The 3Ps Framework: A Powerful Lens for Professional Practice

Introduction: Why problems demand a holistic response

Every professional working with people – whether in social work, social care, management or leadership – faces a fundamental challenge: how do we make sense of the complex, interconnected problems we encounter and work effectively to address them? The answer lies not in simplistic, single-factor explanations, but in frameworks that honour the true complexity of human experience while remaining practical and actionable.

My early career background in social work gave me a strong focus on problem solving and that has remained with me as my career has evolved over time. I came to realize that many problems are *relational* – that is, they arise from how people treat one another. Problems like conflict, bullying, abuse and discrimination all have a relational basis and they all contribute to stress, anxiety and depression either directly or indirectly.

But these are not the only types of problem we encounter. Problems can also be *contextual*, by which I mean that they arise from the wider social context we find ourselves in. Society is not a level playing field. So many problems arise from inequality, privileges for the few and struggles and challenges for the many. For example, it is now being increasingly recognized that mental health problems have their roots in social circumstances (Davies, 2021; Thompson, 2019a) and are not purely individual matters or 'biochemical malfunctions'.

These two sets of problems are not separate spheres – they are closely linked to one another and constantly interact, presenting a complex picture of challenges to face. While this interaction becomes obvious once we start to look at problems and their causes in greater depth than they are usually afforded, these all-important connections are often left out of the picture (for example, when someone is experiencing stress because they are being bullied but are treated as if their stress response is a sign that they are weak or incapable – Thompson, 2024a). Throughout my career, therefore, whether it is in relation to social work and social care or to management and leadership across the board, I have emphasized the need for a holistic approach – that is, one that takes account of both relational and contextual factors and avoids the danger of 'blaming the victim' (Ryan, 1976) by focusing narrowly on individual factors.

The danger of incomplete perspectives

Just to complicate the picture further, while it is a significant, dangerous and harmful mistake to focus solely on individual factors, we should not leave them out of the picture completely. Indeed, an important part of problem solving is the recognition that people will often behave in ways that make their situation worse: a man under stress develops a drink habit; a victim of sexual abuse blames herself and loses self-respect; a child who is being bullied at school starts to self-harm, and so on. Once again, the situation is an interactive one – such reactions also have their roots in relational and contextual factors – aspects of our lives that play a key part in shaping not only how we think, feel and behave but also who we are.

So, when we enter the world of problem solving, whether as human services professionals or as managers and leaders, we are stepping into a complex field of human endeavour. However, it is also a potentially very rewarding place to be as working with people also brings the opportunity to realize potential, to not only address negatives in people's lives but also recognize and capitalize on opportunities for learning, growth and flourishing.

The genesis of the 3Ps framework

It was this recognition some years ago that led me to think in terms of the three Ps: Where there are **P**eople, there will be **P**roblems, but there will also be **P**otential. My work, as now embodied in the Academy, is therefore characterized by efforts to support people in addressing the problems and realizing the potential. This framework has stood me in good stead and, when talking about it on training courses and in consultancy projects, the response has been very positive indeed, with regular comments about how useful people felt it was for understanding the challenges they faced in their work and, indeed, in their private lives. My aim here, therefore, is to explain more fully what the 3Ps framework is all about and how it can inform and enhance professional practice across diverse settings.

The first P: People

Understanding human complexity

In his play 'No Exit' (Huis Clos), Sartre makes the famous comment that 'hell is other people', by which he means that people so often get in the way of what we are trying to do – and we will often be getting in the way of what they are trying to do (Sartre, 2000). A traffic jam is a classic example of this. You want to drive somewhere quickly but so many other people trying to go the same way makes that impossible. There is certainly some truth in Sartre's point of view, but it is clearly not the whole story. We could also say that heaven is other people too, in the sense that our lives can be so enriched by love, friendship, loyalty and support, as well as what people bring to our lives in terms of art, literature, music, entertainment and intellectual and spiritual stimulation.

Which is to the fore at any given time – the hellish or the heavenly – will depend on a number of factors, relational, contextual and individual, as well as how these interact with one another. As I have been arguing for a very long time, there are no situations where we have complete control, but nor are there any situations where we have no control. This is a key part of existentialist thought – there are always choices to be made and choices have consequences.

The biopsychosocial-spiritual approach

Another aspect of existentialist thought is the paradoxical nature of human experience. For example, people are both highly predictable and highly unpredictable, a clear indication of the complex nature of being human. This complexity comes in large part from the fact that we are biopsychosocial and spiritual beings. It's worth unpacking this a little further:

- *Biological* We cannot escape our biological basis; it is an intrinsic part of who we are. However, when it comes to understanding people (and our problems), we need to be wary of the common problem of overemphasizing the role of biology in our lives. For example, feminist thought and related anti-sexist activities have long challenged the idea that 'biology is destiny' or that gender roles are immutable and 'natural'. This has more to do with ideology than biology. Understanding this biological dimension – and its limitations – helps professionals avoid reductionist thinking that attributes complex human problems to simple biological causes.

- *Psychological* This subdivides into three main elements:

    - *Cognitve***:** This relates to thinking processes and memory. We have major variability in terms of these aspects of what it means to be human, and this is partly linked to people's life experiences – for example, how helpful or otherwise their experience of the education system was. Were their capabilities nurtured and enhanced or dampened down? In professional practice, understanding cognitive patterns helps us recognize how people make sense of their situations and what might be blocking constructive change.

- *Affective***:** We tend to think of ourselves as rational beings, but it would be naïve not to recognize that our emotions are very powerful influences on us, sometimes in helpful ways, sometimes not so helpful. This is why emotional intelligence is such an important concept and such a significant part of effective problem solving. Professionals who can read and respond to emotional dynamics – both in others and in themselves – are far more effective than those who ignore or dismiss the affective dimension.

- *Behavioural***:** Our actions are shaped by a number of factors, not least our thoughts and feelings, but also the relational and contextual factors I mentioned earlier. And, of course, we need to understand that one person's behaviour will depend on other people's behaviour and vice versa.

Once again, this is a dynamic picture. Thoughts, feelings and actions are not separate entities, they are different but related aspects of human psychology.

- *Social* This too can be subdivided into three separate but connected and interacting elements:

  - *Personal:* The realm of individuals and how they function is what the domain of micro-sociology is all about. It is concerned with, for example, how social factors shape our sense of who we are and how our interactions with one another contribute to the broader tapestry of social life. For practitioners, this means recognizing that even seemingly 'personal' issues are shaped by social relationships and dynamics.
  - *Cultural:* Cultures are sets of beliefs, values, rituals, taken-for-granted assumptions and unwritten rules. Cultural factors are extremely influential because, for the most part, they affect us without our even recognizing that they are doing so – they become our standard patterns of how we understand – and react to – the situations we find ourselves in. Culturally competent practice requires us to understand not only others' cultural frameworks but also our own cultural lenses and how these shape what we see and how we respond.

- *Structural:* These cultural formations do not exist in a vacuum, they are embedded within wider social structures, such as class, race/ethnicity and gender. Such structural factors shape – and are shaped by – the cultural factors associated with them.

For a fuller explanation of this three-dimensional framework and its implications, see Thompson (2019b).

- *Spiritual* While religion is a major way of expressing – and living – our spirituality, it is not the only one. Not everyone is religious, but everyone has spiritual needs and faces spiritual challenges. We all need to find or create meaning, purpose and direction in our lives, develop a sense of who we are and how we fit into the world and have a sense of values. Many people have spoken and written about human beings as biopsychosocial entities but have neglected this very important spiritual dimension that can make such a major difference to how we live our lives, how we deal with our problems and try to fulfil our potential. The spiritual element is therefore a key aspect of the 3Ps framework.

For professionals, attending to the spiritual dimension means asking questions about meaning and purpose, not just about problems and solutions. It means recognizing that people's sense of who they are, what matters to them and what gives their lives direction profoundly influences how they experience and respond to challenges. This brief overview of the People element of the framework has shown how complex and multidimensional people are, and yet we have only really scratched the surface in terms of just how complex and fascinating we really are. What this complexity demands from professionals is a sophisticated, nuanced approach that resists simplistic explanations and one-dimensional interventions.

The second P: Problems

The nature and diversity of problems

We have already seen that problems can be relational, contextual or individual, with a complex intermingling of different aspects of each. But this is not the only way of

making sense of problems. In my *Effective Problem Solving* book, I explore various aspects of problems and potential solutions and offer 101 different tools that can be used to tackle a wide range of problems (Thompson, 2024b). We are, then, once again finding ourselves in complex territory.

The subjective dimension

One important thing to recognize is that there is a subjective side to the concept of a problem. What may be a problem to one person may not be to another. For example, some people object to swearing and may feel threatened or at least uncomfortable in a setting where there is a lot of swearing, while others may have no qualms at all about being in such a situation. In trying to help people solve a problem, we must first make sure that they actually see the situation as problematic in their terms.

Otherwise, we could waste a lot of time and energy and even be intrusive.
This principle of starting where the person is – rather than where we think they should be – is fundamental to effective practice. It requires us to set aside our assumptions and truly listen to how people themselves define and experience their difficulties.

Avoiding judgemental responses

Another important issue to consider is the danger of being judgemental and seeing someone *with* problems *as a* problem. My work with older people provided plenty of examples of this. I found that older people in need of support were often perceived as a problem, a sad reflection of ageism (Thompson and Cox, 2025; S. Thompson, 2025).

A similar common scenario is with children where they are unsettled because of one or more problems they are experiencing (their needs not being met in some way), and so they behave in ways that can cause problems for other people (anti-social behaviour, for example). However, we should not be naïve enough to fail to recognize that this often happens with adults too. The person experiencing the difficulty is not

the problem; the problem is the problem. Maintaining this distinction is crucial for ethical, respectful and effective practice.

The key role of assessment

But perhaps the most common difficulty in relation to problem solving that I have come across is people trying to find solutions without first being clear what the problem is (and who it is a problem for). Without clarity about the nature and significance of the problem we should not be surprised that many attempts to be helpful will fail and may even be counterproductive. In my experience, this unwise approach comes from an urge to be helpful that leads to oversimplification. Someone may realize there is something wrong (problem) and attempt to do something about it (solution) based on a 'Let's try this …' approach. What they have missed out is the assessment phase. Between problems and solutions there needs to be a process of weighing up what the issues are in order to make sure that we are clear about what we are dealing with and we are not in danger of making a bad situation worse. It appears to be when people are tired or very busy that they are most likely to make the mistake of offering a solution without first clarifying what the problem is.

This is where professional discipline and systematic practice become essential. Taking time for proper assessment – even when pressures are high – is an investment that pays dividends in more effective, efficient and ethically sound interventions.

Understanding vicious circles

Finally, in terms of problems, what is also important to recognize is the importance of vicious circles. A theme of my work over very many years has been helping people to recognize the significance of problems and attempted solutions creating a vicious circle where the problems at best persist and at worst become more and more problematic. Consider this scenario:

> Sam is overworked and feels she is losing control. She becomes stressed, meaning that she finds it harder to concentrate and is low on energy. This

makes it harder for her to get through her workload. Consequently, she gets more stressed and then finds it even harder to concentrate and has even less energy.

Vicious circles also interrelate, in the sense that one vicious circle can trigger one or more others:

> Sam needs support, but she is reluctant to ask for it, because she is afraid of being stereotyped and stigmatized as 'weak' or 'incapable'. This means that she will not ask for support at the very moment she needs it most. This leads to her going on sick leave because of the stress adversely affecting her health. On returning from sick leave, she faces a backlog of work to contend with and is soon feeling stressed and out of control once again. This makes her look for a less pressurized job elsewhere and thereby adds to the staff shortage problem that caused her to be overworked in the first place – another vicious circle.

But this isn't all:

> As the staff shortages get worse, the unit manager gets more and more tense, anxious and frustrated and, as a result of this, starts to engage in bullying behaviour, resulting in more stress for the staff and a higher likelihood of people leaving. The team gets a reputation for being a dreadful place to work and that too adds to the staff shortages problem. Everyone involved is now locked into a set of interconnected vicious circles and the whole situation comes to be seen as unmanageable.

From vicious to virtuous circles

One of the learning systems the Academy offers is called System3V, with 3V being shorthand for creating **V**alue by converting **V**icious circles into **V**irtuous ones. The logic behind it is that attempting to address cyclical problems in a linear way is likely to have a poor success rate (as the high level of dissatisfaction and low level of engagement in so many organizations testifies). What is needed is an approach based

on reversing the polarity, as it were, of those circles, rather than trying to halt them when their circular momentum is so powerful. A clear implication of this, then, is that the wisest approach to problem solving is one that is based on cyclical, rather than linear, logic – hence the training programme based on the 3Vs.

This understanding transforms how we approach seemingly intractable problems. Rather than fighting against momentum or attempting to impose external solutions, we work with the energy of the system to redirect it towards positive, self-reinforcing patterns.

The third P: Potential

The omnipresence of possibility

Everyone and everything can change, which means that there is potential in everyone and everything. However, one of the few things I ever agreed with my late father-in-law about was his comment that a block of wood has the potential to become a beautiful piece of furniture, but it also has the potential to remain a block of wood. In other words, potential is not enough on its own. Steps need to be taken to realize that potential. It is through our actions as human services professionals and/or managers and leaders that we can add value to that potential, to help it come to fruition.
This is where professional skill, commitment and vision become crucial. Recognizing potential is valuable, but only professional competence can help translate that potential into reality.

Building on strengths through empowerment

There are two main ways of understanding this third P. First, there is the process of seeking to empower people to go from strength to strength (a virtuous circle) which involves finding ways of building on their strengths and addressing anything that is holding them back from achieving their best (a lack of confidence, for example, or the effects of being discriminated against). This notion of empowerment has been a feature of my work, whether in relation to human services practice or in management and leadership more broadly. Indeed, I see a key role of leadership being that of

shaping and sustaining an organizational culture that enables people to fulfil their potential and achieve optimal results (Thompson, 2025a).

In my experience, one of the most common obstacles to progress that empowerment-based approaches can aim to address is a lack of self-belief, often accompanied by negative self-talk. These in turn generally have their roots in experiences of sexism, racism or other forms of discrimination that can undermine self-esteem and thus confidence. It is not surprising that people who persistently encounter subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) messages that they are 'less than' other people start to doubt themselves, their capabilities and thus their potential.

For professionals, this means that empowerment work often requires us to help people unlearn the damaging messages they have internalized and reconstruct a more authentic and affirming sense of self. This is delicate, skilled work that requires patience, authenticity and a genuine belief in people's capacity for growth.

The concept of antifragility

Second, there is the more complex approach based on the concept of 'antifragility', as used in the work of Taleb (2013). Something being fragile will often create problems – for example, if you try to move it or change it in some way. Antifragility, as the name implies, is where fragility brings benefits in some way. Fragility means that something that needs to remain whole is vulnerable to being broken. Antifragility, by contrast, refers to where something has broken but none the less brings benefits, albeit often accompanied by pain and suffering. Examples of antifragility would include:

- *Crisis intervention* As a turning point in someone's life, a crisis can result in the situation getting significantly worse, but it can also get better, in the sense that people can learn, grow and develop new coping skills in response to a crisis. For example, someone whose life has been turned upside down by losing a job they loved may end up better off once the situation settles down and they find that the situation has opened up new opportunities that would otherwise not have been available to them (Thompson, 2025b).

- *Post-traumatic growth* Likewise, it has been recognized that traumatic experiences, albeit highly distressing, can also bring benefits in the form of personal growth and learning, increased confidence and a more resilient approach to life (Tedeschi and Moore, 2017). For example, someone who has been bullied could become more assertive and more determined not to allow others to dominate them.

- *Transformational grief* This is a similar concept. It relates to how even the painful, frightening and exhausting experience of facing a major loss can bring a silver lining in the form of one or more benefits (Thompson, 2022). For example, someone who has over-relied on their parents and not learned independence skills may become much more adept at managing their own life and circumstances when one or both parents die and they are forced to review their approach to life.

What antifragility teaches us, then, is that even negative events characterized by pain, suffering and distress have the potential to bring about positive changes that, in turn, can put us – and the people we support – in a stronger position to realize our potential and thereby enrich our lives.

This perspective is particularly valuable for professionals because it helps us maintain hope and purpose even when working with people facing profound difficulties. It enables us to look for – and help others find – the seeds of growth within experiences of adversity.

The 3Ps framework in practice

Analytical scaffolding for complex work

As I hope is now clear, the 3Ps framework represents a fundamental reorientation of how we approach professional practice across the human services and management domains. Rather than operating within narrow, discipline-specific silos, it offers a coherent lens through which we can make sense of the common threads that underpin effective practice.

Applications in social work and social care

For social work and social care practitioners, the 3Ps framework provides helpful analytical 'scaffolding' for addressing the complexity inherent in supporting individuals, families and communities. The People element emphasizes the centrality of relationship-based practice and the recognition that human beings are fundamentally social creatures whose wellbeing is inextricably linked to our connections with others. This is not simply about being 'nice'; it involves sophisticated understanding of power dynamics, cultural competence and the capacity to work authentically across difference.

The Problems element challenges practitioners to move beyond surface-level issues towards deeper understanding of the structural, cultural and systemic factors that generate difficulty in people's lives. This requires critical thinking skills that can take us beyond common-sense notions of individual pathology, recognizing that many 'personal' problems are manifestations of broader inequalities and injustices. Effective human services practice demands the ability to work simultaneously at these different levels.

The Potential dimension introduces a fundamentally strengths-based orientation that counters the deficit-focused approaches that have historically dominated the human services. By recognizing and mobilizing the capabilities, resilience and resources that exist within individuals, families and communities, we can move away from a paternalistic 'doing for' model towards an empowering 'doing with' approach. This connects directly to the current emphasis on co-production, asset-based community development and rights-based practice.

Applications in management and leadership

Managers and leaders can also benefit from thinking in 3Ps framework terms. It offers equally powerful insights, though these manifest differently within organizational contexts. The People dimension here encompasses training and development, team dynamics and organizational culture. Effective leadership recognizes that organizations are human systems, not machines, and that technical

competence must be balanced with emotional intelligence, communication skills and the capacity to build cultures where people feel valued, supported and safe and where innovation and creativity can flourish.

The Problems dimension in management contexts involves strategic analysis, critical evaluation of organizational challenges and the ability to distinguish between surface manifestations and root causes. Leaders who understand this dimension avoid simplistic 'quick fix' solutions and recognize that sustainable organizational change requires systemic thinking and the courage to address underlying cultural and structural issues, rather than merely paper over cracks.

The Potential dimension transforms how leaders conceptualize their role. Rather than controlling and directing from above, leaders who embrace this perspective focus on removing barriers, creating empowering conditions and releasing the latent capabilities within their teams. This fits with current thinking around distributed leadership, learning organizations and the shift from command-and-control models towards more facilitative approaches.

Clearly, then, thinking holistically in 3Ps terms offers a useful analytical framework to serve as the basis of critically reflective practice and a well-informed approach to workplace challenges. The framework enables professionals to:

- Maintain focus on the interconnected nature of people, problems and potential, rather than getting lost in fragmented, partial responses.
- Develop more sophisticated analyses that honour complexity without becoming paralysed by it.
- Identify leverage points for effective intervention by understanding systemic patterns.
- Build on strengths and possibilities rather than become mired in deficit-focused thinking.
- Focus on partnership and empowerment, rather than impose top-down solutions.
- Maintain hope and purpose even when facing significant challenges.

Practical implementation

The practical value of the 3Ps framework becomes apparent when we apply it to real-world situations. Consider, for example, a situation where a team is experiencing high sickness absence and low morale. A narrow, individualistic approach might focus on individual employees' attendance records or health issues. A slightly broader but still inadequate approach might look at workload or management style in isolation.

The 3Ps framework encourages a more comprehensive analysis. The People dimension directs attention to: Who is affected and how? What are the relational dynamics within the team? How do cultural and structural factors (such as discrimination or inequality) feature? What are people's strengths and capabilities? The Problems dimension asks: What is the actual problem (as opposed to 'symptoms')? Who is it a problem for? Are there vicious circles operating? What are the relational, contextual and individual dimensions? The Potential dimension prompts: What opportunities exist for positive change? What strengths can be built upon? How can we move from vicious to virtuous circles? What would empowerment look like in this context?

This comprehensive approach is more likely to identify root causes and generate sustainable solutions than narrow fragmented interventions. It also models the kind of systematic, critically reflective practice that produces better outcomes for all concerned.

Conclusion: integration and wholeness

What makes the 3Ps framework particularly powerful is the recognition that these three dimensions are not separate elements to be addressed sequentially, but rather interconnected facets of a unified whole. Excellence in human services practice and management and leadership alike requires the capacity to hold all three dimensions in creative tension, recognizing that attention to people without understanding

problems leads to well-meaning ineffectiveness, while problem solving without recognizing potential produces dependency rather than empowerment.

The framework therefore provides both analytical clarity and practical guidance for professionals committed to making a meaningful difference in their respective domains. It offers a way of thinking that is rigorous enough to honour complexity, yet accessible enough to inform everyday practice. It bridges the often unhelpful divide between theory and practice by providing concepts that are both intellectually sound and immediately applicable.

Developing your practice with the 3Ps framework

The 3Ps framework is not something to be simply learned about; it is something to be worked with, explored and integrated into professional practice over time. Like any sophisticated analytical tool, its value emerges through sustained engagement and application.

For those interested in developing their understanding and use of the 3Ps framework, the Academy offers a range of relevant learning resources. These include:

- The System3V programme focused on converting vicious circles into virtuous ones.
- Online learning resources that enable self-directed professional development.
- A Centre of Excellence where professionals can share insights and experiences.
- Development tools designed to create safe, productive and humane workplaces.

Whether you work in social work, social care, management, leadership or any other field where understanding people, addressing problems and realizing potential is central to your role, the 3Ps framework offers valuable perspectives and practical tools.

To find out how the Academy can help you use the framework to enhance your professional practice and achieve better outcomes for the people and organizations you work with, visit www.NeilThompson.info or contact us to discuss your specific learning and development needs.

The challenges facing professionals in human services and organizational leadership are unlikely to diminish. If anything, they are becoming more complex and demanding. What we need are not simplistic solutions or quick fixes, but sophisticated frameworks that can guide us through complexity while remaining practical and grounded. The 3Ps framework offers exactly that – a way of thinking and practising that honours the true nature of the work we do while providing clear direction for making a real and lasting difference.

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