

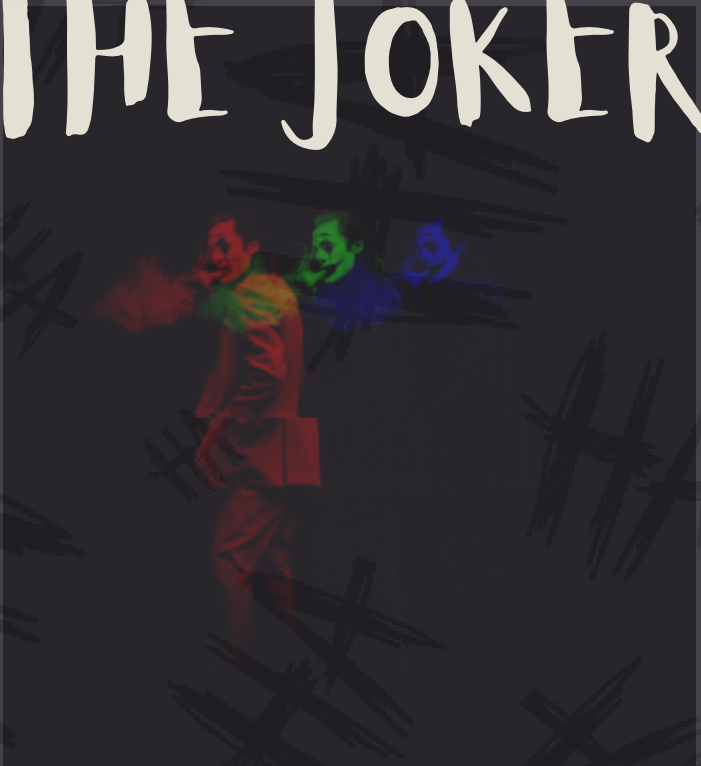
FORENSIC SCHEMA THERAPY

An Introduction with

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THE JOKER

Forensic Schema Therapy (FST) is a relatively recent adaptation of Schema Therapy concepts to a forensic context, issues, and clients. It was David Bernstein and his colleagues in the mid to late 2000's that pioneered this innovation and introduced the so-called forensic schema modes - the bully and attack, self-aggrandizer, predator, coning-manipulator (see Bernstein, D. P., et.al. (2007). Schema-Focused Therapy in forensic settings: theoretical model and recommendations for best clinical practice. International Journal of Forensic Mental Health, 6(2): 169-83). These innovations allowed clinicians to meaningfully work with clients often regarded as untreatable or intractable, and also to make sense of violent behaviours that at first glance can seem inexplicable (see Bernstein, D. P., et.al. (2019).

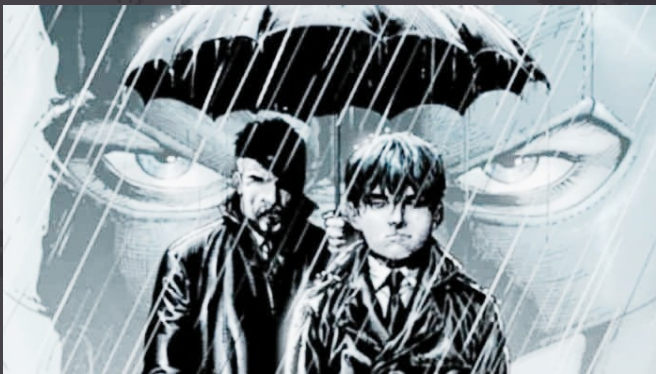


Schema therapy in forensic settings. In The Wiley International Handbook of Correctional Psychology (pp. 654-668). Wiley Blackwell). Bernstein's recently published randomized control study (see, Bernstein DP et al (2021). Schema therapy for violent PD offenders: a randomized clinical trial. Psychological Medicine 1-15). comparing treatment as usual with Schema Therapy attests to the value of this approach with this client group and reinforces what we already know as clinicians which is that FST works with our clients.

Now if I am asked what a good starting point for understanding FST. I would say, a good place to start is probably watching the Joker. !

Why?

If you have ever paid much attention to back story of superhero and super-villains. You will have noticed that the catalyst to who they eventually become is always trauma. Batman is probably the most well-known one. He watched his parents gunned down in an alley, became an orphan, and grew up in the isolated though immensely privileged circumstances of Wayne Manor with the dotting, though emotionally inhibited, family butler - Alfred. It was, however, the unresolved trauma of his parents' death that continued to haunt him and eventually shaped him to become the ice-cool unstoppable vigilante that we now know as Batman.



Super-villains usually have similar backstories though obviously go in a different direction. Bane, for instance, the only villain to have broken Batman, was sentenced to imprisonment from his birth for the crimes committed by his father. Bane grew up in a hell where he had to fight on a regular basis to survive. Later, he was treated like a lab rat and was discarded when considered a failure. A man who was born without love and affection, Bane has only known rage since his birth. The Joker - as portrayed in the Joaquin Phoenix movie - has a similar backstory. But we will get to that.



Spiderman has a similar story. Here a scientifically gifted young boy loses both his parents at an early age and is raised by his uncle and aunt. Living in the rough part of town Peter Parker struggles with poverty, physical illness, and bullying, until he gets bitten by a radioactive spider and develops his powers. His trauma however is the death of his beloved uncle by a petty thief that he chose not to apprehend. It is this death that is pivotal to the Spiderman story - he feels responsible for it and cannot forgive himself - an experience that hardens him both emotionally and psychologically eventually leading him to embrace his sense of responsibility for having superpowers and becoming the crime fighting superhero that we know as Spiderman.



These stories are so compelling when discussing schema therapy because they educate us about the fundamental nature of 'moods'.

A Mode: Refers to an emotional state or 'part-of-the-self' that temporarily dominates a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Rafaeli, et al., 2011)

Because coping modes emerge in response to trauma, and at a very fundamental level they are about protecting ourselves and getting needs met. And the thing about modes is that they kinda work at least in the moment. In the detached protector we do not feel the pain in that specific moment, whilst the angry protector usually does keep others away, and being an over-controller often does feel good. In a sense, modes can be considered a type of brief superpower, and indeed, when you evaluate the so-called superpowers of many of the super-heroes, you can see that many of these have more than a little of a favour of the schema modes. For instance, Bruce Banner only becomes the Hulk when he has access to his enraged child mode. Batman's ice-cold single-minded pursuit of Gotham villains to take down quite obviously reflects a well activated predator mode.

And in the forensic world it is all about the modes, particularly the forensic modes.

Have you ever wondered what's the difference between super heroes and super villains?

It is of course love. Superheroes received genuine love and care in their childhood

FORENSIC VS. CLINICAL CONTEXTS

Forensic environments are different from clinical contexts in several important ways. Firstly, many of the patients who you might see are mandated, and the focus of the therapy is on reducing risk of violence or some other criminal offence. Clinical issues and problems are less of a priority. Secondly, the forensic context is also different in important environmental ways. Patients have less control over the context, and there often is real danger and threat from others.

The typical themes of forensic clients' childhoods are of a dog-eat-dog world where vulnerability is a sign of weakness and a risk factor to being targeted or exploited by others.

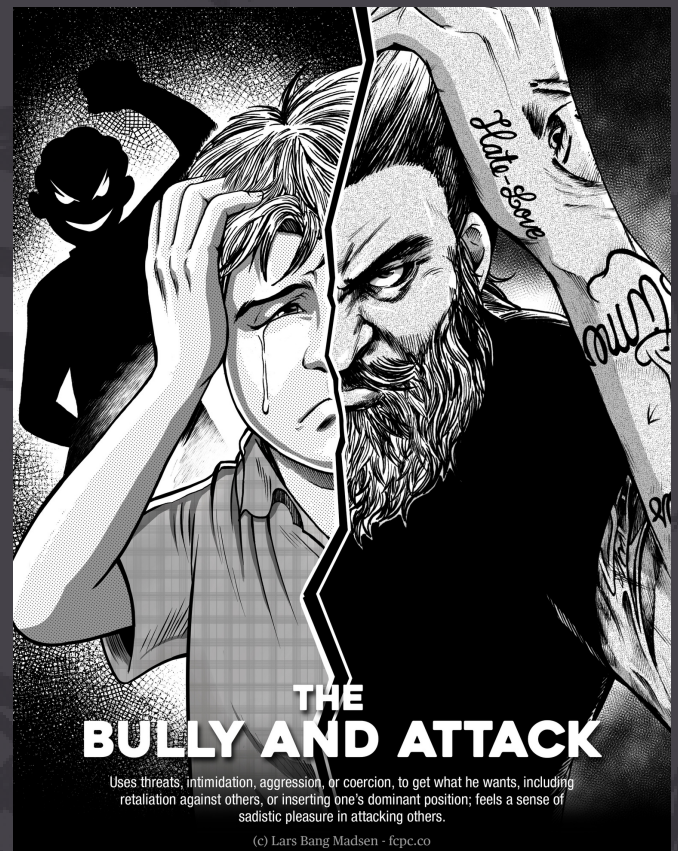
The childhood of many forensic patients is typically fraught with conflict, dysfunction, poverty, and chaos. Many patients will have been removed from their parents' care and placed in care. There is often abuse, physical, emotional, and sexual, incompetent parenting and educational failure for one reason or another.

Violence is not only normalised but in some situations considered inevitable and necessary to be safe. No one can be trusted, grudges are to be held, and walking away is not an option when called out by others, mocked, or belittled in some way.

It is no surprise that forensic populations have a higher prevalence of personality disorder, psychopathy, and a range of other problematic behaviours. These clients rarely present to regular clinical context for psychological treatment, and if they do it is typically not for mental health reasons.

In sessions, of course, this means that clients will present poorly motivated, mistrusting of you and the process. Interpersonal hostility, deception, and sometimes direct intimidation is common – characteristics that can make the process of therapy a harrowing one.

It is dealing with these interpersonal issues that FST really comes to the fore. Because therapy-interfering behaviours are understood as evidence of the clients' maladaptive coping modes. Modes that emerged in childhood to assist them with being able to survive in an unpredictable and dangerous world. Bernstein's forensic modes are usually the ones that are most relevant in this case.



The Forensic Modes (Bernstein, et. al., 2007)

Self-Aggrandizer: Feels superior, special, or powerful, and entitled

Bully and Attack: Uses threats, intimidation, aggression to get what he want

Conning and Manipulative: Cons, lies or manipulates to achieve a specific goal

Predator: Focuses on eliminating a threat in a cold calculating manner

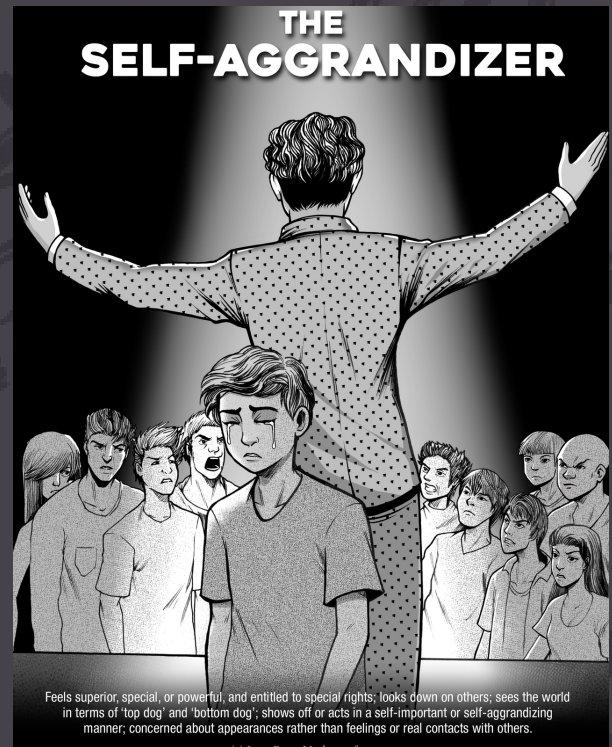
So why the Joker?

The Joker's story tells not only the story of modes, but the trajectory of modes. Specifically, how history and circumstances can inculcate, shape, and then harden modes in extreme ways.

The Joker tells the story of Arthur Fleck a middle age, physically frail man living with his chronically unwell mother. He works as a party clown and aspires to be a stand-up comic. Whilst he is well meaning, he struggles interpersonally, and has a neurological condition that causes him laugh uncontrollably during moments of anxiety or stress. He suffers bullying in the workplace, is isolated, lonely and yearns for relationships where he feels loved, understood, and valued. His early history shows that he suffered terribly. We learn that he was an orphan who experienced physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his adopted mentally ill mother. He, himself, as an adult has suffered mental illness, took psychiatric medication, and attended regular counselling with a social worker with little apparent benefit.

In his life Arthur struggles to assert himself, and many of the early scenes are of him experiencing humiliation and rejection in way or another.

His sense of powerlessness and impotency to alter the course of his life is almost palpable on the screen. In these moments he suffers a number of as transformational traumas. He is sacked from his workplace in difficult and unfair circumstances. All the anchors to his identity and world are stripped away.



Incidentally, he is attacked by a group of three men, and in a panic shoots and kills them. This is the pivotal moment because as he flees the crime scene, we observe the emergence of the overcompensating 'forensic' coping modes - intoxicating, powerful and invulnerable - a compelling antidote to the helplessness and despair that he experienced in life. Of course, Arthur Fleck is no super-villain, underneath his overcompensating modes is immense vulnerability, and a strong need for validation, safety, and genuine connection with others.

The Joker's story is a familiar trajectory for many forensic clients.

Coping modes emerge in circumstances of trauma and take centre stage in a person's life and are ultimately integral to offending behaviour (e.g. Keulen-De-Vox et al., 2014).