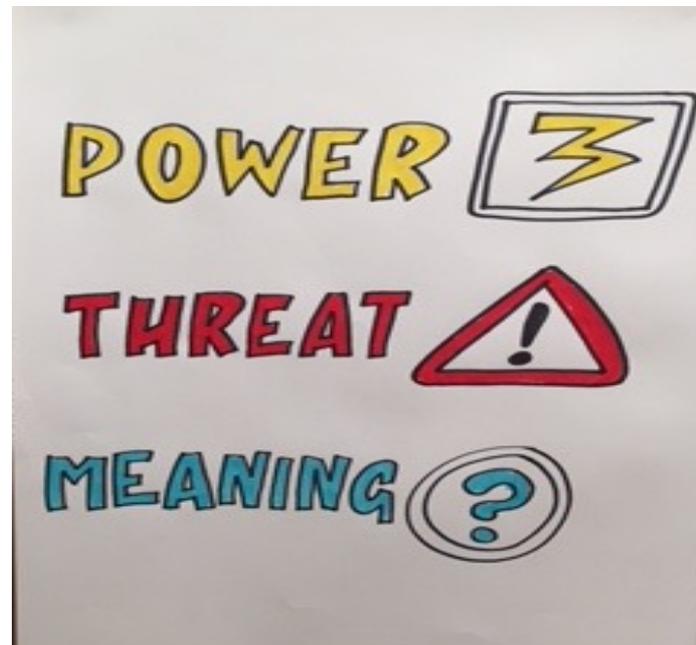




The Power Threat Meaning Framework

#PTMFramework



(Slides: © Lucy Johnstone and Mary Boyle 2018)

Contributors to the project over a 5 year period

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Consultancy group of service users/carers

Critical reader group to advise on diversity

Other expert contributions

Good Practice examples

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework>

The Power Threat Meaning Framework: Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour, as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis

The main document, available online only

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework>

Detailed overview of philosophical and conceptual principles; the roles of social, psychological and biological causal factors; SU/carer consultancy; and the relevant supporting evidence.

Chapter 8: Ways forward: Implications for public health policy; service design and commissioning; access to social care, housing and welfare benefits; therapeutic interventions; the legal system; and research.

The Power Threat Meaning Framework: Overview

The printed version consists of the Framework itself (Chapter 6 of the main document)

Order a copy from membersnetworkservices@bps.org.uk

Appendix 1: A guided discussion about the Framework (also available separately)

Appendices 2-14 Good practice examples of non-diagnostic work within and beyond services

2 page summary of the PTM Framework which can be adapted for local purposes; FAQs; Appendix 1 Guided Discussion; slides from the launch.

<https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework>



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The Power Threat Meaning Framework

Instead of models designed for understanding bodies, the Framework applies to people in their social and relationship contexts....

.....who are acting and making meanings within their life circumstances.

It is an optional set of ideas for people to draw on.

Along with fulfilling more effectively the general functions of diagnosis, it aims to:

- Recognise that emotional distress and troubled or troubling behaviour are, ultimately, understandable responses to a person's history and circumstances
- Restore the link between distress and social injustice
- Increase people's access to power and resources
- Create validating narratives which inform and empower people, groups and communities by restoring these links and meanings
- Promote social action

The PTM Framework and trauma-informed approaches

- Draws on this research (ACEs, neurobiology of stress etc) but also on a much wider range of philosophical, sociological and psychological literature
- Non-diagnostic ('PTSD', 'Complex Trauma' etc..)
- Prefers 'adversity' (less risk of decontextualised shorthand)
- Emphasis on more insidious factors eg inequality, social exclusion, discrimination, devalued identities
- Suggests patterns of distress not related to obvious 'trauma'
- Suggests non-diagnostic alternatives for welfare access, commissioning, legal work, research....etc..
- Explicit links to wider institutional and organisational contexts, macro political and socioeconomic structures and ideologies

The Power Threat Meaning Framework poses these core questions:

- 'What has happened to you?'
(How is **Power** operating in your life?)
- 'How did it affect you?'
(What kind of **Threats** does this pose?)
- 'What sense did you make of it?'
(What is the **Meaning** of these experiences to you?)
- 'What did you have to do to survive?'
(What kinds of **Threat Response** are you using?)



In one to one clinical, peer support or self help work these questions also apply:

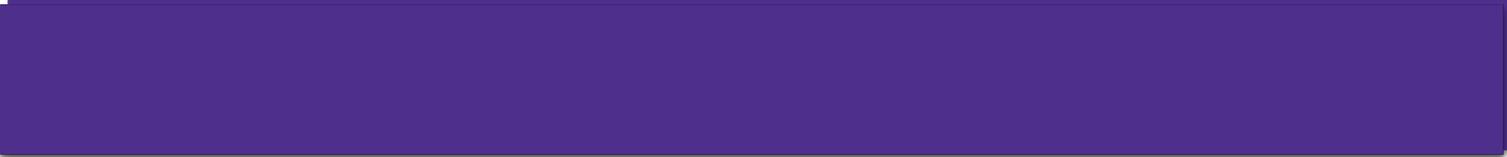
- 'What are your strengths?' (What access to **Power resources** do you have?)
-and to integrate all the above: 'What is your story?'

Some forms of power . . .

- **Legal power** may involve coercion, rules and sanctions supporting or limiting other aspects of power, offering or restricting choices
- **Economic and material power** having the means to obtain valued possessions and services, to control others' access to them and to pursue valued activities
- **Interpersonal power** power within close relationships, the power to look after / not look after or protect someone, to leave them, to give /withdraw /withhold affection etc
- **Biological or embodied power** operates through the possession of socially valued embodied attributes eg: physical attractiveness, fertility, strength, embodied talents and abilities, physical health
- **Coercive power or power by force** any use of violence, aggression or threats to frighten, intimidate or ensure compliance
- **Social/cultural capital** - a mix of valued qualifications, knowledge and connections which ease people's way through life and can be passed indirectly to the next generation in a kind of symbolic inheritance process
- **Ideological power** involves control of language, meaning, and perspective

The particular importance of ideological power - power over meaning, language and perspective . . .

- Probably the least obvious and least acknowledged form of power
- It is part of every other form of power
- It is when our thoughts, beliefs and feelings are ignored, discounted or disbelieved and alternative meanings may be imposed instead
- It shapes the ways we make sense of our life situations
- In mental health and the criminal justice system, it is often used to turn social problems into individual ones and diagnose or define people as ‘bad or mad’



Many people, especially those in less powerful positions, may be deprived of sound, evidence-based, alternative frameworks in order to make sense of their own and others' distressing or unusual experiences

This is a form of 'epistemic injustice' - experienced by groups who lack shared social resources to make sense of their experiences, due to unequal power relations (Miranda Fricker.)

From the PTMF perspective, biomedical psychiatry is a prime example of an ideology, and imposing a diagnosis is an act of epistemic injustice

‘How did it affect you?’
(What kind of Threats does this pose?)

- Relationships eg threats of rejection, abandonment, isolation
- Emotional - eg threats of overwhelming emotions, loss of control
- Social/community - eg threats to social roles, social status, community links
- Economic/material - eg threats to financial security, housing, being able to meet basic needs

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- Environmental - eg threats to safety and security, to links with the natural world - e.g. living in a dense urban or high crime area
 - Bodily - e.g. threats of violence, physical ill health
 - Value base - e.g. threats to your beliefs and basic values
 - Meaning making - e.g. threats to ability to create valued meanings about important aspects of your life/ imposition of others' meanings

‘What sense did you make of it?’
(What is the **Meaning** of these experiences to you?)

Human beings actively make sense of their world, and their behaviour is purposeful and meaningful

But what do we mean by ‘meaning’?



We cannot understand any aspect of Power, Threat or Threat Response separately from their meanings.

Our personal meanings are shaped by:

Social discourses (common understandings about what it means to be ‘mentally ill’, a ‘good mother’, a ‘happy family’, a refugee, and so on)

Ideological meanings - deeply embedded assumptions about the world that serve certain interests (neoliberalism is a good example - and biomedical theories about ‘mental illness’ are another.)

‘What did you have to do to survive?’ (What kinds of Threat Response are you using?)

We have all evolved to be able to respond to threats, by reducing or avoiding them, adapting to or surviving them, and trying to keep safe.

These threat responses are biologically-based but are also influenced by our past experiences, by cultural norms, and by what we can actually do in any given circumstances.

They are on a spectrum from automatic (more biologically-based) to more personally and culturally-shaped.



Some of these may be seen as ‘normal’ or even desirable (overwork, perfectionism, ruthlessness with colleagues, etc..)

They are likely to be to some degree culture-specific (self-starvation in Westernised countries; so-called ‘culture-bound syndromes’.)

Threat responses are there for a reason, and it makes more sense to group them by function - what purpose do they serve? than by ‘symptom.’

Both the function and the meaning of the response vary over time and across cultures, but there are common themes.

Restoring the link between Threats and Threat Responses - a main purpose of the Framework

Psychiatric practice obscures the links between threats and threat responses by imposing a diagnosis and then ‘treating’ an ‘illness.’ The Power Threat Meaning Framework shows how we can restore those links.

At one level this is common sense. We all know that people living in poverty are more likely to feel miserable and desperate (‘depression’) and we now recognise that abuse and trauma makes it more likely that people will hear voices (‘psychosis’ or ‘schizophrenia.’)

But a number of factors combine to conceal these links - from the person and from society as a whole.

General Patterns within the Power Threat Meaning Framework

We can identify new kinds of patterns by putting together the evidence about the influences of Power, Threat, Meaning and associated Threat Responses.

These patterns will always be overlapping, provisional and changing - because they are organised by **meaning** not by **biology**. They describe what people 'do', not what they 'have.'

The patterns will always reflect and be shaped by specific worldviews, social, historical, political and cultural contexts and ideological meanings. Thus, the Power Threat Meaning framework explains why there are widely varying cultural experiences and expressions of distress.

Seven evidence-based General Patterns

- 1. Identities**
- 2. Surviving rejection, entrapment, and invalidation**
- 3. Surviving insecure attachments and adversities as a child/young person**
- 4. Surviving separation and identity confusion**
- 5. Surviving defeat, entrapment, disconnection and loss**
- 6. Surviving social exclusion, shame, and coercive power**
- 7. Surviving single threats**



In Westernised countries, these patterns draw on struggles with Western norms and standards, such as:

- Separating from your family in early adulthood
- Compete and achieving in line with social expectations (e.g. in the labour market; for material goods)
- Meet your needs within a nuclear family structure
- Fit in with standards about body size, shape and weight
- Fit in with expectations about gender identity and gender roles
- Avoiding ‘irrational’ experiences - e.g. about a unitary self
- As an older adult - cope with loneliness and lack of status
- Bring up children to fit in with all the above

For example:

‘Spirit possession’ is sometimes seen as equivalent to the psychiatric concept of ‘psychosis’. One version, ‘cen’, is found in Northern Uganda, where civil war has resulted in widespread brutality and the abduction and forced recruitment of children as soldiers. In this phenomenon, young people report that their identity has been taken over by the malevolent ghost of a dead person. ‘Cen’ has been found to be associated with high levels of war trauma and with abduction, and the spirit was often identified as someone the abductees had been forced to kill.

We could understand this within the PTMF without having to call it ‘schizophrenia’ or ‘psychosis.’

The PTM Framework and the importance of

- Histories of colonisation and intergenerational trauma
- Inseparability of individual from the social group
- Relationship to the natural world
- Integration of mind, body, spirit, natural world
- Indigenous psychologies and research paradigms
- Narrative and meaning-making - personal, family, community.

Returning to the theme of narratives.....

Story-telling and meaning-making are universal human skills
The PTMF provides evidence for the central role of narrative of all kinds as an alternative to diagnosis. Narratives are a means of witnessing and healing, both in and beyond services.
The evidence-based General Patterns support the construction of particular narratives
Art, music, theatre etc are just as valid as written narratives, as are community ceremonies, myths and rituals.
The PTMF includes but goes beyond evidence-based practice and historical truth, in order to value '*narrative truth*' (Spence, 1982); and whether stories seem to 'fit' in a way that '*makes change conceivable and attainable*' (Schafer, 1980).

My story

Adverse childhood experiences led to complex trauma throughout my life. Constant repetitive cycles of coercion, powerlessness and multiple forms of abuse have not only had a lasting effect upon my interactions with others, but are also impacting on my physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. My energy levels are depleted from being consistently broken and distressed by a disempowering, authoritative and controlling mental health system that has been coercive and traumatizing when I needed compassionate trauma informed provision. As a consequence, I am dispirited and struggle to trust others. Even though the on-going clinical dispute with statutory mental health services has deeply hurt and retraumatized me, my relationships with my peers and family are protective factors that motivate me to find the strength to utilise my experiences to self-educate and self-advocate, whilst campaigning for trauma informed services and improved mental health provision for other survivors.

Trying it out – the Guided Discussion

Guided discussion for helping to apply these ideas to people's real lives – inside or outside services.

Either: Use yourself as an example (whether or not you have a MH history) but take care of yourself!

Or: Use someone else as an anonymous example (friend, family member.) NB Confidentiality

Think about the various forms of Power that may apply

Either: Pairing up with someone else

Or: Doing it on your own