An Application of Internal Family Systems Theory to Academia: Toward the Self-led University

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Abstract

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model developed by Richard Schwartz (1995) provides a framework for categorizing, organizing, understanding, and changing intra-psychic systems and offers extensions to family, cultural and societal levels. This paper applies IFS theory, a unique combination of systems thinking and the multiplicity of the mind, to the university system. Based on this model, parts of the university system and subsystems are identified and a view of the Self-led university is given. A potential extension of IFS therapy to this context is invited for future consideration.

In a world climate of fear, instability, and uncertainty, exacerbated by the depletion of vital natural resources and worsening economic conditions, the university finds itself in a critically delicate balance between the changing faces of past and future. It is situated between a deeply rich reverence to tradition with a long, committed history of adherence to disciplinary boundaries and the necessity to respond to innovations and rapid change in various technological, economic, social, cultural, and political arenas. This paper introduces Richard Schwartz' Internal Family Systems (IFS) model (Schwartz, 1995) to the university system as a framework from which to interpret the structure and function of the university and potentially to form a new understanding of how it constructs and adapts to its evolving and increasingly diverse realities.

Following a brief description of the IFS model, IFS theory is applied to the university system using examples of university-related "parts" in the roles of managers, firefighters, and exiles, the three main groups into which human systems in IFS theory, and extension, university systems, can be organized. This is followed by a glimpse of what the Self-led university might look like when exiled parts have been liberated from their burdens of inferiority, insignificance, poor self-esteem, and hopelessness, thereby allowing the university to exhibit qualities of Self leadership. This is followed by a glimpse of what the Self-led university might look like when exiled parts have been liberated from their burdens of inferiority, insignificance, poor self-esteem, and hopelessness, creativity, wisdom, and self-sustainability. In conclusion, an invitation is given to the reader to explore ways in which IFS therapy could be applied to the university system, toward discovering new ways to stimulate its imagination and release its Self-sustaining energy.

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THE INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS MODEL

As described by its founder, Richard Schwartz, the IFS model (Schwartz, 1995) is a collection of principles grounded in a "basic orientation to people" that has its origin and development in the language of parts that Schwartz recognized was a natural way for his clients to communicate their life experiences. The IFS model is a Self-leadership model that combines systems thinking and the theory of the multiplicity of the mind into a theory that focuses on parts that play different roles in systemic patterns of interactions.

Parts can be referred to as "inner people" that represent discrete and autonomous mental systems with their own worldview, their own strengths and weaknesses with respect to abilities, motivation, and expression, as well as their own idiosyncrasies.

The IFS model categorizes parts according to their basic system-specific functions into "managers", "exiles", and "firefighters." Manager parts are protective, strategic, and primarily interested in controlling the safety of the environment, whereas exiles are the most sensitive members of the system that when injured or outraged, will be "imprisoned" by the managers for their own protection as well as for the safety of the system as a whole.

Firefighters are very similar to managers, except that while managers are proactive and preemptive, firefighters tend to flare in a reactive manner. Firefighter activity is usually very powerful, automatic, and undesirable; its purpose is to stifle or soothe negative feelings when exiles are threatened or upset. These exiles are often desperate and extreme parts that have been marginalized and oppressed by the system because they carry feelings of hurt, fear, and shame. They are the outcasts of the system that carry the painful system history of memories from early abuses and trauma.

Schwartz maintains that the Self, though not considered a part, is a naturally resourceful state of being at the core of the system, differentiated from all other parts. From within this Self space the person is able to speak for the other parts of the system while exhibiting qualities identified as the "8 Cs of Self": Courage, confidence, clarity, compassion, connectedness, calmness, curiosity, and creativity. The person would then be considered to be practicing Self-leadership.

In IFS therapy, clients get to know burdened and polarized parts and help them to release from their extreme roles. This process liberates parts' energies and activities so that they can eventually integrate to form a unity with the system. An important goal of IFS therapy is to help to differentiate the Self within the system of parts and in so doing restore Self-leadership, balance, and harmony within the individual.

A STRUCTURAL VIEW OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Various theoretical interpretations may be used to understand the underlying processes of the university's organizational system. Among these interpretations are those that draw upon some of the latest insights of chaos and complexity theory pointing to explanations about how ordered patterns of activity can emerge from spontaneous self-organization (Langton, 1992; see also Lewin, 1992; Kauffman, 1993; Kelly, 1994), or related cybernetic ideas suggesting that change is enfolded in the strains and tensions found in circular relations (Wiener, 1961), or the interesting theory of autopoiesis developed by Maturana and Varela (1980) that maintains that all living systems are organizationally closed, autonomous systems of interaction that reference only themselves. Gregory Bateson's (1972) interest in the ecological aspects of systems emphasizes that "wholes" evolve as complete fields of relations that are mutually determining and determined. Within Bateson's frame of reference, the university system's pattern must to be understood as a whole and as possessing a logic of its own and therefore could not be understood as a network of separate parts.

Informed by all of these different systems theories, for the purposes of this application of IFS theory, the university system is viewed as an eclectic model containing a family of autonomous interconnected subsystems with relations to the environment. Each subsystem is self-referential in that it enters into (often bureaucratic and hierarchical) interactions that are specified in patterns of relations that define the university and the functioning of its component subsystems.

Subsystems ideally encompass the student subsystem as the common focal point of the university. Information exchange within and among subsystems contains feedback mechanisms that propagate change from subsystem to subsystem, as evidenced with formal and informal student evaluations and promotion and tenure decisions that require consideration by multiple committees and individuals, both academic and administrative. Examples of university subsystems include administrative decision-making, faculty governance, university and departmental committees, student governance, undergraduate and graduate programs, sports teams, and community-habitat interconnections.

Most importantly the common student core is understood as representing the space of interaction in which the student and university subsystems coincide. This is the sacred space in which students come to learn about reality, exercise their innate abilities as artists who create and imagine, and begin to realize their potential contribution to humanity. The student core is the heartbeat and *raison d'être* of the university.

THE PARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Parts Identified

As similarly described in human systems, the university system also has parts. University parts also interact in a patterned, prescribed, and generally predictable ways. Depending on how the university is perceived, subsystems can include parts that mirror structural administrative divisions, academic schools, departments, classes, institutes, and centers, or that are patterned from functionally organized committees, clubs, unions, diversity groups, seminar series, and councils, to name a few. For example, an academic school can be described symbolically as containing a part that could be perceived as having potentially polarized department parts. These department parts might in turn have striving faculty parts and so on. Individual parts may also correspond literally to actual responsibilities and roles such as president, vice-president, provost, deans, department chairs, committee

officer, professor, researcher, student advocate, student advisor, or counselor. These parts may find themselves functioning in various ways depending on other parts with which they find themselves in relationship.

The process of getting to know the parts of the university involves understanding a multiplicity of parts that may be identified as corresponding to actual university roles or to other symbolic and archetypal roles and considered on many intellectual, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural, and political levels. Parts based on roles of university-connected personnel include, for example, the various rankings of Academic Faculty parts, Office Manager parts, Administrator parts, Student parts, Trustee parts, and Community and Corporate Practitioner parts.

Similar consideration of symbolic or archetypal roles could be given to departmental, school, college, community, and corporate subsystem levels, as well as to the university level as a whole. For example, a Competitor part might be identified on the individual student level as well as on the departmental subsystem level although with very different motivations and cohort part interactions. While student competitor parts may be striving for high cumulative grade point average, department competitor parts might be vying for additional faculty lines and increased budgetary allocations. On the university level, the Competitor part could be interpreted as working externally, trying to attract talented well-rounded students on one hand and working toward achieving a higher nationally recognized tier ranking on the other.

As previously mentioned, the university can also be viewed as having rich historical and archetypal parts. Paul Moxnes (1993) identifies twelve deep roles in different cultural artifacts such as fairy tales, Greek mythology, the Bible, and soap operas that have their origin in the roles of the primary family - father, mother, son and daughter. These roles could be interpreted as parts of the university; for example, the symbolic mother part might be identified as the Alma Mater of light and truth or perhaps Lady Liberty who lifts her lamp of knowledge and hospitality to all who enter.

Moxnes' father and mother, and son and daughter roles might be recognized from some perspectives in the university as symbolizing the relationship between Administrative and Academic Faculty parts. In departments, or academic schools, department chairs and deans may witness Faculty parts acting as if in sibling rivalry.

According to Moxnes, in groups and organizations each of these images of family roles is polarized into a good and bad part through the basic defense mechanisms of splitting and projection: the father as God or Devil, the mother as Queen or Witch, the son as Crown Prince or Black Sheep, and the daughter as Princess or Whore. In addition to these eight primary deep roles there are two secondary ones, the Helpers, identified as Shaman and Slave, whose function is to help the family survive spiritually and materially, respectively. The two last deep roles are of a transformative nature: the Hero (Winner) and the Clown (Loser), that is, the one who has won a good primary (family) role, and the one who has lost it, or never gained one.

Ian Mitroff (1993) identifies variants of Moxnes' primary family role symbolic characters. He suggests that organizational life can be understood in terms of the relations between fools, magicians, warriors, high priests, lovers, and other symbolic characters. In varying degrees and at differing times these roles might also be among those evidenced in the parts of individuals, as well as in subsystem parts of the university system. A complete analysis of university system parts based on Moxnes' and Mitroff's symbolic characters, while beyond the scope of this paper, would no doubt provide enlightening and instructive ideas for the further application of IFS theory in this context.

Calling upon the theory of Carl Jung (1968) the pattern of organizational life is created and recreated in accordance with the structures found in the history of myth and literature. Jung's emphasis on the role of archetypes in his work on understanding conscious and unconscious life in terms of an interplay between opposing tendencies has potential implications for understanding patterns of part interactions in the university's organizational life. In fact, the University part itself might be considered an archetypal part linking individual and subsystem parts to an innate need for order, a reverence for knowledge, and the inner drive toward creative expression.

University Managers

Manager parts associated with administrative and academic subsystems strategize about programs and planning. These parts often play extreme roles with respect to budget and personnel because they feel responsible for the sustainability of academic and administrative departments across campus. They are active and well exercised, powerful, controlling, and highly protective of individual and subsystem safety, effectiveness, and ability to get work done. Academic managers can be witnessed guarding their domains and student enrollments in college, school and departmental turf wars over ownership of courses and programs. Administrative managers are generally risk averse, polarized with entrepreneurial parts,

and often foster a paralyzing "this too shall pass" attitude with respect to environmental change.

Faculty manager parts can dictate following proper procedure and carefully adhering to contracts. They can also provide motivation to impress administrators with decision-making authority. With respect to students, they take on the tasks of helping to create fruitful learning environments and collaborative research relationships.

Student manager parts are responsible for getting them (hopefully) to class on time and generally help with time management. They also get caught up in extreme roles with all-night cramming for exams or devising excuses for missing class and tests. These manager parts may find themselves also involved in instigating firefighter activity by resorting to plagiarism to insure passing or higher grades in extremely competitive environments.

Exiles and Unburdening

Exiles are sensitive parts of the university system that may carry onerous beliefs about academic reputation, lack of appreciation, feelings of inferiority, lack of personal and professional self-worth, and of being used and abused as political stepping stones. Marginalization over power and control issues as well as the opposite extreme of inordinate and aggressive allocation of resources to university subsystems and faculty may provide clues as to the nature and existence of exiles.

Gratitude and recognition, potentially valuable components in any application of IFS therapy in this context, can be effective unburdening tools. A small perturbation of praise in the system can release creative and transforming energy that ripples throughout the university.

Firefighter Activity

Administrative manager parts are often successful in imprisoning exiles, however, should the exiles launch an escape that can not be contained by manager parts, then firefighter parts take center stage in the guise of grievance filings, law suits, faculty and student demonstrations; all of which are designed to bring immediate attention to the exiles' unmet needs. Academic jealousy, dishonesty, scapegoating, victimization, and blame may all signal firefighter activity in their attempts to assuage exiles deeper anxieties.

Exiles' burdens usually accumulate as the result of past "traumas." Firefighters may then be witnessed reacting in extreme ways to protect exiles from further trauma. For example, in response to financial problems with potentially harmful effects for a university's reputation, one university's Competitor part may find itself automatically participating in firefighter activity to acquire confidential student information from other universities. In the university context, traumas may result from any number of unfortunate decisions and circumstances, including failed financial investments, legislative pull-backs, poor selection of faculty and administrative officers, individuals and committees that are neither productive nor dedicated, general misunderstandings, agenda clashes, or a university's failure to appreciate the rich goldmine of human resources that the university has at its fingertips.

Qualities of the University Self

The Self-led university is not run by its parts. It understands its parts, has perspective on them, and yet is able to differentiate itself from its parts. In the Self-led university the qualities of Self are present in its patterns of interactions and interrelationships. This is most noticeably evidenced when lifelong learning flourishes as a top priority in mission and strategic planning. The university-community interface is a permeable "classroom" that extends beyond the school building to museums, science centers, other colleges and universities, healthcare and social service organizations, businesses and homes (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith, 1994).

The Self-led university values the student as "ultimate concern," a term used by theologian Paul Tillich to refer to a center point or core of that which is cared about most passionately (Brown, 1965). The Self-led university partners with students to advise, support, challenge, and encourage them in their journeys of discovery and their search for meaning and significance in their lives. The Self-led university is curious about ideas from "outside the box"; it makes collaborative multi-lateral decisions, and maintains a sense of reverence for its purpose and mission.

The Self-led university encourages an ethos of openness, mutual respect, acceptance, and responsibility to self and others. Academic freedom is courageously upheld. Traditional concerns for rational control are tempered by Pilgrim parts that thrive on experimentation and new discoveries. The university in Self maintains an active willingness to pursue constructive ways to approach resistance and defensive routines that sabotage and block change.

The Self-led university channels its energies to encourage a sense of community creativity, compassion, and connectedness, and in so doing the university becomes a source of healing.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

In this new millennium, universities are simultaneously being challenged to carry valuable dimensions of tradition, the "old ways", into the new while under increased pressure to rock the *status quo* with innovation and entrepreneurial ventures. New endeavors may call for teamwork and collaboration skills that diverge from the traditional research skills of many university types. The gateway to answers may be found in a Self-led university that is student-centered, and to the extent that its information infrastructure, including acquisition, delivery, and transmission of information and knowledge satisfies the overwhelming need for collaboration and interconnectedness in the network age.

This paper has endeavored to apply IFS theory to the university system by providing an initial mapping of the elements of the model to this domain. A preliminary identification of parts of the university, by no means exhaustive, illustrates their multiplicity on many systemic, subsystemic, and individual levels. Examples of managers, firefighters and exiles have been given, followed by a view of a Self-led university that exhibits the qualities of Self. The Self-led university has been envisioned where compassion and creativity flow freely and confidently within and from the university, strengthening it to fulfill its mission in the challenging days ahead.

With the sphere of IFS influence expanded to the university setting, the reader is invited to consider a potential application of IFS therapy to this domain, for the purpose of helping it evolve new ways to respond to the diverse and changing needs of its students and environment. University, know thyself!

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