

More Than the Sum of Our Parts: Using Internal Family Systems as a Verbatim Processing Tool

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From my high perch on the conference table onto which I had climbed, I looked down imperiously at the five people in the room and crossed my arms in a pose that I hoped would radiate harsh judgment. I had been cast as the Judgmental, Overbearing, Oldest Sibling Part belonging to the student who was presenting her verbatim, and I really wanted to get fully into character. I noticed that one person was walking around nervously wringing her hands and saying, “I think I did it wrong! Oh, no!” (Anxious Student Part), and another was attempting to do what looked like an entertaining song-and-dance routine (The Distracting Joker). One was sitting in a chair, leaning in with an intense and aggressively compassionate expression (The Beatific Chaplain Part)—but her hands were over her ears to block out the noise, so I imagined she could not fully hear what the imaginary patient in the empty chair might have been saying. In the corner, grinning from ear to ear, eyes darting back and forth, was the student whose parts we were acting out. At one point, nodding in recognition, she laughed out loud. After a few minutes, I called us all back together, climbed down off the table, and began the second part of the exercise.

Parts verbatims, as I call them, are a core element of the CPE units I lead. One of the personality theories with which I work is internal family systems (IFS), and this educational tool that I developed brings the theory to life with students. Before I delve more deeply into how parts verbatims work, it may be helpful to do a quick review of IFS for those who are not familiar with the theory.

Internal family systems theory is a contemporary psychological theory developed over the last several decades by Richard Schwartz, originally as a break-off from Bowenian family systems theory. According to IFS, there is a core Self in each of us who embodies the qualities of curiosity, calm, confidence, compassion, creativity, courage,

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connectedness, and clarity.¹ When a person acts out of Self, they are functioning at their best, with a strong sense of pastoral authority and pastoral identity. This Self holds and ideally leads our internal system of “parts,” which can be understood as “sub-personalities.” Our parts form a complex system of interactions, relating to each other in styles that form *internal* systems (or families). These internal families mirror external systems in which we each live. In other words, we are as relational on the inside as we are on the outside. Just as a healthy community (or a healthy CPE group) requires people who take on many different roles in order to function well, a healthy inner system *requires* all our sub-personalities, or parts, to thrive. Each of our “parts” has its own distinct story, perspective, role, ideas, resources, and coping strategies that contribute to our healthy functioning.² A basic assumption of the IFS model is that *all* of our parts, no matter what challenging behaviors they may exhibit, contain valuable resources and strengths that we need to survive.

According to IFS, our parts come in three basic groups:

Exiles: These are extremely vulnerable parts, usually young, that have experienced woundedness or trauma. They carry emotions, memories, and physical sensations of past harm. These parts are called exiles because they are often isolated from the rest of the internal system for their own protection as well as the system’s protection. Exiles, for very good reason, are in no shape to lead a system. The protectors (managers and firefighters) have very good reasons to keep the exiles contained. If they were to take over in the wounded state they are in, a person’s whole system might collapse.

Managers: Managers are the first class of protector parts. They *preemptively* help us manage our lives, hoping to protect us from whatever might have happened to our exile parts and to ensure that the wounding does not happen again. A manager might be an inner critic, chastising you to look or perform perfectly (like the part I was playing in the above exercise.) A manager might be highly organized and controlled. Managers will steer people towards roles in groups that are “safe” for them—the observer, the leader, the supporter, the historian, the indispensable helper, etc. The more hurt there is to contain, the harder they work.

Firefighters: Despite all the managers’ hard work, the outside world can sometimes break through anyway and touch the fragile parts (exiles). This group of protector parts is there to react in the moment to douse the flames of pain that shoot out when something comes too close to an exile’s hurt. For example, a firefighter might lash out in rage or go into overfunctioning mode in an attempt to “fix” a patient whose pain mirrors the student’s own. Firefighter parts might shut down a student down in group when another student challenges them with

something a bit too close. These firefighter parts can be somaticizing when pushed too close to a deep well of emotion.

As in family systems theory, IFS holds that working with individual parts of the internal system to hear their story fully will help them to shift, helping the whole system to reorganize into a more positive stance. IFS is extraordinary in its focus on competence rather than pathology and in this way partners very well with the adult education professional development model of CPE. IFS allows the student to feel competent rather than judged or diagnosed when growing edges emerge. There is a critical difference, however, in how IFS is used in a therapeutic setting and how it is used educationally—in this case, as part of CPE. In IFS therapy, a central goal is to eventually unburden the exile parts of the person's pain, helping them to transform into more functional parts of the internal family system. *Educationally*, I can work with students to help them notice and recognize their parts, and I can guide students in listening to their parts as they work to reorganize their internal systems into more harmony and balance. Ultimately, however, my educational frame is about articulation and recognition and not direct unburdening. Healing does, of course, happen in this process, though it is a byproduct of a student's increased awareness of self.

Earlier on in my use of this theory, I would offer a didactic on IFS near the beginning of the CPE unit so that students could immediately use the language and assumptions of IFS. Students would usually warm quickly to the concept of individual parts, but it was harder for them to conceptualize the idea of an internal family system. After some experimentation in the timing of this didactic, I have found that after midunits is a better time in the arc of the unit to do this. By midunits, students have had some time to get used to the concepts of "external" group dynamics, have had experience reflecting on their own roles inside their peer group, and have begun to appreciate that the group as a system is more than the sum of its parts.

With certain students who are already using language like "There is a part of me that . . .," I *will* introduce IFS briefly in individual supervision if learning about IFS seems that it would help the student untangle a challenge. One example of this comes from my work with "Allison,"³ a second-career student in her forties who was frustrated that issues she thought she had "worked through years ago" kept emerging in her clinical work. I listened to Allison explain—or more accurately, berate herself—that she had "again, *again!*" overrun her schedule and gotten herself in a time bind with her family. In this case, a staff member had asked Allison to accompany a patient down to an activity as she was on the way out at the end of the day, when Allison was already late to pick up her daughter. There were many people around to potentially accompany the patient, and it was in no way an urgent situation. When I asked Allison what she thought led to her choice to say yes to the request, she replied, "There's a part of me that was worried that she [the staff member] would be angry with me and wouldn't like me if I said no." She

went on to use some shame language about being “the kind of person” who always gets stuck in these things. It seemed that one of Allison’s protector parts took charge of her internal family system and reacted to appease and assuage a potentially angry person by agreeing to something that stressed the rest of Allison’s system. The clarity and calm that Allison could usually access when being Self-led was nowhere to be seen. I took the opportunity to introduce Alison to IFS, drawing a diagram of self and parts, and asked her to identify what parts she thought were activated in response to the staff member’s request. She was able to identify an Appeasing Part and began to see that the leadership and actions of this protector part did *not* mean that she, Allison, was a “person with no boundaries.” I invited her to notice when this protector part emerged in future situations, and we agreed to track what triggered her Appeasing Part to jump in and take action so that it wouldn’t always take over.

In most groups, after midunits I assign students the book *Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life* by Tom Holmes and Lauri Holmes⁴ and offer a didactic introducing the history, language, and assumptions of IFS. Since the release of the 2015 Pixar film *Inside Out*, which I find that many if not most of my students have seen, the idea of parts has been easy to explain. There are some discrepancies between the way the protagonist’s “system” works in the film and the concept of Self and parts in IFS, so, although I use a clip from the film in the didactic,⁵ I also make sure to differentiate the actual elements of the theory from the animated story.⁶ For the IFS didactic, I use a verbatim that a student wrote years ago on a visit with a nonverbal patient, in order to have the students play with the model and begin to tease out the parts they see in someone else. The current group analyzes the verbatim writer’s rich inner thoughts, which were articulated in the parentheses of the verbatim, to notice where they sense a part is active.

In the weeks after the IFS didactic, each student presents a verbatim that we process using IFS. For the first time we do a parts verbatim, I reserve about two hours total so that there is time to explain unfamiliar aspects of the experience. For subsequent parts verbatims, one and a half hours is usually enough to complete the full experience. Parts verbatims have a six-step process: presentation, articulation, acting/observation, storytelling, response and resourcing, and identifications.

PRESENTATION

For the first step, the student writes up and presents the verbatim to the group in a “traditional” way, using our standard verbatim template, and we read and discuss it in group. In the write-up, the student is asked to identify the parts that were activated for them in that patient visit. This section combined with the articulation section usually takes approximately 60 minutes.

ARTICULATION

During the verbatim processing, the presenter reviews the parts that they were able to identify in themselves (ACPE 2020 Outcome L1.2), and the peer group and I wonder with the presenter about parts that we thought *we* noticed during the visit. The presenter has final say on what their own actual parts are since they are the authorities on their own systems. A list of the most active or impactful parts from that visit is created, and the presenter is asked to assign each peer and me to “play” one of their parts in a restaging of the visit. In the case with which we began, the student identified that the parts who were most active in her visit were her Anxious Student Part, activated when the patient greeted her with “Oh, good, you’re religious, you can tell me what I should do about my situation.” Her Distracting Joker and Beatific Chaplain Part both showed up when the patient’s situation turned out to be trouble with one of her personal care aides, and her Judgmental, Overbearing, Oldest Sibling Part came in when she felt in over her head.

The presenting student gives some direction to each of us as to physical placement in the room, affect, and personality, and each peer becomes a character actor as the presenting student watches from the side. This is how I, cast as the Judgmental, Overbearing, Oldest Sibling, came to be standing on a table glaring down at the others in the room.

ACTING/OBSERVATION

Originally, I asked students to do the parts verbatim exercise in silence; the presenter would arrange each of us-as-parts into a tableau. Even silently, it was powerful to see the physical representation of the parts. In that era, “Julie,” a presenting student, positioned the peer who was assigned to her Scared Child part to curl up on the floor right next to the person playing her Fake It Till You Make It part in the scene. Though she had not realized it before seeing, as she put it, “her entire psyche taken outside her head and put on a stage,” Julie’s Scared Child was directly in the center of the tableau, and none of the other parts could act without tripping over her or tending to her. Observing this physically represented, Julie saw clearly for the first time that she needed to work on her fear of her own authority in order to be most effective as a chaplain (ACPE 2020 Outcome L1.5, L2.6).

In 2015, one CPE group, which happened to have several members who enjoyed improv as a hobby, felt that it would add to the exercise if they were not still and silent in a tableau but instead could move around the room and speak as the parts they were assigned. This change electrified the experience by actually giving voice to the parts, and I have used this version of parts verbatims since that summer. Either version works well. The acting/observation period continues for approximately three to five minutes, long enough for the peers-as-parts to explore their roles in concert with each other.

STORYTELLING

In the next phase of a parts verbatim, each person is given an opportunity to voice what they experienced while acting as one of the parts in the reenactment. This is done in first person, as the part. For example, in Julie's reenactment, the student playing the Fake It Till You Make It part was able to articulate, "I felt a lot of pressure to be constantly 'on' and smiling" and noted how much she longed for support. Both she and the Scared Child observed that the Inner Critic, who was looming above them, glaring, felt intimidating to them-as-parts. The Inner Critic spoke of the pressure *she* felt to hold everything together and how alone she felt because she was unable to trust that the Fake It Till You Make It and the Scared Child would hold up their responsibilities. This section usually takes five to seven minutes.

RESPONSE AND RESOURCING

After hearing the stories of the parts, the presenter is invited to respond to their own experience of watching their parts acted out. Often, revelations come from just how close to home and accurately the part is being played, but just as often, the presenter learns something about their parts by how different a peer's interpretation was from what the part feels like internally. In their reflection on their observations, the presenter has an opportunity to risk both offering and receiving feedback from others by reflecting on what they learned from the performance (ACPE 2020 Outcomes L1.3 and L1.4, L2.3).

In this response section, the presenter uses their recognitions, surprises, and new understandings to experiment with how they might bring their system more into balance by supporting or resourcing parts whose impulses towards protection are having the opposite effect. I give the students an opportunity to physically rearrange their parts in ways that might improve the visit or to reflect verbally. This helps them to formulate goals for further work with the patient on whom they presented as well as for improving on future visits in which these parts might arise. One of the central goals of IFS is to differentiate and elevate the Self so that it can be an effective leader in the internal system, and this exercise helps students recognize whether there are parts who are inadvertently blocking the Self from doing so. Depending on the energy in the room after the acting and storytelling sections, this might last anywhere from five to fifteen minutes.

IDENTIFICATIONS

Finally, peers are invited to reclaim their own identities and are asked to reflect on what they drew on in their own personalities and experiences to be able to fully inhabit the part assigned to them. This is a quick go-around, not an in-depth exploration. Asking students to connect their own experience with that of a peer can bring them closer to their peers, can normalize and contextualize feelings of aloneness or shame about their own parts, and ensures that the exercise is a learning experience for each member of the group, not only the presenter.

As in with any educational exercise, parts verbatims are appreciated by some students and prove more of a challenge for others. Those who are more kinesthetic, visual, and interpersonal learners tend to rate this processing exercise as a highlight of their CPE experience.⁷ Those who are more intrapersonal learners, or internal processors, might find that this way of processing sits on their growing edge, and they might need to stretch themselves for it. From the time of the initial IFS didactic through the end of the parts verbatim exercise, I try to frame that all responses to this theory and to this exercise are welcome. Like the parts of our internal family system, all responses have something to teach us about ourselves. The thirteenth-century poet Jelaluddin Rumi expresses this in his well-known poem *The Guest House* in a way that is as applicable to our twenty-first-century CPE groups as it was in his day.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice:
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*⁸

NOTES

¹ Richard C. Schwartz, *Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model* (Oak Park, IL: Trailheads Publications, 2001), 34.

² Richard Schwartz, "Moving from Acceptance toward Transformation with Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS)," *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session* 69, no. 8 (2013): 808.

³ All students have been de-identified and names have been changed for confidentiality reasons

⁴ Tom Holmes with Lauri Holmes, *Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life*, 4th ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Winged Heart Publications, 2007).

⁵ In this clip, Sadness comforts Bing Bong, Riley's imaginary friend, over his losses by listening to him while Joy attempts to jolly him out of his grief. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT6FdhKriB8>.

⁶ For those who would like to delve deeper into the differences between Inside Out and IFS, here is a link to a blog where Richard (Dick) Schwartz, the originator of IFS, discusses his observations about the film: <https://namastenutrition.net/yoga-and-nutrition-blog/2015/07/02/inside-out/>.

⁷ Those who are more visual might appreciate a diagram of an internal family system, accessed here: <http://lifeasawave.wordpress.com/tag/internal-family-systems/>

⁸ Jelaluddin Rumi, "The Guest House," in Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 109.