



The British
Psychological Society
Promoting excellence in psychology



Division of
Clinical Psychology

Power Threat Meaning Framework Pattern

WOMEN SURVIVING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

The context

- Scale of men's abuse of their female partners and ex-partners
- De-gendering and de-politicising of domestic abuse
- Medicalising of women's responses to abuse
- 'Universalist' approach in (some) statutory services

The Power Threat Meaning Framework pattern.....

- Focuses on the multiple power processes involved in men's violent and abusive behaviour to their female partners and ex-partners, and in women's and society's responses to it
- Rejects medicalisation – instead enables clear links to be made between threats women face from domestic abuse and their understandable and meaningful responses
- Recognises that the experience and expression of mental distress is always shaped by culture and meaning – with implications for universalist approaches in services
- Supports a focus on women's strengths and resources and on constructing non-pathologising stories of their lives and futures
- Highlights what is needed for prevention

Instead of asking 'What is wrong with you?'
.... or 'What disorder do you have?'
.... the PTMF asks....

'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?)

PTMF Patterns use these questions to describe evidence-based regularities in power, threat, meaning, and threat responses across groups in relation to a range of shared contexts and life experiences

'WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU?'

(How is **Power** operating in your life?)

The Domestic Abuse pattern shows how interacting forms of power and power imbalance enable, support and are expressed in men's abuse of their female partners, at a societal level and in relationships....

- **Bodily** e.g. health/strength/fertility/ethnicity
- **Economic** e.g. income, wealth, access to valued goods and services, and control over other people's access to them
- **Legal** – how the law can operate to protect, prosecute or disadvantage us
- **Coercive** e.g. threat/intimidation/violence
- **Social capital** e.g. education/qualifications/social rank and connections
- **Relational** e.g. giving or withholding love, care or support
- **Ideological** – control of language, meaning, narrative and perspective; power to silence or undermine

The operation of power is part of all 4 questions

'HOW DID IT AFFECT YOU?'

(What kind of **Threats** does this pose?)

The abuse and misuse of power in domestic abuse create threats across multiple areas of women's lives, for example:

Bodily – pain, injury, ill-health, death

Emotional – overwhelming feelings

Economic/material – poverty/homelessness

Social/relational – rejection/isolation

Legal – legal action, challenges in family courts

Identity – loss of sense of self, respect from others

Control – loss of autonomy/agency

Knowledge and meaning making – imposed by others

.....contexts that make it difficult to meet core human needs e.g. for....

- Safety and security
- Close and supportive relationships
- Control over key areas of our lives
- Respect and esteem from others
- A sense of justice and fairness about our lives
- A sense of hope, meaning and purpose

Threats from domestic abuse have features that make them especially challenging.....

- Threats are long-lasting, repeated, severe
- There are many kinds of threats
- No clear way to predict, control, avoid or escape the threatening situation
- Threats involve sense of self/self-worth
- Threats are intentional, directed at *you*
- Threats happen in a close relationship with someone you love and depend on

‘WHAT SENSE DID YOU MAKE OF IT?’

(What is the **meaning** of these experiences to you?)

We *make* meaning – about ourselves, others and the world – from our own personal experience

But we also *find* meaning from social and cultural norms and standards, gendered expectations etc – including how we should feel if we do not meet these.

Our sense-making is profoundly influenced by ideological and other forms of power

- An abusive man will routinely impose meanings about his partner and his behaviour – and so may the legal system, mental health services, friends and relatives, often drawing on gendered cultural norms and standards
- All this can be reflected in the woman’s sense making, along with the dangers and contradictions of her situation and her responses to it
- Without context, a woman’s meanings may be seen as confused, self-defeating or bizarre. They may be medicalised, undermined or overlooked in favour of her partner’s account

'WHAT DID YOU HAVE TO DO TO SURVIVE?'

(What kinds of **Threat Response** are you using?)

Threat responses are what we and our bodies do for protection and survival – **they are ways of meeting our core needs under challenging and dangerous circumstances**

But....

Threat responses are often medicalised as symptoms – obscuring the links between power-based threats and our meaningful and functional responses

And.....

People with less access to conventional forms of power are more likely to adopt socially disturbing or disruptive threat responses in the face of trauma and adversity.....

.... And more likely to be officially labelled 'mad' or 'bad'

Some examples of women's threat responses and their functions

Protecting against danger/ creating a sense of safety and security	Hypervigilance, insomnia; flight, fight, freeze; appeasement, self-silencing, submission; giving up, hopelessness; suspicious thoughts and 'paranoid' beliefs; planning to escape
Protecting against attachment loss/abandonment	Appeasement; anticipating his needs, denying her own; minimising, rationalising or denying the abuse; self-silencing; anticipating/avoiding threat triggers
Maintaining a sense of control	Strict exercise, dieting, self starvation; perfectionism; overwork; spending or gambling; carrying out rituals; carrying out acts of defiance or revenge; ruminating about how to change things; trying to be a better partner
Regulating overwhelming feelings	Use of alcohol or drugs; expressing emotions through physical problems; compulsive rituals; self-harm; dissociation; hearing comforting or protective voices
Escape from the abuser	Attacking or killing the abusive man; attempting or committing suicide

Two more questions.....

‘WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?’

(What access to **Power Resources** do you have?)

And to bring it all together.....

‘WHAT IS YOUR STORY’?

Further reading....

<https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/Introduction%20to%20PTMF%20patterns.pdf>

And....

Chapter 8 of the 'Straight Talking Introduction'



Part 4 of the Overview document and pp22-27



Chapter 6 of the Main Document and the Appendix



The Patterns in the Power Threat Meaning Framework – Lucy Johnstone interviewed by Ray Middleton.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3EXj53_oyo