Evolution of The Internal Family Systems Model

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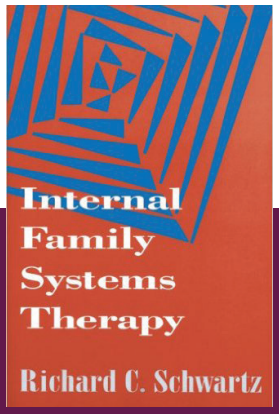

The Internal Family Systems Model (IFS) has evolved over the past twenty years into a comprehensive approach that includes guidelines for working with individuals, couples, and families. The IFS Model represents a new synthesis of two already-existing paradigms: systems thinking and the multiplicity of the mind. It brings concepts and methods from the structural, strategic, narrative, and Bowenian schools of family therapy to the world of subpersonalities. This synthesis was the natural outcome that evolved after I, as a young, fervent family therapist, began hearing from my clients about their inner lives. Once I was able to set aside my preconceived notions about therapy and the mind, and began to really listen to what my clients were saying, what I heard repeatedly were descriptions of what they often called their "parts" — the conflicted subpersonalities that resided within them.

This was not a new discovery. Many other theorists have described a similar inner phenomenon, beginning with Freud's id, ego, and superego, and more recently the object relations conceptions of internal objects. These ideas are also at the core of less mainstream approaches such as transactional analysis (ego states) and psychosynthesis (subpersonalities), and are now manifesting in cognitive-behavioral approaches under the term schemata. Prior to IFS, however, little attention was given to how these inner entities functioned in relation to each other.

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Since I was steeped in systems thinking, it was second nature to begin tracking sequences of internal interactions in the same way I had tracked interactions among family members. As I did, I learned that parts take on common roles and common inner relationships. I also learned that these inner roles and relationships were not static and could be changed if one intervened carefully and respectfully. I began conceiving of the mind as an inner family and experimenting with techniques I had used as a family therapist.

The IFS Model, which evolved as a result of this exploration, views a person as containing an ecology of relatively discrete minds, each of which has valuable qualities and each of which is designed to — and wants to — play a valuable role within. These parts are forced out of their valuable roles, however, by life experiences that can reorganize the system in unhealthy ways. A good analogy is an alcoholic family in which the children are forced into protective and stereotypic roles by the extreme dynamics of their family. While one finds similar sibling roles across alcoholic families (e.g., the scapegoat, mascot, lost child), one does not conclude that those roles represent the essence of those children. Instead, each child is unique and, once released from his or her role by intervention, can find interests and talents separate from the demands of the chaotic family. The same process seems to hold true for internal families — parts are forced into extreme roles by external circumstances and, once it seems safe, they gladly transform into valuable family members.

What circumstances force these parts into extreme and sometimes destructive roles? Trauma is one factor, and the effects of childhood sexual abuse on internal families has been discussed at length (Goulding and Schwartz, 1995). But more often, it is a person's family of origin values and interaction patterns that create internal polarizations which escalate over time and are played out in other relationships. This, also, is not a novel observation; indeed, it is a central tenet of object relations and self psychology. What is novel to IFS is the attempt to understand all levels of human organization — intrapsychic, family, and culture — with the same systemic principles, and to intervene at each level with the same ecological techniques.

Managers, Firefighters, and Exiles

Are there common roles for parts across people? After working with a large number of clients, some patterns began to appear. Most clients had parts that tried to keep them functional and safe. These parts tried to maintain control of their inner and outer environments by, for example, keeping them from getting too close or dependent on others, criticizing their appearance or performance to make them look or act better, and focusing on taking care of others' rather than their own needs. These parts seemed to be in protective, managerial roles and therefore are called managers.

When a person has been hurt, humiliated, frightened, or shamed in the past, he or she will have parts that carry the emotions, memories, and sensations from those experiences. Managers often want to keep these feelings out of consciousness and, consequently, try to keep vulnerable, needy parts locked in inner closets. These incarcerated parts are known as exiles.

The third and final group of parts jumps into action whenever one of the exiles is upset to the point that it may flood the person with its extreme feelings or make the person vulnerable to being hurt again. When that is the case, this third group tries to douse the inner flames of feeling as quickly as possible, which earns them the name firefighters. They tend to be highly impulsive and strive to find stimulation that will override or dissociate from the exile's feelings. Bingeing on drugs, alcohol, food, sex, or work are common firefighter activities.

The Self

One other key aspect of the IFS Model also differentiates it from other models. This is the belief that, in addition to these parts, everyone is at their core a Self, containing

many crucial leadership qualities such as perspective, confidence, compassion, and acceptance. Working with hundreds of clients for more than two decades, some of whom were severely abused and show severe symptoms, has convinced me that everyone has this healthy and healing Self despite the fact that many people initially have very little access to it. When working with an individual, the goal of IFS is to differentiate this Self from the parts, thereby releasing its resources. When the individual is in the state of Self, we can work together to help the parts out of their extreme roles.

I had no clue about the Self until I began this journey almost twenty years ago. Like many other young people in the sixties, I had experimented with meditation for respite from my inner cacophony. From these experiences, I sensed other dimensions of myself but had no framework to understand them. I was also an athlete and, on the football field and basketball court, had occasionally entered that delicious flow state in which my mind was still and my body could do no wrong. Like most people, however, I was primarily concerned with finding ways to counter the undercurrent of worthlessness that ran through my psyche. I believed the inner voices telling me I was basically lazy, stupid, and selfish. That's who I thought I really was.

I was led to knowledge about the Self less through direct experience than, later as a therapist, through witnessing what happened to my clients as I helped them explore their inner worlds. I had several clients in the early 1980's who began talking about different parts of them as if these "parts" were autonomous voices or subpersonalities. As a family therapist, these inner battles were intriguing to me, and I began asking clients to try to alter them in the same ways I'd been trying to change their family's communication. It seemed that many clients could actually converse with these thoughts and feelings as if they were real personalities.

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For example, I had a client, Diane, ask her pessimist voice why it always told her she was hopeless. To my amazement, Diane said it answered her. It said that it told her she was hopeless so she wouldn't take any risks and get hurt. It was trying to protect her. This seemed like a promising interaction. If this pessimist really had benign intent, then Diane might be able to negotiate a different role for it. Yet Diane was not interested. She was angry at this voice and was telling it to just leave her alone. I asked her why she was so rude to the pessimist, and she went on a long diatribe, describing how that voice had made every step she took in life a major struggle.

It then occurred to me that I was not talking to Diane, but rather to another part of her that constantly fought with the pessimist. In an earlier conversation, Diane had told me about an ongoing war inside her between one

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voice that pushed her to achieve and the pessimist, who told her it was hopeless. It seemed that the pushing part had jumped in while she was talking to the pessimist. I asked Diane to focus on the voice that was so angry at the pessimist and ask it to stop interfering in her negotiations with it. Again, to my amazement, it agreed to "step back," and Diane immediately shifted out of the anger she had felt so strongly only seconds before. When I asked Diane how she felt toward the pessimist now, it seemed as though a different person answered. In a calm, caring voice, she said she was grateful to it for trying to protect her and felt sorry that it had to work so hard. Her face and posture had also changed, reflecting the soft compassion in her voice. From that point on, negotiations with the pessimist were easy.

I tried this "step back" procedure with several other clients. Sometimes we had to ask two or three voices to not interfere before my client shifted into a state similar to Diane's, but we got there nonetheless. I began to get excited. What if people could get extreme voices to step back simply by asking them to, not only in negotiations with other parts, but with family members, bosses, anyone? What if the person who was left when the parts stepped back was always as compassionate as Diane and these other clients had become? When they were in that calm, compassionate state, I asked these clients what voice or part was present. They each gave a variation of the following reply: "That's not a part like those other voices are; that's more of who I really am — that's my Self."

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Without knowing it, I had stumbled onto a new way of helping people access the Self that is well-known in many spiritual traditions, but I didn't realize this until years later. At the time, I was thrilled to have found a way to make therapy so much more effortless and effective for my clients, as well as for me. Diane and the others began relating to their parts in ways that the parts seemed to need. Their emergent compassion, lucidity, and wisdom helped them get to know and care for these inner personalities. Some parts, like Diane's pessimist, needed to hear from her that, while at one time she had been very hurt and needed to withdraw, she no longer needed it to protect her in that way. Subpersonalities, like the pessimist, seemed like inner trauma victims, stuck in the past, their minds frozen around a time of great distress. Other parts needed to be held, comforted, loved, or just listened to. The most amazing thing of all was that, once in that Self state, clients seemed to know just what to do or say to help each inner personality. It gradually became clear that I didn't have to teach them how to relate differently to these thoughts and emotions they were calling parts because they would either automatically begin doing what the part needed, or

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they would begin asking questions that would lead to ways of helping the part. My job was mainly to try to help them remain in the state of Self and then get out of their way as they became therapists to their own inner families.

Since I was still a family therapist, I also experimented with this Self-leadership approach to interpersonal relationships. When I could help family members get their parts to step back and let their Selves communicate, they resolved long-standing issues on their own with little guidance from me. Rather than reacting to each other's extreme views and positions, the Self in each partner seemed to have an automatic empathy for the other, just as individual clients had for their own parts. They could sense the hurt behind their partner's protective walls and weren't afraid of losing face by apologizing for how they might have contributed to that hurt. I began to see the potential of Self-leadership for healing but was frustrated because these flights into Self-leadership often would not last long, and in subsequent sessions the inner and/or outer family systems would revert to their old patterns. Plus, many clients couldn't attain Self-leadership to begin with. Their parts wouldn't step back or would do so only temporarily. I would later learn that for Self-leadership to be a lasting presence, we needed to heal the parts that swam in their inner pools of pain and shame. To access those parts, however, we had to get permission from the parts that protected them. Not knowing that then, I could only glimpse the vision of what helping people access their Self could do, but that glimpse was so exhilarating that I devoted my professional (and much of my personal) life to pursuing it.

The Self-Led Person

I was also finding that the Self wasn't just a passive witness state. In fact, it wasn't just a state of mind, but could also be an active healing presence inside and outside people. It wasn't only available during times when, in therapy or meditation, people concentrated on separating from or witnessing their thoughts and emotions. Once a person's parts learned to trust that they didn't have to protect so much and could allow the Self to lead, some degree of Self would be present for all their decisions and interactions. Even during a crisis, when a person's emotions were running high, there would be a difference because of the presence of Self energy. Instead of being overwhelmed by and blending with their emotions, Self-led people were able to hold their center, knowing that it was just a part of them that was upset now and would eventually calm down. They became the "I" in the storm.

Over the years of doing this work, it becomes easier to sense when some degree of Self is present in people and when it's not. To rephrase a joke, you get the impression that "the lights are on and someone is home." A person who is leading with the Self is easy to identify. Others describe such a person as open, confident, accepting — as having presence. They feel immediately at ease in a Self-led person's company, as they sense that it is safe to relax and release their own Selves. Such a person often generates remarks such as, "I like him because I don't have to pretend — I can be myself with him." From the person's eyes, voice, body language, and energy, people can tell they are with someone who is authentic, solid, and unpretentious. They are attracted by the Self-led

person's lack of agenda or need for self-promotion, as well as his or her passion for life and commitment to service. Such a person doesn't need to be forced by moral or legal rules to do the right thing. He or she is naturally compassionate and motivated to improve the human condition in some way because of the awareness that we are all connected.

Whenever I begin describing this Self-led person, it triggers parts of me that feel inadequate. While there are times when I can remember embodying some of those qualities, there are more times when I'm a far cry from that person. I believe that this is one of the mistakes that some organized religions make. They hold up the image of a saintly person as a model of what their followers should be, yet they provide little practical advice on getting there, other than by using willpower or prayer. As a result, people feel chronically inferior and get angry at their emotions and thoughts that aren't so evolved.

Qualities of the Self

Let's continue examining this presence we call the Self. To clarify this discussion, I find it useful to differentiate between what people report while meditating — while being reabsorbed into the ocean — and what people are like when their Self is actively leading their everyday lives. If meditation allows immersion into a seemingly Self-less oceanic state, then the Self is a separate wave of that ocean. It is that oceanic state which seems so difficult to describe. People report feeling as if they have no boundaries, are one with the universe, and lose their identity as a separate being. This is accompanied by a sense of spaciousness in body and mind, and can be an experience of great contentment, often with moments of bliss. They often feel a pulsating energy or warmth running through their bodies and may sense a kind of light in or around them.

People encounter different levels and stages as they deepen their meditative practice, which the different esoteric traditions have explored and charted. Here we are more concerned with what people are like when they bring some of that awareness, spaciousness, and energy to their daily tasks and relationships — again, when they are a wave rather than the ocean. What qualities do they report and display when they live in the world yet hold the memory of who they really are? What are the characteristics of Self-leadership? I don't know the entire answer to that question. After twenty years of helping people toward that Self-leadership, I can describe what my clients exhibit as they have more of their Self present. As I sifted through various adjectives to capture my observations, I repeatedly came up with words that begin with the letter C.

The eight Cs of self-leadership include:

CALMNESS	CONFIDENCE
CURIOSITY	CREATIVITY
CLARITY	COURAGE
COMPASSION	CONNECTEDNESS

For readers unable to join us at the Summer Gathering to work with the author in person, visit the Next Practice Institute Reading Room on the Mobius website, where under Dick Schwartz's name you can access his 20 minute video introducing his IFS model. ■

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