (2020) had been developing a similar geometrical shape with different elements. Benedetti et al. were also unaware that the version described in this article was being developed. (Benedetti et al article is in this journal, Vol. 11, Issue 1 at

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Abstract

The life script heptagon, developed by the author, is described to show how seven elements, all seven aspects of human personality – behaviour, feelings, thoughts, body holding patterns, habits, beliefs and attitudes, and early decisions – fit together geometrically so that they reinforce and support each other and make it hard for people to change their life scripts. These elements are then related to the ways in which different psychotherapies tend to work with them, and explanations are given of why the geometric nature of the model means that several aspects need to change because otherwise the remaining elements are reinforcing the unhelpful patterns.

Key words

Life script, personality, racket system, homeostasis, redecision, resilience, CBT, gestalt therapy, catharsis, emotion, habit, bioenergetics, body therapy, introjection, values, attitudes.

Introduction

This article will examine the life script from a geometric perspective. It will examine how the life script is structured in the human psyche to give it a resilience and the resistance to change that it possesses. This model has been prompted by the racket system, which Erskine and Zalcman (1979) present as a self-reinforcing system which has three parts of script beliefs and feelings, rackets displays and reinforcing memories; and by Mellor (1980) who shows four corners of believing, thinking, feeling and doing. In each of these models, the parts support

each other and maintain the integrity of each other, so they are self-reinforcing closed systems.

This idea is expanded with the life script heptagon as presented in Figure 1, in which there are seven components - behaviour, feelings, thoughts, body holding patterns, habit, beliefs and attitudes, and early decisions. The terminology of behaviours, thoughts and feelings is fairly straightforward. Any thought, feeling or behaviour can be habitual, in which case they will manifest differently and will need to be treated differently. Beliefs and attitudes are separated from thinking in the same way that Mellor (1980) did because thinking is seen as Adult whereas beliefs and attitudes are Parent. Early decisions are what we might refer to within the racket system as script beliefs. Body holding patterns are similar to the reported internal experiences within the racket system but they are also different because the term encompasses much more, as are seen in approaches to body therapy.

The differences between the corners will become clearer as you read on but the key point now is that all seven components fit together. Like the racket system, the heptagon is a self reinforcing closed system. Each of the seven parts reinforces and supports the others. The early decisions result in certain patterns of behaviour such that each time the behaviour is displayed it supports the original early decision. These two in turn result in certain feelings being experienced. When these feelings are felt they in turn support the early decisions and the behaviour patterns displayed. The feelings support the behaviour and the behaviour supports the feelings just as the feelings support or reinforce the early decisions and the early decisions result in certain feelings being experienced. As one can see we end up with all seven corners of the heptagon supporting each other. Thus we have a self-supporting closed system.

Geometry of the life script

The heptagon life script is drawn in such a way to illustrate its strength or resilience. If one built this

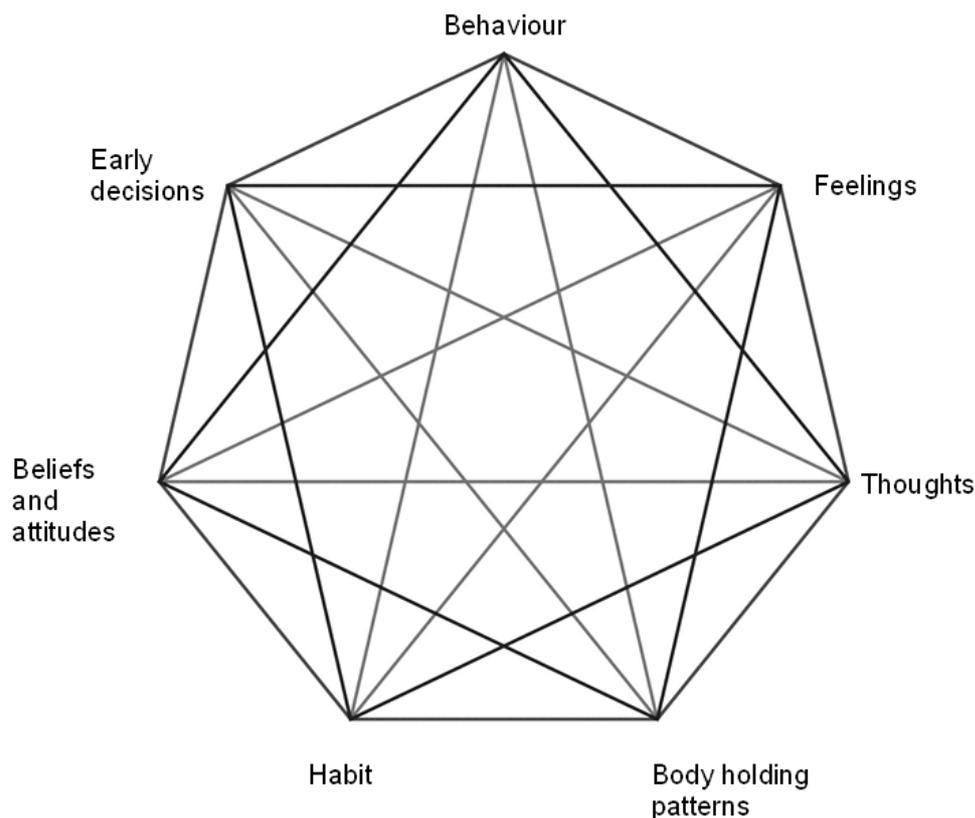


Figure 1: Life Script Pentagon

heptagon out of wood, it would be geometrically strong. Each corner has six other wooden supports coming from the other six corners to strengthen that one particular corner. If one was to hit a corner of the wooden heptagon with a hammer it would be very hard to break. One would have to strike it with considerable force because if you hit one corner then you have all six wooden slats from the other corners supporting and resisting the force of the hammer making it a very strong structure. Just like the life script is. The life script has a similar resistance to change. The life script is the transactional analysis explanation of how the human personality is structured. The life script heptagon illustrates the geometric strength that the life script has, or how the various parts of the human personality fit together and support each other.

Bary and Hufford (1990) noted that Berne used the idea of homeostasis to illustrate how the personality functions. People will naturally tend to maintain an internal psychological equilibrium and homeostasis. The person will unconsciously and automatically accept whatever reinforces the equilibrium and supports the homeostasis. Anything that does not and disrupts the system will be discounted or ignored in some way.

As soon as one corner changes, effort and attention is automatically required by all six other corners to change and of course under normal conditions that will automatically be resisted. This highlights the homeostatic basis of the life script. In childhood when the life script is forming all seven corners, or aspects of human personality, reach an equilibrium, even if it is a pathological equilibrium (Thombs, 1999). All seven work out how to function together, to coexist together and support each other.

For example, as I wrote above, the early decisions support the behaviours and the behaviours will support the early decisions that were made. The feelings support the thoughts and early decisions and vice versa and so on. Again the heptagon is drawn so as to highlight this, each corner has six connections to each of the other corners.

Once this equilibrium is achieved the individual will then automatically seek to maintain the homeostasis of the life script and to preserve the unity and integrity of the system. As a result of this, change will be automatically resisted by the other six corners because psychotherapy on any one corner will disrupt the homeostasis of the whole system.

As a result, we can see the geometric structure of the life script is to maintain homeostasis and to resist change. This makes the life script a very resilient organism and something that is difficult to change. Indeed this resilient quality of the life script can explain how the profession of psychotherapy came into being in the first place. If the life script did not have this strength and resilience then it would be easier to change and people would simply do that themselves, and would not need a psychotherapist to help them.

Psychotherapy and the Life Script Heptagon

All psychotherapies will address at least one corner, and often more than one corner of the heptagon simultaneously. This follows on from the idea by Ken Mellor (1980), who presented an interesting list of therapies and their areas of influence on the various corners of the script heptagon. My development of his ideas is shown in Table 1. What is presented here is an extension of his ideas as he only considers the four areas of believing, thinking, feeling and doing. This is by no means a complete statement of how various therapies work as there are now a huge variety of alternate psychotherapies and that would require a very large tome to make a complete statement. Table 2 contains ideas on which psychotherapeutic approaches are likely to impact most on the seven corners within the heptagon.

Applying Redecision Therapy – The Early Decisions, Thinking and Feeling Corners

The main focus of the rededecision therapy approach, which is of course transactional analysis and gestalt therapy, is on the early decisions which essentially are the injunctions and drivers decided on by the child. A rededecision is a change in those early decisions which make up the life script. However, transactional analysis is about thinking and gestalt is much more about feeling and the expression of feelings. Therefore rededecision can also be seen to work at these other corners of the heptagon. With empty chair rededecision work there can be quite considerable cathartic expression of emotion that would typically occur in gestalt therapy. Also Goulding and Goulding would use the white board a lot to explain transactional analysis concepts to the client and hence we have the thinking and Adult ego state aspect of rededecision. In this sense one could say that rededecision seeks change in the life script by addressing the early decisions, thinking and feeling aspects of the heptagon.

Hence, rededecision therapy is like hitting the wooden heptagon on the early decisions, thinking and feeling corners. However, when a rededecision is made the other four corners may also act in a way that does not support that change. There may be challenges

from the habits, behaviours and beliefs and attitudes corners, with the latter containing introjections. For instance if an unassertive person rededecides on the Don't be important injunction, they will still need to change other corners in order to habitually display more assertive like behaving.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy - The Early Decisions and Thinking Corners

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approach focusses on the thinking (cognitive) and behavioural aspects of the heptagon. They view thinking, behaving and feeling as all being intimately connected. As Beck (2011) says, the therapist seeks to produce cognitive changes in the client to bring about enduring emotional and behavioural change. Dysfunctional thinking is seen as central to all psychological disturbances. In this way one can see many similarities between CBT and classical transactional analysis, with the use of the Adult ego state and the centrality of the Adult in the process of the cure of psychological disturbances.

There are even further similarities. CBT talks about 'automatic thoughts' which are ideas or belief systems the client has about themselves and the world. These are in essence what Goulding and Goulding refer to as the early decisions and injunctions. Beck (2011) states, "For lasting improvement in patient's mood and behaviour, cognitive therapists work at a deeper level of cognition: patients' basic beliefs about themselves, their world, and other people. Modification of their underlying dysfunctional beliefs produces more enduring change." (p.3). Clearly CBT is also working with the early decisions of the heptagon.

However this is where CBT and rededecision therapy differ significantly, in how one changes the early decisions. CBT will use cognitive or Adult decisions to do so, whereas Goulding and Goulding (1979) would say this is simply not enough and one must use a Child ego state rededecision (not an Adult rededecision) to change the early decisions. Unlike CBT, their use of gestalt techniques such as empty chair work to induce significant regression in the client brings the Child ego state into the therapy process.

CBT also differs significantly from classical transactional analysis in that Berne (1957, 1961) openly used psychoanalytic concepts in transactional analysis, with an emphasis on early childhood trauma, Libido and Mortido, the unconscious, transference cure and so on. Beck (2011) openly discusses the importance of a good therapeutic relationship but never mentions anything about transference, the repetition compulsion, unconsciously motivated forces in the client and so on.

Therapy	Processes			
	Believing	Thinking	Feeling	Doing
Behaviour therapy				X
Contracting		X		X
Dance therapy				X
Gestalt therapy			X	
Logotherapy	X			
Medicine				X
Mindfulness		X	X	
Philosophy	X			
Primal therapy			X	
Psychoanalysis		X		
Psychodrama			X	X
Rational Emotive Therapy	X	X	X	
Religion	X			
Rogerian therapy		X	X	
Rolfing body work				X
Transpersonal psychology	X	X	X	X
Transactional analysis		X	X	X

Table 1: Psychotherapy Approaches to 4 of the Corners (modified from Mellor, 1080, p.350)

Corner	Therapeutic Approaches	Corner	Therapeutic Approaches
Feelings	Cathartic expression Dropping the feeling work Body therapy Gestalt Redecision	Early decisions	3Ps Redecision Relational TA Integrative TA
Thoughts	Reinforcing memories Cognitive restructuring for different internal transactions CBT - thinking errors Fantasies - Child ego states changes fantasies to positive Classical TA highlights Adult thinking	Body holding patterns	Body work - bioenergetics such as Lowen and Joe Cassius Body focused behavioural techniques - martial arts, stretches Highly cathartic work Yoga or body movement therapies like dance therapy
Behaviours	CBT behavioural techniques Classical TA homework exercises, behavioural contracts	Beliefs	Logotherapy Christian counselling Bibliotherapy Introjections
Habit	Contracts designed to counter existing habits Creating new habitual patterns in all other corners		

Table 2: Therapeutic Approaches for Pentagon Corners

Others, like Dryden (2009) who discusses rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) goes further and states: "The consensus view in cognitive-behaviour therapies is that the core conditions outlined many years ago by Carl Rogers (1957) - namely, empathy, respect and genuine - are solid foundations for therapeutic change, but are neither necessary nor sufficient for change to occur." (p.71)

More about the Feeling Corner of the Heptagon and Therapy

Redecision therapy and gestalt therapy directly focus on the feeling corner as does CBT and rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT) but in quite different ways. There are two schools of thought about this, with one being those who favour catharsis and believe there is therapeutic benefit from clients expressing their emotions in the therapy setting whether that be anger, sadness, anxiety and so on. This is often viewed as working through the emotion and with that a client will at some point come to a resolution about the emotion and what they are feeling the emotion about. Then it can be said to be worked through and then it will no longer contribute to psychological disturbance. This is a very widely held view by many therapies including rededication, gestalt, Reichian, bioenergetics, primal therapy and so on, as described by Feiss (1979).

The other school does not encourage the expression of emotion but instead invites people to begin thinking about their feelings. This is found in the CBT and REBT approaches (Beck, 2011; Dryden and Neenan, 2006). Whilst the catharsis approach invites the person to feel the feeling in their Child ego state, these other approaches invite the client to start thinking and thus move out of their Child and into their Adult ego state. So in essence they stop feeling the feeling. Peck (1990) explains why this approach is adopted: "My reading of the literature on anger management suggests that expressing anger can lead one to feel more angry and that the catharsis theory has largely been disproved. I think it is for this reason that the cognitive theorists and therapists have reverted to interventions which are largely cognitive." (p.1). Hence there is the view that the cathartic expression of feelings such as anger would only lead the person to become chronically angry over time.

This simply has not been my experience. After 40 years of psychotherapy where I have often used catharsis with clients, I cannot recall one instance where that has happened, I cannot recall one person ever complaining about that or reporting that. I have worked in conjunction with such psychotherapists for many years and have never heard any one of them report that and have not seen it reported in journals or at conferences.

In rededication the use of catharsis is done in a very specific and goal directed way. Perhaps if the client was asked to express anger just as anger with no actual goal, then it is possible it may develop over time into chronic racket anger. In rededication the person may be invited to express their anger at their mother in the empty chair because of the perceived abandonment of the person as a child. This anger is directed at a specific person for a specific reason and it is up to the therapist to keep the client on that track for the duration of the catharsis. This allows the person to finally express the emotion they have felt for many years at the other. In my view this catharsis can be of considerable therapeutic value, as the Child ego state is finally able to express that emotion.

The client may indeed do the same a number of times towards that specific person but usually it is not too long before the client tires of it. The therapist (or client) may then raise the issue of how long will they continue to remain angry at their mother? Who may have in fact been dead for the last 10 years. Most clients will tend to see the futility of this and most will then let the feelings go and the anger then becomes a non-issue for them. The opposite to the formation of the chronic anger happens. The mother then just becomes a memory with little strong emotion attached to that memory of her.

Body holding patterns

Wilhelm Reich (1975), the father of body therapies, was originally a psychoanalyst who worked with Freud. He proposed that people developed chronic holding patterns in their body. These were stress-related muscle contractions that became permanent in the body. In transactional analysis these occur in children when they make life script decisions. When the parent delivers an injunction the child will automatically tense and contract muscles in some part of its body along with making the early decision. The decision and the bodily contraction become connected as shown in the heptagon, and therefore support each other. All body therapies in some way seek to focus on and release these chronic muscle-holding patterns, sometimes referred to as body armour. The most noted transactional analyst to write on this topic is Joseph Cassius (1980) who follows on from the work of Lowen (1976) and bioenergetics.

The theory is that if you can break down the body armour that will then force the other six corners of the heptagon to change, including the early decisions corner. Thus one can get life script to change with the use of body therapies. As mentioned before, the number of body therapies employed over the years is huge, beginning with the mainstream Reichian body work and bio energetics to many others including yoga, martial arts, massage, reflexology

and even to movement therapies like dance therapy that was developed by Marian Chance in the 1930's. However, it would seem that if this really dealt with the other corners it would have become apparent.

Beliefs and attitudes

Of all the seven corners this is one of the most resilient and resistant to change. This refers mainly to beliefs, opinions and attitudes the person has. These take some time to form but when they do it takes a lot to change them. This includes attitudes and opinions about anything including religious beliefs, beliefs about race and other views that might be considered sexist or ageist and so forth. It also includes all the existential questions that people may ask, such as why am I here and what is the point of it all?

One way these are formed is through introjection, (Starke, 1973). Children will introject their parents' beliefs, opinions, attitudes and views as they spend time with them and live with them. In transactional analysis terms introjection is what Berne described as the child making tapes of mother and father and placing those tapes in their Parent ego state as shown in Figure 2. Introjection is a normal developmental process which every child does as it forms its personality (Rycroft, 1972; Tilney, 1998).

This introjection then becomes part of its own personality and part of who it is. The introjection is automatic and indiscriminate. The child has no choice and it will introject all parts of the parent's personality, both the healthy parts and the parts that are less desirable.

Racism is a good example of this. If a child grows up with a parent who makes racist statements and displays racist behaviour then the child will introject those. Once the introjection is made you can never get rid of it which is one reason why such beliefs and attitudes are so resilient. If a racist introjection is made it remains in the Parent ego state until the day the person dies. This does not mean the person will be racist themselves because they also have two other ego states (Adult and Child) which will determine the final attitude the person will display.

However, the racist introject is there, so the potential for them to be racist is more than for a person who does not have a racist introject. However introjection never stops and we are introjecting people into our Parent ego state our whole lives. Husbands introject wives and wives introject husbands. New non-racist introjects can be made but this does not remove the original racist introject. Again this explains why people's beliefs and attitudes are so resilient. Getting a community to significantly change racial views is going to take generations.

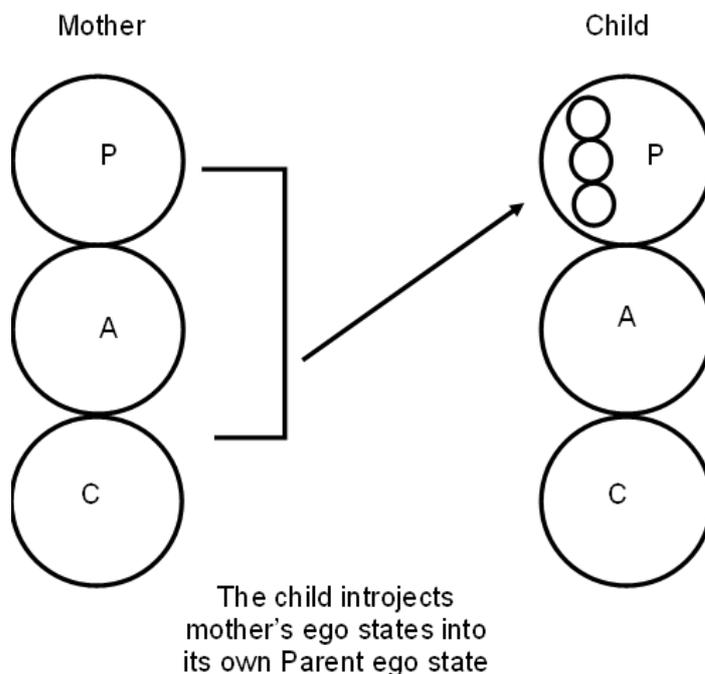


Figure 2: Introjection

Research on values and beliefs highlights how influential introjection can be. Johnson and Whiffen (2006) report on children's Parent ego state standards and values that are similar to their actual parents. These vary with age, in particular in adolescence: 16 year olds reported 25% similar values to the parents; 25 year olds reported 40% similar values to the parents; 30 to 40 year olds reported 70% similar values to the parents. Whilst in the younger years, during the earlier stages of human development, there seems to be a rejection of the standards and values of the parents and the parental introjects, by the time the person has reached adulthood we can see a significant majority of the parental standards and attitudes are accepted within the basis of the person's personality. This indicates that introjection is a powerful way by which people establish their personality and who they are.

One changes the beliefs and attitudes corner of the heptagon by including new introjects into their Parent ego state. This however takes time. People will tend to form relationships with others who have similar attitudes and opinions, so they tend to get new introjects that support the old introjections. Of course the same can happen in therapy where clients will tend to introject therapists into their Parent ego state.

However there is more to beliefs and attitudes than just introjections by the child. We all at some point have to deal with the existential questions of who am I and what is my meaning for being here. This is no better illustrated than with the work by Viktor Frankl (1984) and his development of logotherapy. This system of psychotherapy focusses more on these existential questions than do most psychotherapies. He proposes there is a drive in people called the will to meaning where people come to terms with what is their meaning of life or what is their purpose. They develop their beliefs in this way about these much deeper existential questions.

There are clients who present with issues as to what are their beliefs and answers to such questions. Relevant here is also the work by Fanita English (1972) in her discussion of 'Sleepy' or the C1 ego state. She proposed that we all have a pull to non-life in the Sleepy ego state and that the parents are meant to deal with this by providing the child with strong survival messages from a very young age. When this doesn't happen, people can be left with feelings of despair and a pull to non-life. It is in these individuals that such existential questions start to become very important. These are representative of the beliefs and attitudes corner of the heptagon and approaches like logotherapy are good in assisting clients to deal with such basic questions and beliefs about self and the world.

Behaviour

All therapeutic approaches are leading to change in all the corners. For a change to be complete in a person's life script then all seven corners have changed to accommodate the original change that the therapy focussed on. If the therapy primarily focuses on behaviour change then the change is only complete when the other six corners have also adjusted to that original behaviour change. If logotherapy is successful with changing the client's existential beliefs then the life script change is only complete when all the other corners like behaviour and feelings have also adjusted and changed to accommodate the original change in the beliefs.

Habit

Humans are very habitual creatures. How they eat, sleep, eliminate waste, clean themselves, work and recreate often are done in quite habitual ways. The more a person repeats a behaviour the more automatic it becomes. In ego state terms it moves out of the Adult where conscious thinking is required to do the behaviour, and the more it moves into Child where the behaviour is done habitually, with less Adult thinking required. Habit is all about repetition and automaticity. The more you repeat a behaviour (or feeling or thought) the more likely you will automatically repeat that behaviour in the near future.

Habits can be your best friend or your worst enemy. If one smokes marijuana every day for two months then at the end of that a strong habit for smoking marijuana has been established. That person will then easily automatically smoke marijuana again the next day often without even thinking about doing so. To stop smoking marijuana becomes a task that requires a lot of thought and modification of behaviour. One has to actively think and plan not to smoke again the next day. Breaking a habit is not easy and so habitual drug taking is a hard habit to break. The habit is your enemy in this sense.

If the person stops smoking marijuana for two months then at the end of that they have formed a new non-marijuana smoking habit. Now it is easy for the person to habitually not smoke marijuana the next day and this is how a habit can be a friend to the drug user. To again get a drug using habit one has to actively think and plan to smoke again the next day which takes time and energy. It is much easier not to automatically do it.

Research into habit formation by Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle (2010) showed that for a fully developed habit to form takes about two months of regularly doing the same behaviour over and over. Therefore to break a strong habit takes about two months of consciously planning and avoid-

ing doing the undesired behaviour. And two months of regularly doing the desired behaviour. However, those authors' research participants were university students and the habits they changed were about eating, drinking and exercising, so changing other habits for individuals of other ages may take longer. Therefore to break a strong habit takes at the very least two months but most often it is much longer. To break a habit in two months means the person has to perfectly display the new behaviour each and every day with no relapses. This rarely occurs as most people will have relapses. After a few days of the new behaviour they will relapse and show the old behaviour for a day or two.

After each relapse they then return to the new behaviour. Often there are multiple relapses, and each time this happens, so the time taken to acquire a fully formed habit will have extended out to three or six months or more.

For example, if an unassertive individual makes a rededication on their Don't be important injunction on the early decisions corner of the heptagon, the habit corner will resist any new assertive behaviours, thoughts and feelings because that person has been habitually behaving unassertively every day for years. Instead, the individual has to actively make contracts and remember to display assertive behaviours which over time will eventually become habitual in themselves. When that happens then the habit corner will support the change on the early decisions corner.

Conclusion

This article seeks to answer the question of why the life script is so resilient and resistant to change that we need psychotherapists to help people to change theirs. This strength of the life script has been noted since Eric Berne first proposed the idea of the life script and human destiny. This article uses a mathematical perspective to answer this question by proposing a geometrical view of the life script. It demonstrates that the life script has a powerful geometric structure and this can explain why it is so resilient.

The heptagonal geometric structure of the life script allows for a taxonomy of psychotherapies and it is shown how some therapies fit into the heptagon structure. They are explained in terms of how they fit into the seven corners of the heptagon and indeed some therapies can fit into more than one corner. This mathematical view of the life script advances our understanding of the strength of it and how the different aspects of human personality work together in resisting forces that seek to alter it.

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