

INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY

SECOND EDITION



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CHAPTER 2

Individuals as Systems

SYSTEMS THINKING

Early in the 20th century a group of organismic biologists recognized that studying the chemical and physical laws of a living organism's components was limiting their understanding of how those components coordinated to function as a whole. Their explorations gave birth to a new way of conceptualizing and studying living organisms, which came to be called "systems thinking." Rather than analyzing an organism's components—which is now called *reductionistic, mechanistic, or atomistic thinking*—systems thinking is wholistic, organismic, or ecological. Rather than asking "What is this made of?", systems thinkers ask, "How do the components of this function as a pattern?" and "What is the larger context in which it operates, and how is it affected by that context?" Rather than studying each part individually, they map relationships among a system's parts and with its context.

From those early explorations in biology, systems thinking produced a radically new conception of life. Today we no longer see the universe as a machine composed of elementary building blocks; we see that the earth itself is a living, self-regulating system (Capra & Luisi, 2014)—a network of relational patterns. Systems thinking entered psychotherapy in the 1970s through the nascent field of family therapy, and I was fortunate to be steeped in it before I encountered the inner world of parts. As a result, rather than focusing on the qualities of each part, I was quickly intrigued by their relational patterns and how those patterns affected the larger system in which they were embedded—the person.

24 *Note the polysemy here

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To elaborate on systems thinking, a *system* can be defined as any entity whose parts relate to one another in a pattern. Thus systems include everything from watches to televisions to transit systems. In addition, by this definition all biological organisms, from bacteria to whales, are systems. Human systems include everything from an individual's personality to a nation, and both operate according to beliefs. For example, a nation has a set of laws that encode cultural beliefs over time. A system is composed of smaller systems (subsystems) but is also part of larger systems, just as a state contains counties and cities but is also part of a nation. Thus, depending on one's point of view, any entity that is being examined will be the system-of-focus. For example, some chapters in this book focus on the family. In these chapters, the family is the system-of-focus; the family members and their relationships are subsystems; and the family's ethnic community or society is a larger system.

By this definition a pile of car parts is not a system, but once those parts are assembled in a certain way, they become a system that is more than the sum of its parts. They become a car. The car parts relate in a patterned way (i.e., they have structure), which creates a system for transportation. Cybernetic systems can regulate themselves by being sensitive to, and changing according to, feedback from the environment. Since a car is dependent on a driver and mechanic for direction and repair and cannot self-correct, it is not a cybernetic system. However, cars increasingly contain cybernetic subsystems such as a thermostat or cruise control, which function to maintain a steady state (homeostasis) while the larger system is in operation. Cybernetic systems contain sensors that read the feedback from the car's environment and trigger automatic adaptations. The car enters a cold front and the heat goes on; on cruise control the accelerator goes down as the car starts up a hill. Because the automatic response in the car's mechanisms has the effect of reducing the deviation from the steady state—that is, bringing the system back within homeostatic range of temperature or speed—this increase in heat or in gas is called *negative feedback*. In complementary fashion, *positive feedback* amplifies deviations. For example, when the accelerator or heat mechanism gets stuck, the speed or heat will be pushed well past prescribed limits.

Since it is usually easy to define what is part of the car and what is not, the car has clear boundaries. But these boundaries are not closed because parts can be replaced or added. A car entering a highway becomes embedded in a larger system, which it influences and is influenced by. If the car were to stop suddenly in heavy traffic, it would powerfully alter the flow of traffic. Likewise the car's speed and ability to maneuver are constrained by the pace of the cars around it. When the highway is less congested, the car is less constrained by its larger system. Thus there are degrees to which systems affect one another—degrees to which they are embedded within or constrained by one another.

All of the concepts outlined above apply to human systems as well, including structure and boundaries as well as positive and negative feedback, homeostasis, and degrees of embeddedness or constraint. Human systems are certainly cybernetic. People organize to maintain a range of homeostasis in any number of areas, from proximity to other people to levels of conflict with other people. In addition, each person contains a multitude of cybernetic subsystems, from those that regulate blood sugar levels to those that regulate the expression of feelings. Yet because people do not merely react to environmental feedback, the cybernetic principles that family therapy borrowed from the study of mechanical and biological systems to try to understand families are not enough. They are necessary but not sufficient to explain human systems. A comprehensive perspective on human systems needs to include more principles that derive from the study of complex living systems.

** This feels quite vast 11/21*

The way in which human systems differ from mechanical systems is key to the IFS model. A basic premise of IFS is that people have an innate drive toward and wisdom about their own health. We not only try to maintain steady states and react to feedback, we also strive toward creativity and intimacy. We come fully equipped to lead harmonious internal and external lives. From this basic premise, it follows that people have chronic problems because their inner resources and wisdom are not being fully accessed. Elements of the systems in which we are embedded or that are embedded within us often constrain our access to our inner resources. IFS therapy is designed to help people find and release these constraints.

Systems thinking helps us examine the various systems surrounding or within a client to find and release constraints. Constraints may exist in a client's system of inner personalities, in the client's relationship with various family members, in the way the family in general is organized, in the way various institutions outside the family affect it (school, work, mental health, etc.), and in the way the client's ethnic community and the larger society affect the family's values and beliefs. All of these human systems are interlocked. They affect and are affected by one another.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN SYSTEMS

Trying to understand and assess all of these levels of human systems would be an overwhelmingly complex task—except that each level operates in similar ways. The following sections discuss four key principles of human systems that are not included in the preceding discussion of cybernetic systems: balance, harmony, leadership, and development. These principles have evolved from work with inner systems and family systems, but they seem to have a good deal of universality.

Balance

Human systems function best when they are balanced. We believe that there are four dimensions for assessing balance within a system: (1) the degree of influence a person or group has on the system's decision making; (2) the degree of access a person or group has within the system; (3) the degree to which the system's boundaries are balanced; and (4) the degree to which subsystems within the system have boundaries that are neither too rigid nor too diffuse. In a balanced system each person is allowed the degree of influence and access to the system's resources and responsibilities that is appropriate to their needs and equal to those of people in similar roles.

Harmony

The concept of harmony applies to the relationships among people in the system. In harmonious systems, an effort is made to find the role each member desires and for which he is best suited. People work cooperatively toward a common vision yet value and support individual differences in style and vision. The harmonious system allows each individual to find and pursue their own vision while also trying to fit that individual's vision into the larger vision of the system as a whole. In such an atmosphere, people do not mind sacrificing some of their personal resources and goals for the greater good, because they feel valued for their personal qualities as well as for their contribution, and they care about one another's well-being. They communicate well because they are sensitive and responsive to information flowing among members of the system. Polarization is the opposite of harmony. In a polarized relationship, each person shifts from a flexible, harmonious position to a rigid, extreme position that is the opposite of, or competitive with, that of the other person. Later we discuss the many ways in which polarizations constrain systems.

Leadership

Balance and harmony in human systems require effective leadership. One or more members of a system must have the ability and respect to do the following: Mediate polarizations and facilitate the flow of information within the system; ensure that all members are protected and cared for, and that they feel valued and encouraged to pursue their individual vision within the limits of the system's needs; allocate resources, responsibilities, and influence fairly; provide a broad perspective and vision for the system as a whole; represent the system in interaction with other systems; and interpret feedback from other systems honestly. Fortunately, though our resources are often constrained by a variety of factors that we discuss later, human systems have the resources necessary for this kind of leadership.

Development

Despite being born with the resources necessary for balanced and harmonious living, human systems need time for those resources to develop. As an analogy, consider a new basketball team. The team members possess plenty of raw talent, but until they learn one another's habits and come to trust and respect their coach, they will not function optimally as a team. Similarly, the wisdom for health exists within a human system, but it takes time to develop the skills and relationships necessary to implement that wisdom. Thus effective leadership and clear boundaries evolve gradually and are affected by the system's environment. If the system-of-focus is embedded in a harmonious, balanced larger system then, it is likely to have the freedom and support it needs to become harmonious and balanced. A human system's ability to use its resources for healthy development will be constrained, however, if it evolves within a polarized, unbalanced larger system, in which case it will take on the extreme beliefs and emotions of the larger system.

VIEWING PARTS IN CONTEXT

The IFS model brings systems thinking into the intrapsychic realm. In psychotherapy it works well to conceptualize and relate to individuals as *psychic systems*. Following are some important benefits of viewing the psyche as a system.

Less Rigidity, More Flexibility

When we feel obliged to deny one truth in favor of another (e.g., *I love you, I'm mad at you*), we sign on to an unceasing project of denial and self-constraint. In contrast, accepting the mind's ability to encompass many perspectives at once means that we can acknowledge the truth of two apparent opposites and move forward creatively (Rosenberg, 2013). As we navigate a complex world there are advantages to having many minds in close communication with each other yet operating with a certain amount of autonomy.

Ease of Access

Most clients become aware of their parts with striking ease. The plural mind makes intuitive sense to them. Barring strong cultural biases, most people can go inside and quickly make contact with their parts. And although they may initially fear all that inner messiness and strife as a sign of defectiveness and failure, this changes as they pay attention and listen

to their parts' heroic, creative, often heart-breaking struggles, sacrifices, and sorrows.

Ecological Maps

When we view the psyche of an individual as a distinct ecology, we find many points of possible entry. If curiosity is the key to these doorways, mapping is a particularly useful guide to what lies within. Just as family therapists map a family's relational organization, individual therapists can map the inner family to clarify alliances, coalitions, and polarities among the client's parts. A map of the inner system not only tells us about the jobs and relationships of parts, it also reminds us that we are approaching an active system full of motivated individuals, which cues up our social instincts and sense of timing. Meanwhile, knowing how systems interact helps us to anticipate the behavior of those who orbit the client—family, friends, and providers—so that we can move within and between system levels with dexterity.

Clear Guidelines for Change

The connection between theory and practice in IFS is very clear: Every intervention (as we illustrate throughout this book) is designed to address the needs of the client's inner family by releasing constraints and making the most of the client's inborn resources. The concept of *normal psychic multiplicity* can illuminate many notable phenomena for those who make the shift to this way of thinking, including highly contradictory behavior like a committed atheist converting to Christian fundamentalism, a teenager falling in or out of love abruptly; an avowed homophobic activist getting arrested while soliciting men in a public bathroom; an adult transforming from one character to the next with little or no awareness of having done so (behavior that denotes the psychiatric diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder); or the way an answer to a formerly insoluble problem comes to mind "out of the blue" during the night. Rather than viewing one person displaying different, often contradictory, interests, beliefs, feelings, values, or knowledge as abstract shifts in feeling and thought, we can view all this as the product of a plural mind.

* This feels like a Copernican
revolution in the human
Sciences, TBH - 11/2/21

CHARACTERIZING PARTS

Other therapeutic approaches have also observed and worked with psychic multiplicity, calling parts variously *subpersonalities*, *subselves*, *internal characters*, *archetypes*, *complexes*, *internal objects*, *ego states*, ...

voices (Jung, 1969; Rowan, 1990; Stone & Stone, 1993; Watkins & Watkins, 1997). Although the mechanistic connotation of the word *part* is not ideal—and its simplicity can be off-putting for some—IFS just sticks with vernacular language that seems comfortable and easy for clients. Most clients reference *parts* when they talk about inner conflict and it tends to work well clinically.

An obscure definition of the word *part* in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971) offers some validation for this choice: A *part* is “a personal quality or attribute, natural or acquired, esp. of an intellectual kind (as a constituent element of one’s mind or character)” (p. 2084). There is also a precedent in the Bible: “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: We are cut off from our parts” (Ezekiel 37:11); in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598/1974, V.ii.60–61) when Benedick asks Beatrice, “For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?” and, contemporaneously with Shakespeare, the comment from Ben Jonson, in 1598, about “A gentleman . . . of very excellent good partes” When clients are uncomfortable with the word *part*—or, more likely, with the concept that we have parts—we can simply follow their word choice: *aspect, thought, subpersonality, character, feeling, place, person*, etc. In this book, however, we talk about *parts*.

Naming and Renaming

Just as we relate better to people when we know their names, we also relate better with parts when they have a label that signifies something about their identity. Therefore, in addition to referring to our inner entities as “parts,” we encourage clients to label their parts. We start by following the client’s lead (the *sad one*, *Yoda*, *Golum*, the *baby*), which is usually related to the part’s role, though sometimes a part will say *Call me Betty*, in which case we call it *Betty*. We do not, however, follow suit when parts insult each other. If one part calls another *stupid* or *lazy*, we just ask the part in question what it prefers to be called. Then we continue to use its preferred label until it shifts to a new role (and often a different appearance), at which point we invite the part to rename itself. Happily, naming and renaming highlights the multidimensionality of parts and the shifting nature of their behavior.

Parts as Inner People

Though we refer to parts with labels, it is a mistake to assume that the part’s label or role (the *sad part*, the *angry part*, the *captain*, the *caretaker*, etc.) captures its essence. In this book, we aim to help readers stay mindful that a part is not just an emotional state or a habitual thought pattern. Rather, parts are discrete, autonomous mental systems, each with their

own idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, abilities, desires, and views of the world. For example, a part who is angry can also feel hurt or scared. If we just see it as the "angry part," we are likely to ignore its other feelings. If, on the other hand, we view it as an angry *person* (often a child or teenager), we are more likely to be interested in its full range of feelings and its potential to shift between feeling states.

From the perspective of IFS every one of us contains an inner tribe of people, each of a different age with different interests, talents, and temperament. Once again, the analogy to a family can help to make this clear. Just as children get forced into extreme roles that they don't want and for which they are ill-suited, parts get forced into extreme roles. In alcoholic families, for example, we often find an overly responsible, caretaking child, a distracting child, an angry rebel, and so forth. Once released, these children change dramatically. Parts are the same. When we view a part as a child or teenager who is shy or angry in a certain context, we are more likely to be curious about who it would be in other circumstances than we are to believe it is defined by this one attribute. As a result, we are more likely to think of helping the part discover its full potential.

THE ROLES OF PARTS: A THREE-GROUP SYSTEM

*This feels like the least helpful taxonomy
11/2/21

In response to danger, the individuals in human systems at all levels take on roles that can be categorized by three groups. One group tends to be highly protective, strategic, and interested in controlling the environment to keep things safe. In IFS we call the members of this group *managers*. A second group contains the most sensitive members of the system. When these parts feel injured or outraged, managers will banish them for their own protection and the good of the whole system. We call them *exiles*. Finally, a third group tries to stifle, anesthetize, or distract from the feelings of exiles, reacting powerfully and automatically, without concern for consequences, to their distress as well as to the overinhibition of managers. In IFS we call the members of this group *firefighters* because they fight the flames of exiled emotion.

Internal systems that are responding to trauma not only divide into these roles, the protective parts (managers and firefighters) form alliances and get into conflicts with each other, and can be very harsh (or smothering) with the exile they are trying to protect or ward off. The sadder, more terrified, ashamed, rageful, or sexually charged an exile is, the more protectors legitimately fear its release and the more extreme they become in their efforts to suppress and constrain. In turn, the more an exile is suppressed, the more it tries to break out. In this way all three groups become victims of an escalating cycle of internecine conflict. Judith Herman (2015) described such cycles:

[A trauma survivor] finds herself caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feelings and arid states of no feeling at all, between irritable, impulsive action and complete inhibition of action. The instability produced by these periodic alternations further exacerbates the traumatized person's sense of unpredictability and helplessness. (p. 47)

Exiles

Children are commonly taught to fear and hide emotional pain or terror because adults react to them in the extreme way they react to their own hurt child parts: with impatience, denial, criticism, revulsion, or distraction. Managerial parts of the child then follow suit, adopting the same attitudes toward vulnerable young tribe members inside, pushing them out of awareness, blocking their access to the Self, and making them ever more vulnerable to trauma.

Exiles are the parts who have been exploited, rejected, or abandoned in external relationships, and then subjected to negative judgments from other parts of the system. If an exile was sexually stimulated during abuse, managers view it as disgusting and dangerous. Because the system associates sexual arousal with the abuse, the very existence of a sexually stimulated part evokes the fear that, deep down, the client is (like) the perpetrator. Managers want these parts in prison and out of mind. In general, managers have no tolerance for fear, shamefulness, and emotional pain. To them, injured parts are defective, weak, threatening, and pitiful.

While exiles are frozen in the past and left behind, they are actually less vulnerable to alarming events in the present, so there is a rationale for the managerial perspective. But exiles, like any oppressed group, grow extreme over time. As they look for opportunities to break out of prison and tell their stories, their desperation and neediness become ever more of a hazard. They may dull and weigh the body, mind, and heart with their chronic unarticulated misery, or they may overwhelm emotionally with flashbacks, nightmares, and sudden fleeting tastes of pain, fear, and shame that cause protectors to panic and overreact.

Like the abandoned children they are, exiles want care and love. As a result, they look for rescue and redemption, usually tapping someone who resembles the person who rejected them in the first place or even returning to the actual abuser (Schwartz, 2008). <Often exiles will pay virtually any price for even small amounts of acceptance, hope, or protection. In return, they are willing to endure (and, indeed, often believe they deserve) more degradation and abuse> When exiles take over, traumatized clients may repeatedly enter and have difficulty exiting abusive relationships. Thus, managers have reason to fear the extremity of exiles as well as firefighters, especially firefighters who are enraged about the trauma and want revenge.

Managers

Having locked up exiles, managers live in fear that they will escape. Various managers adopt different strategies to avoid interactions and situations that might trigger an exile. As we describe some of the most common managerial roles, keep in mind that managers (and firefighters) are forced into these roles. Although they believe they must do what they do, they don't enjoy it. Afraid that the smallest slight or alarm might activate a young, hurt part, managers often try to keep the person in control of all relationships and situations. There are many kinds of managers. A manager may be highly intellectual and effective at problem solving, but also obsessed with pushing feelings away. Clients often call that kind of manager the *thinker*, the *controller*, or some similar moniker. Relatedly, some managers strive for career success or wealth in order to put the person in a position of power and distract her from difficult feelings. This striving, motivating manager may be bitingly critical, a taskmaster who is never satisfied with outcomes or the person's performance. The denier is a manager who distorts perceptions to keep the person from seeing and responding to risky feedback. The protector who tries to avoid interpersonal risk is often particularly concerned about situations that could arouse anger, sexuality, or fear. It may be a passive pessimist who erodes the person's self-confidence and sabotages her performance, keeping her apathetic and withdrawn so that she will not try to get close to anyone or have the courage to pursue goals. Conversely the pessimist may look for and accentuate any flaws in an object of desire in order to undermine attraction and avoid closeness. In people who have been severely abused, this part can become an inner terrorist, taking on qualities of perpetrators and scaring exiles into hiding. ✓

Since our culture is patriarchal, many managers appear in gender stereotypical ways, and it would be interesting to study their appearances (male, female, or neither) according to the client's gender identity. Women are often socialized to rely on a manager who is perfectionistic about appearance and behavior. This manager believes she must be perfect and please everyone or she will be abandoned and hurt. Many women are also socialized to rely heavily on a caretaking manager. Extreme caretaking parts push women to sacrifice their own needs continually for others, and will criticize a woman as selfish if she asserts herself. Men, on the other hand, are often socialized to rely on an entitled or competitive manager who encourages them to get whatever they want, no matter who is wronged by their actions. Other common managerial roles include the hyperaroused worrier (or sentry) who feels in constant jeopardy and is on continuous alert for danger. This manager will flash worst-case scenarios in front of a person when she contemplates risk. And then there is the dependent manager, who tells the person he is a victim and keeps him appearing helpless, injured, and passive to ensure that other people will take care of him. ✓ Managers have many behavioral options. ✓

Our point is that the primary purpose of all managers is to keep exiles out of mind, both for their protection and to protect the system from their feelings and thoughts. When they spill over the inner walls, they threaten the person's ability to function. Managers preempt exiled feelings by keeping the person in control and out of unknown or unpredictable situations; they also please those on whom the person depends. In order to maintain this kind of internal and external control, managers can give the person the outward appearance and substance of success, providing the drive and focus to gain impressive academic, career, or monetary achievements. Success not only brings control over relationships and choices, but also serves to distract from (or compensate for) inner shaming, fear, sadness, and despair. On the other hand, if a pessimistic, dependent, or worry manager dominates the inner system the client's life may be characterized by a series of half-hearted attempts and failures that provide protection from responsibility and disappointment. Other common managerial tools run the gamut from obsessions, compulsions, reclusiveness, passivity, numbing, emotional detachment, and the sense of unreality all the way to phobias, panic attacks, somatic complaints, depressive episodes, hypervigilance, and nightmares. (Yes, nightmares may be the tactic of a manager rather than an exile breaking through.)

The rigidity and severity of managerial strategies will match the degree to which a manager thinks (correctly or not) that the person is in danger of being reinjured. Like parentified children in families, managers are not equipped to lead, but they feel that they have no choice. Their burden of responsibility contributes to their rigidity and extremity. Not only do they have to deal with a world they find dangerous, they also have to keep a finger in the dike to contain exiles, and they are desperate to protect the whole system from threats. In this way, managers, too, are neglected, suffering, and scared. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller (1981) offers a poignant description of the parentified child's predicament, which is identical to the predicament of many manager parts in internal families. The patient Miller describes was the eldest daughter of a professional woman:

I was the jewel in my mother's crown. She often said: "Maja can be relied on, she will cope." And I did cope. I brought up the smaller children for her so that she could get on with her professional career. She became more famous, but I never saw her happy. How often I longed for her in the evenings. The little ones cried and I comforted them but I myself never cried. Who would have wanted a crying child? I could only win my mother's love if I was competent, understanding, and controlled, if I never questioned her actions nor showed her how much I missed her. (p. 68)

Like Miller's client, when the striving, perfectionistic, approval-seeking managers inside a client speak, they often describe hiding their loneliness

and misery, and sacrificing themselves to keep the person's life afloat. Managers, like exiles, tend to be children who really want to be nurtured and healed. Unlike exiles, however, they believe they have to hide their vulnerabilities and sacrifice themselves for the system. The more competent they become, the more the system relies on them, and the more they feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities and power. Eventually they come to believe that they alone are responsible for the person's success and safety, which makes them ever more wary of relinquishing leadership to the Self.

Firefighters

Despite all the efforts of managers, the world has a way of breaking through their defenses and activating exiles. In addition, when we are tired or sick, our managerial guard is inevitably down. Whatever sets off exiled emotions, their activation is an emergency that summons another set of protectors. We call this group *firefighters* because they react to surfacing exiles as if an alarm has gone off, doing whatever they believe is necessary to distract from or suppress the exile's emotional firestorm with little (or no) regard for consequences to the client's body or relationships. We all have a hierarchy of firefighter activities, so if the first and mildest doesn't work, we go on to the next. The first firefighter tactic for clients with bulimia, for example, tends to involve food, but if food isn't effective, the client's firefighter team will try other measures, such as drugs, alcohol, sex, self-cutting, or stealing. At the top of the hierarchy for many clients is the ultimate comfort of suicide. Traditional therapy views firefighter behaviors as pathological, but in IFS we recognize the protective intent of firefighters and negotiate with them to let the client's Self help with the underlying problem of exiled feelings.

Firefighter techniques include numbing activities like self-mutilation, binge eating, drug or alcohol abuse, dissociation, and sexual risk taking. A firefighter will usually try to take control of the person so thoroughly that he feels nothing but an urgent compulsion to engage in some dissociative or self-soothing activity. Firefighters can cause a person to be self-absorbed, demanding (narcissistic), and insatiably driven to grab material things. Their activities can also include the inflating satisfaction of rage, the exhilaration and indulgence of stealing, or the comfort of suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Although firefighters have the same basic goal as managers—to keep exiles out of mind—their strategies tend to be quite different from (and are often in conflict with) those of managers. Managers strive to keep the person in control at all times and to please everyone. They are often highly rational, planful, and able to anticipate and preempt activating situations. Firefighters, on the other hand, react to an exile surfacing. They take the person out of control and displease everyone (unless the behavior

* This economy feels too rigid - rather than "managers" etc, I feel as though there are managerial energies that various parts tap into 11/2/21

is socially sanctioned, like workaholism or dieting). They tend to be reactive, impulsive, and unthinking. In contradistinction to managers, who try to shut out exiles, firefighters tend to try to find something to calm and appease.

In turn, the impulsivity and extremity of firefighter behaviors inspire a barrage of criticism from managers internally and from people around the client. Although managers may rely on firefighters and even call on them, they attack the firefighter after the fact for having put the person at risk and caused her to be indulgent, weak-willed, or insensitive to others. The typical dynamic between managers and firefighters is a vicious cycle that repeats and escalates, with managerial shaming activating exiles, which energizes firefighters, which alarms managers, and so on. As a result, managers and firefighters are strange, uncomfortable bedfellows who are often in conflict.

Even people who are not very symptomatic and have never been severely hurt are organized internally according to these three groups: managers, exiles, and firefighters. This is because we are all socialized to exile various parts of ourselves, and once exiling begins, the containing and distracting roles of managers and firefighters become necessary. If we were to write a diagnostic manual based on IFS, we would start by categorizing mental health symptoms according to which group of parts is in the driver's seat internally. This way of understanding the balancing act of human survival is a far less pathologizing, in our opinion, than any iteration of psychiatry's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Managers, for example, often dominate the systems of people who are chronically depressed, exiles dominate in those who experience bouts of intense sadness or fear, and firefighters dominate people who have problems with addiction.

The length of treatment in IFS is indexed to the system's level of trust for the Self and how polarized parts are rather than to the severity of the client's symptoms. Generally the longer and more sadistic a person's traumatic experience, the more polarized their system will have become and the less the parts will trust Self-leadership.

WORTHLESSNESS AND THE NEED FOR REDEMPTION

When children are uncertain or pessimistic about their value, they strive to understand what will please their parents and they try to become that. The normal need for approval grows into a craving, and they take the extreme messages they are given about their worth to heart. If a child is told, verbally or nonverbally, that he has little value, his parts organize around that premise. His parts feel desperate for redemption in the eyes of the person who is withholding love, which can include any person on whom the

child depends. Thereafter, carrying the burden of worthlessness, the child's parts believe they cannot be loved, a belief they will maintain regardless of contradictory feedback, as if the devaluing person holds title to their self-esteem. Burdened young parts who seek redemption from worthlessness exert a powerful influence over intimate relationships, either returning to the person who stole their self-esteem, or finding someone who resembles that person. Often this results in a long string of abusive, unsatisfying relationships. When clients send the burden of worthlessness away, it is as if a curse has been lifted. ✓

BURDENED MANAGERS

Children instinctively know that the penalties for parental disinterest can be dire, including abandonment, severe harm, and death. During this period of high dependence, inconsistent messages regarding one's worth are bound to be particularly consequential. As a result, children are, as noted above, very sensitive to messages from parents regarding their value. When parental signals are consistently reassuring, this hypersensitivity is calmed. But most families have some notable imbalances and polarizations, some inherited burdens, and some classes of parts who are not welcome. We need not suffer capital-T Trauma in order to pick up burdens. When a vital part of a child is rejected and the child feels unlovable, protectors who are desperate to win approval often take on some of the worst qualities of the person who is stealing the child's self-esteem and safety. Believing the child must be perfect to be accepted, parts who become harsh inner critics and moralizers sacrifice their inner relationships and their childhood to the cause of safety. b

LEGACY BURDENS

As we have described, parts get forced into extreme roles when they are hurt and frozen in time, when they protect other parts, and when they become polarized with each other. But there is an additional reason for extremity that bears discussion. Parts often take on the extreme ideas, behaviors, or feelings of significant others. These transferred burdens are just as organizing and constraining as personal burdens. Because they are highly dependent on their parents and eager to be included in the family culture, children are particularly susceptible to burdens that are passed down from one generation to the next, including the burden of having to protect another family member, having to be a great success, or believing that the world is too dangerous to engage in developmental exploration and risk taking.

Approval-craving parts can mimic virtually any extreme part of a parent or other authority figure. We often see the same burden being passed through many generations in a family, as we discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4. This idea of a burden transfer process is similar to what analytic therapies call *introjection*, but with one important conceptual difference. In IFS we think in terms of inheriting burdens that are neither the essence of the ancestor from whom they derive nor the essence of any part internally. If we were to view the part itself as a mental introject we would miss its valuable qualities and its ability to transform. The introject is the burden, not the part. Our goal is to release parts from the constraining influence of their burdens and enable them to pursue their preferred, constructive roles. [Rather than pushing them to change, we are helping them to let go.]

THE SELF

As soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to live.

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Everyone has a seat of consciousness at their core, which we call the *Self*. From birth this Self has all the necessary qualities of good leadership, including compassion, perspective, curiosity, acceptance, and confidence. It does not have to develop through stages. As a result, the Self makes the best inner leader and will engender balance and harmony inside if parts allow it to lead. At the same time, our parts are organized to protect the Self and remove it from danger in the face of trauma at all costs. Protective parts will report having pushed the Self out the body for protective reasons. Once they do this, the inner system is on its own with the extreme feelings or thoughts we call burdens.

Nevertheless, the Self remains whole. The therapist does not supply or strengthen the Self. Although the Self can be an observer, it is neither passive nor just a witness. Instead, once parts differentiate from the Self, it becomes an active, compassionate, collaborative leader. And strange though it may sound, as parts gain trust and open space for the Self, clients often say they feel physically as well as mentally present, lively, and centered (for more on IFS practice and the body, see Chapter 5).

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Self-Leadership

Systems at all levels—families, companies, and nations—function best when leadership is clearly designated, respected, fair, and capable. Internal families are no different. The Self can care for and depolarize warring parts in an equitable and compassionate way, lead discussions with

parts regarding major decisions on the direction of the person's life and deal with the external world. Parts do not disappear under Self-leadership, but their extreme roles do, as does the rigid three-group arrangement of managers, firefighters, and exiles. In a Self-led system the youngest parts may just want to be spontaneous and play. Meanwhile, others will want to advise, remind, problem-solve, lend their talents, and generally help. Each will have a different, valuable role and set of abilities. Generally parts will cooperate rather than compete or argue with each other, but when conflicts do arise, the Self is there to mediate. Once the system is operating harmoniously most of the time, each individual member (as in any harmonious system) will be less noticeable, and we become less acutely aware of our parts. In short, when we are in a Self-led state we have a sense of continuity and integration. We feel more unified—because we are.

B.W.

—This is not to suggest that we never want to have a part take temporary leadership. Certain parts have abilities that make them the best leaders for certain situations. At other times it is fun or thrilling when a part takes over. The point is that parts can take over (with permission from the Self) for reasons that are not protective once Self-leadership is restored. And they can withdraw from leadership when the time is right for the Self to take the lead again.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS IN IFS

The following sections summarize the key assumptions of the IFS model.

Multiplicity

The natural state of the human mind is to contain an indeterminate number of subpersonalities that we call *parts*; most clients identify and work with between 10 and 30 parts through the course of therapy. Because of the way parts present to us, we conceptualize them as inner people of different ages, temperaments, talents, and desires who form an internal family or tribe. This tribe reflects the organization of the systems around it, and organizes itself in the same way as other human systems.

It is axiomatic in IFS that multiplicity is the inherent nature of the mind. This is not a product of external influences being introjected, nor is it the consequence of a once-unitary personality being fragmented by trauma. In addition, multiplicity is advantageous. All parts are precious and want to be constructive, though some are forced into extreme, destructive roles by external influences as well as by the self-perpetuating nature of inner polarizations and imbalances. Therefore, parts will gratefully find or return to preferred, valuable roles once they find that doing so is safe.

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Polarization

Many past or current events can affect the leadership, balance, and harmony of a person's inner system. The most common of such influences include family-of-origin attitudes or interactions and traumatic experiences. When parts become frozen in the past, take on burdens, and assume leadership, their internal relations shift from harmony to conflict. This is because one extreme generates another, as does the uneven distribution of resources, influence, and responsibilities in a system. The polarized parts continually confirm their negative assumptions about each other, with each part becoming more extreme to counter or defeat the other. Thus, in the absence of effective leadership, polarizations escalate. Polarizations also generate coalitions, with one lead part forming alliances that unite in opposition to or in competition with another lead part and its allies.

The Three-Group Ecology

Highly polarized inner systems are rigid, delicate ecologies that react severely to disruptions. Trying to change any one part without considering the network in which it is embedded often activates a phenomenon many therapies call *resistance*, but which IFS considers a natural, often necessary ecological reaction. An ecological map that illustrates inner relationships can help us understand and appreciate the validity of protective behaviors.

Balance, Harmony, and Leadership

Even highly polarized inner systems can heal themselves if the therapist is able to create a safe, caring environment and point the person in certain directions. Our systems already have plentiful resources, which only need to be released and reorganized. In addition, all parts of the system want to relate harmoniously and, given the opportunity, will eagerly leave extreme roles. If, however, a person lives in an activating or dangerous environment, inside or out, protective parts will be reluctant to leave their roles, and the process of harmonizing the inner system will be more difficult and prolonged. In addition, change in such an environment often evokes protective counterreactions in other people. For this reason, we advise finding and releasing constraints in the client's external as well as internal world throughout therapy, as we describe in the chapters on family and couple therapy.

Interconnected Ecologies

Systems thinkers are intrigued with the parallels among living systems. As Gregory Bateson (1979, p. 8) famously asked, "What pattern connects the

crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all four of them to me? And me to you?" We have been fascinated with how the organization of internal systems of parts is paralleled in other human systems and in this book we cover those parallels in families (see Chapter 14) and countries (see Chapter 18).

From tiny to vast, living systems are interconnected ecologies. Therefore, changing one aspect of a system without understanding its larger network of relationships can cause severe repercussions. For example, in the 1950s a tribe in Borneo had an outbreak of malaria. The World Health Organization (WHO) sprayed DDT, which killed the disease-bearing mosquitoes and things improved. But the DDT poisoned the insects eaten by geckoes, which in turn were eaten by cats. When the cats died, the rat population exploded, which led to other plagues. To resolve the problem, the WHO ultimately parachuted 14,000 live cats into Borneo (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999).

The Internal and External Parallels of Our Interconnected Ecologies

Internal systems are equally delicate ecologies. Trying to change or heal one part without understanding its network of inner relationships often results in resistance at best and severe backlash at worst. For example, a young man named Tyrone had become depressed due to the relentless efforts of his inner critic. He found a therapist who tried to get him to focus on his strengths and positive social connections. In response, his critic became brutal. Unable to concentrate at work, Tyrone took a leave of absence. Tyrone's therapist, who was moving away, happened to refer him to an IFS therapist who guided Tyrone to ask the critic what it was afraid would happen if it let him feel good about himself. The critic said that confidence would cause Tyrone to take social risks and be rejected. When asked why that would be bad, the critic said it knew he couldn't tolerate another rejection and was sure he would kill himself.

In subsequent sessions, they talked to the suicidal part who was, indeed, committed to not letting him feel the pain of his exile—a part who had been betrayed and rejected many times earlier in his life—ever again. Thus, Tyrone learned that his critic was keeping him alive by keeping him depressed and had good reason to counter the efforts of the first therapist. As a result, Tyrone and his IFS therapist focused on Tyrone accessing his Self and getting permission from the suicidal part to heal the exile. Once the exile was healed, they returned to the critic, who was now happy to stop brutalizing Tyrone.

In the IFS model we view the client's inner and outer worlds as nesting, interconnected systems that operate according to the same principles and are responsive to the same techniques. In addition, systems that interface

"WE ARE A HABITAT"

come to reflect one another, so changes at one level are likely to produce some kind of change at other levels. Because system levels echo each other, a therapist should not work with a client's internal system without thoroughly considering and addressing the person's external context. In addition, we can start at one system level in therapy (say, the family), but shift fluidly back and forth with another system level (individuals in the family) as needed. * Again, how? I can't fix, say, a client's abusive employer.

As Tyrone's experience illustrates, we are effective when we become ecologically sensitive. To be ecologically sensitive we drop the interpretive stance of the expert and, in a spirit of humble curiosity, collaborate with the client's parts to map their inner relationships. Once we have a preliminary map, we are guided by it in a spirit of respect and the willingness to keep learning. When we misstep and the client's system reacts severely, our job is to remain curious not to pathologize that reaction. When we are Self-led, our missteps become another opportunity to locate mines in the client's inner minefield.

CONCLUSION

We live in symbiosis with a population of inner people who exist in multiple relational subsystems, much as we have symbiotic relationships with the millions of microbes in the gut, which are in relationship with each other.

We are a habitat. The citizens (parts) of this habitat can be hurt and can get into conflict with each other, engaging in mutual injury, self-attack, and defensive (or offensive) maneuvers. The good news is that we also have a Self that is ready to provide stewardship to our inner system. Once we appreciate the disparate characters and perspectives of all our parts, we can stop expending energy disapproving of ourselves (or anyone else) for being inconsistent, having mixed feelings, or hosting inner conflict. Though our inner communities can be divided by conflict, they are also full of gifts. When our parts separate from the seat of consciousness (the Self) we discover what spiritual traditions have known and taught for thousands of years: that we have the resources we need to support and protect this vulnerable inner population with its awesome potential. Self-acceptance is the ongoing process of welcoming all parts and banishing none. When we pursue the ideal of self-acceptance we also gain the freedom to live by curiosity, exploration, and inclusion.