Our Multiple Selves

Applying systems thinking to the inner family.

by Richard Schwartz

Richard Schwartz, Ph.D. is the Coordinator of Training and Research, Family Systems Program, Institute for Juvenile Research, 907 South Wolcott, Chicago, IL 60612. His article reprinted here was first published in the *The Family Therapy Networker*, March-April edition, 1987 and is used with permission. A book length treatment of his work projected to be titled *Internal Family Systems* is forthcoming from the Guilford Press. Schwart'z work is noteworthy to Hakomi Therapists for many reasons. One is the clinical application it gives to the unity principle in honoring many levels of person's life system. Another is the clarity it brings to the distinction between the witnessing part of consciousness which can passively observe the organization of experience, and the Self which can actively bring loving presence and wisdom to bear in intervening with the multiple parts of the psychological self.

Which one of the many people who I am, the many inner voices inside of me, will dominate? Who, or how, will I be? Which part of me decides?

Douglas Hofstadter

By the winter of 1983, I had been working with Sally, a 23-year-old bulimic, and her family for over a year as part of a family therapy outcome study of patients with bulimia. My colleagues and I had good success with the families in the project. Sally and her family had done everything we asked. She had given up her role of family protector and her parents had adapted well to this change. She had moved out of her parents'' home into her own apartment and was performing well in a good job. For the first time she was making close friends and, it seemed to us, the whole family system had moved to a new level.

Through all of this change, Sally's bulimic symptoms had waxed and waned. But now that she was "detriangulated" and functioning independently, out of the grip of family crises and loyalties, I expected her to let go of this nasty binge/purge habit. After all it was no longer "needed" by her or her family. To my dismay, Sally seemed unaware of her cure. Her bulimia persisted, albeit with less frequency and intensity. She was still bingeing and purging enough to keep her from feeling totally healthy and to keep me, with my bottom-line, outcome-study mentality, from feeling successful. Sally religiously followed a variety of direct and paradoxical tasks I suggested, but they worked only temporarily at best. I realized I was confronting the limitations of my structural/strategic model and, out of frustration, I decided to violate the unwritten rule that forbids family therapists from considering the intrapsychic foundations of a problem.

I began discussing with Sally what her internal experience was just before she went on a binge and vomit spree. She described a confusing cacophony of voices that seemed to carry on conversations inside her head. When I pressed her to differentiate the voices, she found, to her own and my surprise, that with relative ease she could identify several voices that regularly participated in heated conversations with each other. One voice was highly critical of everything about her, especially her appearance. Another defended her against this criticism and blamed her parents for her problems. Another voice made her feel sad, hopeless, and helpless; and still another kept directing her to binge. I found her inner life fascinating, both because her report was so similar to the reports of other bulimics I had treated, and because, as I listened to her, I became aware of somewhat similar voices within me.

As I had no preconceived conceptual framework for these explorations with Sally, I spent many sessions simply asking (and, later, my other bulimic patients) about the participants in these inner conversations—what were they like, what did they want, how did they get along with each other? The more I explored these questions, the more their descriptions felt familiar to me as a family therapist, as if I were interviewing one family member about the rest of her family. It seemed that each voice had a distinct character, complete with idiosyncratic desires, styles of communication, and temperaments, and that these voices interacted like conflicting parties in a family struggle: alternately protecting and distracting, allying and battling with each other.

Through all this, I felt as if I were breaking one of the rules of the family therapy profession in becoming so focused on a client's report of inner experience. At the same time, it seemed only logical to try applying the concepts of systems thinking to the internal processes that direct thought and feeling. I had the feeling of extending and fine-tuning a systems model that has, for the most part, approached the workings of the mind as if they were unknowably locked away inside a black box. The question I was trying to answer for myself was: What are the "components" within that box and how do they interact? In a family system there are flesh-and-blood human beings whose behavior can be tracked, whose reactions can be described. But what are the "parts" of our internal mental system?

THE MODULAR BRAIN

Some answers to these questions are beginning to emerge from a new wave of brain research and work on artificial intelligence that has tremendous implications for the understanding of human psychology. One of the best discussions of this work is in *The Social Brain* by Michael Gazzaniga. Gazzaniga is the scientist whose early research on the different functions of left and right brain in the '50s and '60s altered forever our ideas about how thinking occurs. His more recent research has led him to conclude that the original distinction between left and right hemisphere function was simplistic. The brain actually consists of an undetermined number of independently functioning units or "modules" with specialized functions. As we go through our daily lives, different modules are accessed within us, typically without these shifts being part of our conscious awareness or control. "With regular frequency we find ourselves engaged in activities that seem to come out of nowhere," says Gazzaniga. "Everything from eating atypical foods to forming uncommon relationships occurs and at one level these activities appear to start up from scratch."

According to Gazzaniga, our emotional lives are as shaped by the relationship among modules as our cognitive functioning. Once we accept the idea that we each consist of a group of "modular selves," clusters of related beliefs, feelings, and expectations about the world, many of the curiosities of inner experience become easier to explain. For example, have you ever become extremely sad or needy and begun behaving toward your partner in a way that you were sure was going to make things worse, but still felt unable to stop? Or felt as if something or someone had taken control of you? Or found yourself embroiled in an intense inner debate that you couldn't turn off no matter what? Gazzaniga believes that these kinds of experiences are dramatic reminders of how our "modular selves" direct our everyday experience.

Robert Ornstein, another well-known psychoneurologist, also recently addressed the implications of the brain's modularity in his *Multimind: A New Way of Looking at Human Behavior*. He writes that "Instead of a single intellectual entity... the mind is diverse and complex. It contains a changeable conglomeration of different kinds of small minds... and these different entities are temporarily employed—wheeled into consciousness— and then... returned to their place after use."

Outside the world of brain research, a remarkably similar view of the mind is emerging from the fields of computer science and artificial intelligence. In the von Neumann model, the original conception that computer scientists used to represent the mind, information was stored in one area and processed in another. Only one cluster of information could be processed at a time. That is, information was passed from one area to another in a serial manner, like an assembly line in a factory.

More recently researchers have developed parallel computers in which many different processors work side by side, communicating with, but remaining largely independent of, one another. Instead of an orderly serial or sequential operation, they jointly solve a problem by individually addressing separate parts of it. These computers are able to "think" in a way that approximates human intelligence much more closely than the earlier, serial computers.

From this work has come a view of the mind as a society or "democracy, with 'factions' of processors competing for cognitive control." As Douglas Hofstadter, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Godel, Escher, and Bach*, and a computer scientist heavily involved in the field of artificial intelligence, puts it, "A brain with its billions of neurons, resembles a community made up of smaller [communities], and so on. The highest level communities just below the level of the whole are what I like to call 'subselves' or 'inner voices'...competing facets that try to commandeer the whole, something like hijackers, although often benevolent hijackers." Speaking in a similar

vein, Michael Gazzaniga has observed, "A confederation of mental systems resides within us... we have a social brain."

These researchers at the cutting edge of psychoneurology, computer science, and artificial intelligence, are converging on a new, multi-self view of people. In Ornstein's words, "we are not a single person. We are many." From this multi-self perspective, we no longer have to fear "fragmenting"— we are already fragmented. In a sense we are all multiple personalities. The condition we call multiple personality disorder only represents an extremely disengaged and polarized version of the ordinary operation of our internal system. This is a very difficult proposition for most people to fully accept, but once it is accepted, one's view of one's self and of human nature is profoundly altered.

PARTS

Sally and my other clients, as well as people in general, often refer to the subselves they encounter in examining their internal experiences as "parts": "Part of me is afraid, but another part says 'go for it'." I have adopted the decidedly non-technical term "parts" to describe the various components of internal experience because clients are comfortable with it, and I will use it often in this paper as a shorthand for this sub-personality or sub-self phenomena. By "part," I mean not just a temporary emotional state or habitual thought pattern. Instead, it is a discrete and autonomous mental system that has an idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, and set of abilities, intentions, or functions.

The power that human systems— especially families— exert upon us comes from their ability to evoke particular sub-identities within us. Many of us have had the experience of returning home for a family visit after a long absence and finding— often to our great alarm— that being with our family again shifts our whole conception of ourselves, and we're back in an old personality.

It is not only our immediate feelings that can change in this way, but our entire outlook on the world as well. In fact, each part/sub-self within us represents a distinctive filter or mind-act that focuses our view of things. For example, what people often call their angry or assertive part is characterized by a black/white, right/wrong epistemology. When accessed ina stressful situation, the message from this sub-self is, "I am right and they are wrong." On the other hand, a fearful part is more apt to say, "I am wrong and they are right." In addition, parts/sub-selves can influence one's sensory perceptions in ways that confirm a distorted world view. For example, an anorexic whose experience is dominated by the part of her that is fixated on appearing slim can distort her visual input such that she actually sees herself as much fatter than she is.

This perspective enables us to understand why our reframes (when they work) can have such impact on clients. The power of reframes comes not only from the cognitive shift they require, but from their ability to call forth internally consistent sub-personalities in a client. When a different part is evoked in a parent who shifts from seeing his child as "mentally disturbed" to disobedient, a whole different set of perceptions, emotions, and reaction patterns can emerge.

How might these "parts" or modular selves operate within us? To illustrate, let me return to the case of Sally. Sally's bulimia was embedded in a larger family pattern and that pattern was the focus of the first phase of intervention in the case. Eventually, however, it became clear to me that there was an additional process within Sally that maintained her symptom, even in the face of changes in her family.

The interviews with Sally about her "voices" revealed four main participants in the sequences that maintained her bulimia. Each was called forth by certain issues in Sally's life and urged her to respond to the world in a particular, highly stereotyped way. For example, one voice directed Sally's attention to how well or how much she was achieving, while another was concerned with the approval of other people. In the face of any comment from others that might be interpreted as a slight, both of these parts became activated. The result would be a torrent of self-criticism, especially focused on her appearance and work habits.

This attack, in turn, activated a part Sally called "Poor Me," who insisted that no one cared about her and that she was helpless to change her life. Sally's mood was then dominated by the powerful emotions of this sad part and by its message of helplessness and despair. She became unbearably sad, needy, and, at times, suicidal. This state called forth still another participant in the internal interaction, the unfeeling "eating machine," which took over and cut off these feelings by immersing her in the immediate gratification of the binge, followed by the

penitence of the purge. After the binge and purge, Sally's critical voices started in on her again for eating so gluttonously and the sequence would repeat.

THE MYTH OF THE MONOLITHIC SELF

Family therapists have long tread lightly around the issue of how the inner life of the individual influences the process of change. By and large, we have assumed that the most effective therapeutic leverage is found within the interpersonal context of people's lives. We have shown little interest in theories of personality, seeing them as over-emphasizing the rigidity of an individual's essential nature and irrelevant to the practical business of change.

Yet, despite our distrust of traditional personality theories, we are faced everyday with the problem of how to describe the individuals who come to us. Having rejected the formal category system of psychiatric diagnosis and the theoretical vocabulary of psychodynamic theory, we have yet to develop a language to replace them. Typically, that puts us in the curious position of having a highly technical language for describing broad family patterns (e.g., "enmeshment," triangulation," etc.) and only the loosest hodgepodge of terms for describing the individuals who enact these patterns.

Consider, for example, the following: "Jonny is a needy, dependent child who is trying to protect his parent's marriage. His mother is enmeshed with him, and afraid to let him grow up. Father is overly rational and afraid to deal with his wife's feelings." What is striking about this description is not only how commonly it is invoked in case conferences around the country, but how imbued it is with the assumption that the individuals in this family can be characterized by reference to one aspect of themselves. These statements contain the implicit assumption that each family member is a unitary self that is thinking, or feeling, or wanting only one thing.

Without a fuller appreciation of the inner reality of each family member, a therapist, no matter how skillful, will miss the range of potential that characterizes the living, breathing realities of each individual. Instead, each client will become simply a needy child, a fearful woman, or a distant father. Ignored will be the different unrealized selves that compromise the potential of each of them.

Consider what possibilities open up when the description of the family situation is rooted more in the internal experience of each member. "There is a part of Johnny that, when extreme, worries about being deserted and tells him to protect his parent's marriage. There are other parts of him that feel strong or competent but get overridden when the scared part is activated. There is a part of his mother that can take over and make her feel helpless and fearful, but there are other parts of her too. The father relies on a part of himself that is afraid of emotions and makes him very rational, but it is only one of his many parts."

Assuming that each member of this family has the capacity to access a range of possible selves expands the therapist's vision enormously. This is, in fact, a vision many effective clinicians like Salvador Minuchin, Virginia Satir, and Milton Erickson share. Rather than focusing on the deficits or apparent pathology a client presents, these clinicians are known for their ability to help clients tap into their hidden resources and make dramatic changes in their lives. So far, however, family therapists lack a clear conception of the inner organization of the individual that would enable them to understand how such dramatic changes can take place. By shifting form a monolithic view of the individual— a view of him or her as a kind of black box— to a conception of the individual as comprised of multiple selves, a profound shift in one's understanding takes place in which the framework of systems theory can be linked to the world inside the individual.

Just as one cannot not communicate, one cannot not have a set of assumptions about the nature of individuals. Through trying to avoid conceptualizations of internal process, many family therapists fall victim to what might be called the myth of the monolithic self— the ubiquitous notion that we are more coherently organized than we really are. This view of people as monolithic beings can create problems at all levels of a system. If a husband says "I hate you" to his wife in the midst of an argument, she is likely to think, even after his post-fight apologies, that down deep he really does hate her since "he wouldn't have said it if he didn't mean it." In other words, people tend to mistake the parts they activate in each other for the whole person and, consequently, become locked into rigid ways of relating. Similarly, if a sad, hopeless part of the wife is activated by her husband's anger and overwhelms her, she may conclude that the part is all she really is. She will have a very different self-concept once she is able to see that particular sub-

self as one that temporarily took control. Many people feel immediate relief just to learn that a part they believed to be their whole self is just one of many within them.

OTHER INTRAPSYCHIC MODELS

The multi-self perspective is evident to one degree or another in many existing models of psychotherapy. I believe that one of Freud's greatest contributions was opening the door for exploration of our many selves in his description of the struggles among the id, ego, and superego. Various analytic theories since Freud's time developed his theories beyond the over-simplified, tri-partite model. Perhaps the most important of these is object relations theory, which asserts that our internal experience is shaped by introjected "objects," holographic representations of significant people in our lives.

The analytic explorers of the inner landscape are, I believe, limited by their method of investigation. None, as far as I know, accepts the autonomous functioning of its parts/sub-selves within the individual. As a result, none interviews these sub-selves directly. My own work pivots on the use of experiential methods, like the empty-chair technique, which move people beyond just reporting their subjective experience into accessing their sub-selves. Just as a therapist gets a very different, usually less sinister, impression of a client's family when the family members actually come to a session, an individual's "inner family" looks very different when its various members get a chance to show up in an interview.

Much of the view of inner life presented by object relations theorists does not go far enough. If these theorists had more direct access to the inner objects, I believe they would find that, while a part of a person may resemble a family member, there is much more to the part than the idea of introjection allows for. Further, the concept of introjection leads object relations theorists to assume that people who have problems are defective, in that, due to poor parenting, they lack a "good internalized object." Therapy, in this view, is necessarily a long-term proposition during which the therapist is internalized as the good parental object that the client lacks.

Models that use experiential techniques to build their theory and therapy consistently present a less pessimistic and intractable depiction of clients' inner experience than more traditional frameworks. Gestalt therapy has been especially significant in providing powerful clinical techniques and developing a more benign view of inner struggles. Unfortunately, however, it has failed to develop a way of conceiving of the operation of the internal system as a whole. Lacking a theory based on pattern and relationship, Gestalt therapy has failed to have the impact on family therapy that it might otherwise have had.

Both Psychosynthesis, developed by Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1965, 1973, see also Ferrucci, 1982) and Voice Dialogue, developed by Hal Stone and Sidra Winkelman (1985), who are influenced by Jungian ideas, see people as made up of many parts that they call sub-personalities or voices, respectively. I became acquainted with these models after I began working individually with some of my family therapy clients and was excited to see how similar their depiction of individual personality is to what I had found. Nevertheless, like Gestalt therapists, they also use an energy-based language that restricts their appreciation of the network of relationships within the internal system.

For the most part, the multi-self perspective has not been a prominent theme in family therapy. Nevertheless, a number of influential figures have pointed in this direction, Virginia Satir alludes to parts of people and, at times, works with parts in a similar way to Gestalt therapists. Grinder and Bandler (1982), whose work was based in part on studying Satir, have written about techniques to change the relationship between two parts. The multi-self perspective is implicit in statements from Minuchin like: "A child interacting with her overinvolved mother operates with helplessness, to elicit nurturance. But with her older brother, she operates shrewdly and competitively, to get what she wants... Different contexts call forth different facets. As a result, people are always functioning with a portion of their possibilities. There are many possibilities, only some of which are elicited or constrained by the contextual structure" (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981).

Sandra Watanabe (1986, and see her case study in this issue) is, as far as I know, the only family therapist who has systematically explored the implications of seeing individuals as comprised of multiple selves. She has developed an interesting model for working with what she calls our "internal cast of characters." Her model represents the way that an experimental family therapist would conceive of and work with the multi-self system. The model I describe later in

this paper represents my encounter, as a structural/strategic family therapist, with this internal system.

THE SELF

At this point, as Ornstein states, "A natural question arises: Where in this is the 'me' who is responsible for our actions?...The view that there are any number of semi-independent small minds, each designed for a purpose...also brings up the question of who runs the show."

To address that question let's return to Sally. Directed in my work with Sally by my background as a structural/strategic family therapist, I was particularly interested in the way her internal system was organized in terms of leadership. I became increasingly aware that, in addition to the voices that interacted in her internal conversations, there was another internal state of consciousness that interacted with the parts, but in a different way. When I asked, for example "Sally, how do you like the sad part of you?" it was this other state that would answer as Sally, and it seemed to be able to achieve a more balanced perspective than the parts/sub-selves could. When accessed in a client or in myself, this state had a qualitatively different feel to it.

This aspect of inner experience, which I will refer to as the "Self," is similar to what some therapeutic models have called the "observing ego" or others have called "witness consciousness." After developing my own thinking about the Self, I was intrigued to learn that both Psychosynthesis and Voice Dialogue contain similar concepts. It is the Self which has the ability to achieve a "meta" perspective on one's own inner predicament and compassionately view the situation of the parts/sub-selves.

Gregory Bateson called this witnessing potential Learning III, a perspective from which one begins to see oneself as a field within which various sub-identities interact. From this viewpoint one no longer rigidly identifies with any particular participant of one's internal experience, but with the interacting nature of the system itself.

As various Eastern spiritual disciplines have taught, recognizing the power of the Self involves a profound redefinition of the personal identity. As Bateson put it, "If I stop at the level of Learning II, 'I' am the aggregate of those characteristics which I call my 'character.' 'I' am my habits of acting in context and shaping and perceiving the contexts in which I act." At the level he calls Learning III, the individual recognizes that the inner world furnishes a range of choices for identification and that one's states of mind hinge not on any particular identification, but the relationship among these sub-selves.

However, it seems to me that, unlike the observing ego or witness state, the Self is not just a passive observer, and, instead, can and should be an active leader of the internal system, disciplining and taking care of the parts. For example, when I asked Sally how she liked her sad part, "Poor Me," she said she hated it for being so weak. But I found that her Self, at that point, was close to another part, the striving, achievement part she called "Pusher" that was influencing the Self to see "Poor Me" that way. Once distanced from "The Pusher," Sally could see "Poor Me" as an isolated, lonely child that needed her nurturance. As the Self differentiated from "The Pusher," she could then comfort "Poor Me" rather than chastise it, when it was upset.

The Self has a non-judgemental, meta-epistemology that provides a systemic or contextual appreciation of the internal system as well as external systems. This perspective is required for effective leadership of any system and when the Self is clearly differentiated from each part, it will see the inner and outer world with that wisdom, and will be able to lead. When it is enmeshed or overly identified with any part, its meta-perspective will be obscured, and the system will polarize due to a lack of impartial and clear-sighted leadership.

Everyone's Self always has the ability to lead, but sometimes is not in position to do so. That is, people who have problems do not have an underdeveloped or defective Self; instead, their Self is often enmeshed with certain parts or unaware of its abilities and, consequently, is not using its inherent capacity to be an effective leader. This assumption of the inherent competence of the Self has implications for the rapidity with which an internal system can change, and is consistent with the assumptions of competence that allow structural, strategic, or systemic family therapists to help families reorganize rapidly.

THE INTERNAL ORCHESTRA

The concept of the Self is an elusive one. One way to think about how Self and parts operate is to

imagine them as a kind of orchestra, in which the individual musicians are analogous to the parts and the conductor is the Self. A good conductor has a sense of the value of each instrument and the ability of every musician, and is so familiar with music theory that he or she can sense precisely the best point in a symphony to draw out one section and mute another. Indeed, it is often as important for a musician to be able to silence his or her instrument at the right time as it is to play the melody skillfully. Each musician, while wanting to spotlight his or her own talent or have the piece played in a way that emphasizes his or her section, has enough respect for the conductor's judgement that he or she remains in the role of following the conductor yet playing as well as possible. This kind of a a system is (literally) harmonious.

If, however, the conductor favors the strings and always emphasizes them over the brass, or if the conductor cannot keep the meta perspective of how the symphony as a whole should sound, or if he or she abdicates and stops conducting all together, the symphony will become cacophonous. Further, if one of the musicians, lacking the abilities or perspective of a real conductor, tries to take over the conducting, the result would be more incoherence and confusion.

Thus, I am suggesting that we all have within us a capable conductor. One implication of this assumption is that the goal of therapy shifts from the gradual development of the Self to the elevation and differentiation of the Self, much as a family therapist helps a parent to elevate him or herself to a position of unbiased and non-extreme leadership in a family. Thus, the length and difficulty of treatment will often depend on where the Self begins in the hierarchy of the internal system rather than how many stages it is behind in its development.

I find that when the Self, with its meta perspective, is leading effectively and the parts have calmed down, people experience what has been called being "centered"—they are better able to feel calm, secure, and "in the present." And, rather than being overly concerned with the past or future, they have a heightened sense of awareness. They have access to the talents and input of all the parts but do not allow them to take over without permission. They many not be able to or want to constantly maintain this sense of equanimity (indeed, it is sometimes necessary or fun to let some parts take over) but they know how to and are secure that their Self can reassume leadership when necessary.

I also find that when a person's Self has risen above and helped to resolve the melodramatic conflicts of the parts, the person has a better appreciation of the interconnectedness of all life. He or she achieves the kind of systemic or ecological wisdom that teachers of family therapy struggle to instill in their students. This explains why some students seem to already possess this wisdom and some never achieve it; in some the Self has been leading and in others it has not.

It is important to remember that if a person's Self is leading, this meta perspective will be evident in what they say. Because our society encourages us to rely on and become highly identified with achievement or the need for approval, the corresponding parts within us can be mistaken for the Self. If such a mistake is made and one of these parts is encouraged to continue to dominate, the internal system will become more extreme and polarized. This mistake is made, for example, by models that encourage "rationality" to rule over "emotionality."

THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEM

Assuming that it may be useful to conceive of people as composed of a multitude of sub-selves, each of which has a different function and intention, and a Self that can lead their internal system, what is the best way to understand how the whole system operates? Lewis Thomas (1979) has offered this description of his inner world:

> Actually it would embarrass me to be told that more than a single self is a kind of disease. I have had, in my time, more than I could possibly count or keep track of... To be truthful there have been a few times when they were all there at once... clamoring for attention, whole committees of them, a House Committee, a Budget Committee, a Grievance Committee, even a Committee on Membership, although I don't know how any of them ever got in. No chairman, ever, certainly not me. At most I'm a sort of administrative assistant. There's never an agenda. At the end I bring in refreshments... We never get anything settled. In recent years I've sensed an increase in their impatience with me, whoever they think I am, and with the fix they're in. They don't come right out and say so, but what they are

beginning to want more than anything else is a chairman.

Most people seem to want more than a mere decision-making chairperson to be in charge. In my own work, I find it most useful to conceive of one's inner life as an internal family, in a loose, metaphorical sense. In this family, the Self is like the central executive of a loyal clan containing a wide range of members, from needy children to meddling older relatives. Indeed, if asked, most clients can conjure up an image of each part or sub-self (see Watanabe, p. 54) and the visages of the personified parts range from very young to old and haggard. One can assemble a picture of the whole network by asking each part to describe its relationship with the Self and other parts, or by using an open-chair technique to watch the parts and the Self interact. In fact, a therapist working with this internal family may actually use familiar family therapy techniques like circular questioning (Selvini et al., 1978) or enactments (Minuchin, 1974).

The internal Family Systems model I am developing applies many concepts and techniques of structural/strategic family therapy to the inner domain of the internal family. This model suggests that for each of us, the Self, as the organizing focus of identity and awareness, is in coalition with certain factions within the inner family and allied against others. The inner family can be vividly brought to life by looking for alliances among various parts/sub-selves and their "cross-generational" coalitions as well as by discovering which internal family members will protectively distract the Self from threatening issues.

If asked to, most people can initially identify somewhere between eight and 15 distinct parts/sub-selves. While each person has a unique set of internal relationships among these sub-identities and their Self, and each part has idiosyncratic ways of expressing itself, I have found a remarkable degree of similarity from one client to another in parts/sub-selves.

Through accessing the various participants in the internal family, one can find out what the main goals and intentions of a particular part may be. For example, if you are a therapist who has gone through college or graduate school, you probably have a strongly-developed inner voice or thought pattern that pushes you to do your work rather than watch TV. When you're not being "productive," this voice becomes activated in an effort to get your attention or motivate you with inner messages like, "Why are you so lazy, you'll never amount to anything," etc. Your relationship with this part—i.e., your Self's reactions to it—will determine whether it becomes increasingly critical or calms down and simply encourages and advises you. If, when this part becomes extreme, you allow it to take control of your internal family, you are likely to look and think like a "Type A" personality.

In counterbalance to a part/sub-self that directs you to strive and achieve, you may also hear a voice or voices telling you to relax and "stop and smell the roses," or to go out on the town. Or, if the part of you organized around achievement is particularly harsh, you may often feel intensely sad about your shortcomings and start to think that you are hopelessly incompetent or needy. Each of those different internal reactions to that achievement "part" represents the other parts/sub-selves that might be activated by it, i.e., parts focused on relaxation, enjoyment, sadness, or fear. What is crucial to inner well-being is the relationship among the parts. The more extreme one part becomes in its demands, the more extreme those opposed to its positions will become and the more polarization within the internal family.

"MORE-OF-THE-SAME" RELATIONSHIPS

Much as in an "external" family, extreme relationships are maintained by the frame that each internal family member has regarding each other member. For example, consider "Ben," a man who came from a family that prohibited the overt expression of anger. Consequently he disliked and feared the parts of him that told him to stand up for himself and he desperately tried to avoid or eliminate it. As a result of being cut off from access to the Self, his assertive part escalated, becoming unreasonably angry. When Ben listened to the disengaged assertive part, it sounded destructively extreme. In turn, the assertive part increasingly viewed the Self as weak and in need of its protection, and looked for opportunities to "take over." The more it took over, the more there were destructive consequences, and the more Ben tried to shut it out, and so on.

Such self-confirming frames or parts, maintained by "more-of-the-same" circular sequences (Watzlawick et al., 1974), are characteristic of many internal family relationships, and often are derived from the values and attitudes that were

prevalent in our external families. People's experiences in their families of origin—the attitudes they encounter about achievement, expressing feelings, what matters in life—shape the network of their internal relationships and determine which parts are accessed and which are not. Thus, certain inner resources are never tapped. As Minuchin et al. (1978) state, "As a result of this feedback [from a child's family] certain ways of being fall into disuse and become less available to the child. Other types of input and response, encouraged by the family, become familiar and easily available. These familiar ways tend to become identified as the self." When any one part/sub-self takes over the direction of the system, it is likely to become increasingly rigid, and the person will conceive of only a narrow range of ways of viewing and responding to the world.

ISSUES OF PRACTICE

These concepts about self and parts are more than just another way of describing the inner experience of the individual. I believe that they point the way towards an elaboration of family therapy that extends both our theoretical framework and the range of our interventions. In my first stage of treatment with Sally, my focus was helping her to be less active in protecting or pleasing her parents. At the same time I also assisted her parents in becoming less critical of Sally. I found that these kinds of family therapy interventions, when effective, also recognize a client's internal family. As Sally saw that her parents could resolve their differences and enjoy each other without her help and as she became more direct with them about the effect of their criticism, the members of her internal family that were so concerned with these issues became less extreme. This set the stage for further individual work with her.

Because it was clear that "Poor Me" was so powerful and obviously linked to Sally's binges, I began trying to get her to develop a more nurturing relationship with that part of herself. After several stormy sessions in which she struggled unsuccessfully with this sad, despairing aspect of herself, and became increasingly disheartened in the process, I came to the realization that as long as Sally's critical voices had free reign to work her over, "Poor Me" would be constantly activated. So we focused on the critical voice, and Sally, from the stance of leader within her internal family, helped these critical parts to see that it was in no one's best interests for them to continue attacking her. Instead, she encouraged them to support her efforts to achieve or to accept her appearance. In the process, the nature of her internal relationships changed. Instead of identifying with "Poor Me" when it was extreme, she learned to recognize it as a part that needed taking care of. At the same time, Sally recognized that while her "eating machine" may have been well-intended, bingeing just perpetuated the very sadness that it wanted to avoid. As she became the leader within her own inner world, Sally recognized her ability to run her life and take care of the variety of the sub-selves within her. During this six-month process Sally stopped binge/purging and ate normally, without obsessing about her appearance.

PARALLELS BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FAMILIES

The parallels between one's internal and external family processes remain the most fascinating, potentially valuable, and underdeveloped aspects of this model. I will share some observations in this area with the recognition that these hypotheses are preliminary and that much of this territory is uncharted.

It is clear that internal relationships are highly related to external family relationships. For example, if your father used criticism to try to motivate you to work harder in school or around the house, there is a good chance that some part within you will use similar strategies to motivate you. If you have such a critical, achievement-oriented sub-self it is also likely that it will be critical not only of you but of others as well, of your children for example. If this critical self takes over when you relate to your kids, it is likely that an internalized critical self will assume the task of motivating them as well and, eventually, they will criticize their kids, and so on. Thus, internal family members and systems can become replicated from generation to generation.

In addition to this transgenerational modeling of the strategy of a particular part/sub-self, the emotions and attitudes that are valued or disdained in your family-of-origin will be reflected in the degree of prominence the parts of you that embody those emotions and attitudes achieve in your internal family. In this way cultural values are translated into family values which are then translated into individual family members' internal family structure which, recursively, reinforce external family and cultural values.

Another parallel lies in the style of leadership of internal and external families. Suppose that when you were sad as a child, your father became impatient with you, or your mother became so upset that your own sadness began to frighten you. In your internal family you are likely to respond to a sad part of you in the same way that your parents did. You will try to get it to stop bothering you or you will get sad with it. Of course, neither of those responses will help that part of you become less sad. To effectively nurture that part, your Self will have to distance from the parts that are overreacting.

Thus, these hypothesized parallels between internal and external families become more interesting because one can observe that changes on one level can create parallel changes on another level. With this in mind, a therapist can work either internally or externally or both, and know that he or she is affecting all levels. The choice of levels will depend more on an assessment of the two (or more) level ecology and where change is most possible, than on the therapist's preferred modality. Indeed, I by no means believe that every client's internal family needs to be directly addressed and restructured. Much of the work I do looks like ordinary family therapy. I do, however, always have this multi-self perspective in my mind as I work and use it to help direct my interventions.

EMPOWERING ASSUMPTIONS

The picture painted above of an inner life replete with escalating, self-perpetuating dysfunctional relationships would be no less pessimistic and pathology-oriented than traditional intrapsychic models if not for several fundamental assumptions about internal family systems that empower clients to help themselves change rather than make them feel defective. A basic conviction is that, in the tradition of Milton Erickson, people already have all the resources they need to solve their problems. They do not need to introject new, more functional "objects," or to eliminate or repress bad ones, or to wait years for an ego to develop and mature. Instead, people come fully equipped; what does need to change is the network of relationships among these internal family members.

The key to change within this internal family is elevating the Self, that aspect in each of us capable of conducting our internal orchestra and helping us to see how we can take charge within our inner world. Since all systems—families, organizations, nations—function best when leadership is clearly designated, respected, fair, and capable, the internal family will become less polarized and extreme as the Self takes on a more elevated and central role.

As the Self is differentiated from extreme states of the parts, it will increasingly achieve the meta perspective which is necessary for balanced leadership and, consequently, will be able to recognize the predicament and positive intent of each participant in the internal family. As the Self takes care of each sub-self, in the sense of comforting it when it is upset, negotiating with it to do some things it wants, as well as firmly but fairly disciplining it when it gets extreme, these components of inner life will develop the kind of harmonious relationships that characterize healthy functioning.

Members of the internal family, like those in more three dimensional families, say or feel or do extreme things when they are in an extreme context, but when that context changes they can, and want, to renegotiate their role such that they are helping rather than obstructing the larger system. Thus, in this model, there are no essentially bad, hurtful, or selfish parts, just as there are no bad children in families, just children who get extreme when neglected, sided against, over-indulged, or depended upon beyond their capabilities.

I have worked with people who had voices that told them to kill someone or to hurt themselves or said or did other terrible things and yet, when the system changed and the part became less extreme, I have always found there to be an underlying positive intent to their messages. In the words of Tom Waits, "...there ain't no devil, there's just God when He is drunk."

A SYSTEMIC APPRECIATION

When I first began focusing on the partial inner selves that comprise people, I was surprised by the between-session consequences of working out negotiations within the internal family. Sometimes clients did not return to see me. More commonly, they were more distant or "resistant" the next session. Often they reported feeling upset and disoriented after such sessions. I soon realized the dangers of changing one part of the system without an appreciation of the network of internal relationships in which that part was embedded.

Once I began to think of my client's psyche as a system that was not unlike the families I treated, it made perfect sense that, just as in families or other delicate ecologies, change has its phases. If certain pivotal inner relationships are addressed too early, other parts of the system will be activated to sabotage those changes. With a more systemic appreciation of this inner ecology, I can now anticipate and deal with the consequences of internal as well as external change. This appreciation of the inner system makes family therapy not only easier and quicker, but also less upsetting to the client.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have sketched out the conceptual side of an approach that bridges the gap between family and individual therapy. The unguided use of the techniques related to this approach can be dangerous. For example, if an extreme part/sub-self is accessed before the Self is adequately elevated, the system will become more polarized. I do not present this Internal Family System conceptual framework as a finished picture of absolute reality. It has not been tested through outcome studies and there is not enough space here to adequately provide the guidelines and warnings needed for the safe application of the technique, so to say much more about these methods at this point would be to "sell them before their time" (Schwartz and Perrotta, 1986). It is a model in development that, no doubt, has blind spots and limitations as does any representation of such complex and murky territory. Indeed, rather than fully describing a model, the purpose of this paper is to provoke those family therapists who have written off the examination of internal process as useless, distracting, or necessarily non-systemic. Most of us enter this field with some curiosity about who we are are and what makes us tick. It is good to have permission to pursue that curiosity at all levels of the system.

There is a part of me that, as is its wont, fears that this model will provoke a fire storm of criticism from all directions. The brief therapists will say that it is unnecessarily complex and the psychodynamic types will call it too simplistic. The constructivists will chastise me for confusing my map with the territory, and the hard-core system family therapists will revoke my membership card because I opened the black box. Everyone else will claim that it is no different than the model they already subscribe to. Of course, there is another, rebellious part of me that hopes all this comes to pass. As my Self, however, I believe that it is a valuable and different way to understand human interaction and hope that you were able to read it as your Self.

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