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# Internal Family Systems (IFS) in Indian Country: Perspectives and Practice on Harmony and Balance

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### **Straddling worldviews: A context for research ideas generation**

Today's Indigenous peoples straddle several worlds. A range of traditional and contemporary Indigenous and Western cultures, often conflicting, are encountered in everyday living. How can a healing modality address worldviews and experiences acquired from walking in so many different worlds?

A worldview which privileges more than one way of healing can harmonize and balance pathways followed in diverse worlds (McCabe, 2007). In a survey of the Society of Indian Psychologists (SIP) and others recognized for expertise in working with Native American Indians (NAI), similar findings about broad knowledge of approaches are reflected (Thomason, 2012). A perspective from a larger consciousness can embrace many ways of knowing that arise from walking in cultures with different root knowledge bases. The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model offers an accessible language and framework that can support the healing process of those whose knowledge is drawn from two major worldviews, Indigenous and Western.

In this article I describe the IFS model and its core concepts through highlights of a workshop given in June, 2012, on "Internal Family Systems (IFS) in Indian Country: Perspectives and Practice". Through the lens of Indigenous Knowledge Research (IKR), I explore how IFS perspectives and practice for recovering and sustaining harmony and balance might be a useful healing practice in Indian Country.

Over the last twenty years, IFS has gained wide acceptance as a non-pathologizing way to increase compassionate respect and reduce impacts of trauma. One stated goal of IFS therapy is restoration of harmony and balance. Also known as the Self-Leadership model, IFS represents a synthesis of two paradigms: systems thinking and multiplicity of mind (Schwartz, 1995).

Centered on the belief that core self is a natural interrelational state of wellbeing, IFS is a bio/psychosocial/spiritual/energy model applicable for a wide variety of mental health issues including historical trauma transformation and addictions treatment. Richard C. Schwartz (personal communication, February 19, 2013), developer of the IFS model, used to claim the self had no agenda. After working with so many people over the years, he now believes the self has a desire to create harmony, healing, and connectedness internally and externally. Steege (2010), moreover, asserts that the most distinguishing aspect of the IFS model is the belief that the self has leadership and healing qualities that are different from the other parts of an individual.

The Internal Family Systems model, well-established in English-speaking countries, is also practiced in Europe and the Middle East. Embedded in IFS language about systems and multiplicity of mind are concepts of personal

sovereignty, innate spirituality, interrelatedness, connectedness with nature and the oneness of the universe, compassion, and natural tendency toward harmony and balance (Schwartz, 2001). IFS language arises from inborn knowing about human dignity, the need to be connected with ourselves and others through caring attention. Hicks (2011) affirms that the state of compassionate witness, a state that restores dignity, reminds us that we are invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable. In IFS healing, compassionate witness of our own inner worlds and others in the external world is essential.

IFS is a self-in-relationship model that could have been called the Internal Kinship Systems or Inner Community Systems model. The model's core concepts and framework liberate the self, making it especially useful to those with different worldviews and languages. How the self is framed in a worldview is pivotal to a healing process. Bernstein (2012) and King (2012) use simple terms to differentiate the NAI psyche from the Western psyche: The Western psyche is based on dominion over all life with humans set above and apart from nature. The Indigenous psyche is based on a worldview of reciprocity where humans co-participate in the whole of life and physical and psychic existence is sustained in balance. The IFS model emerged out of Western psychology, but, aligns with the relational reciprocity of Indigenous worldview. The self in the IFS framework is not a force or location of domination over others or nature.

IFS is not well-known in Indian Country. When I gave my workshop at the SIP (a division of the American Psychological Association) annual conference, I opened to perspectives through the lens of IKR. IKR helped to focus discernment about compatibility of the IFS model and NAI worldviews. Sheehan and Walker (2001) provide a description of IKR as directed by the aims and intentions of Indigenous communities and elders. Smith (2012) further characterizes the Indigenous inquiry lens as decolonizing and transformational with an agenda of systemic change requiring leadership, capability, time, courage, reflexivity, determination, support, and compassion. Only in the last thirteen years, Smith informs us, have Indigenous research methodologies presented a strong strand of study in higher education. I hold the IFS model's core concepts to the legitimizing scrutiny of both IKR and Western methodologies to examine its usefulness in Indian Country.

In 2007, two brief conversations with counselors working in Indian Country bolstered my experience that the model could be beneficial with NAI peoples. Both were excited about positive outcomes gained from using the IFS model. My IKR project sprouted with a broadcast inquiry, "Who is doing IFS work in Indian Country?" I want deeper knowledge about the healing effectiveness of this self-leadership model for NAI communities. Persistent networking led to a handful of individuals in the US and Canada who find success combining traditional and contemporary NAI cultural ways with IFS. These

success stories strengthened deep observation in my practice which privileges both approaches. Conversations about the self's interrelatedness with parts mutually inspired us and informed our projects. Gray (2010) and Sheehan & Walker (2001) include sharing stories and wisdom as IKR methodology where all are learners.

### **Wisdom sharing and listening with a distributed community: Explorations in a workshop**

In addition to introduction of basic concepts of the IFS model, workshop objectives were to provide experiential practice with IFS and open a talking circle for perspectives on the model's potential in Indian Country. During the SIP conference, I listened deeply to responses about the IFS model. Woods et al. (2011) detail steps of *research ideas generation* as important orientation for respectful beginnings in forming collaborative relationships to understand the relatedness of IFS with NAI populations. Traditional IKR, Hains (2012) writes, involves many forms of listening, including prayer. We opened my workshop with prayer and proceeded in a listening way on external and internal levels.

Introducing and locating ourselves as Indigenous researchers follows traditional purposeful awareness of interrelatedness. Accordingly, explains Kovach (2009), we welcome non-Indigenous listeners and readers by making context explicit. I located myself as a Cherokee descendant. Workshop circle members situated themselves in several Indigenous traditions and lands from Australia, Canada, Mexico, New Zealand, Turkey, and the United States.

As a basic level of inclusion, those whose ideas helped shape this manuscript, including Elders, SIP leaders, and psychotherapists, were invited and gave input before publication. Gathering research ideas in rigorous IKR may include intuitive knowing, internal knowledges, and external knowledge from others (Four Arrows, 2008). Approached respectfully at each point of interaction, a distributed learning community like SIP can share information in fluid, minimally hierarchical ways. Mutuality in sharing, an IKR value of relatedness without colonizing agendas, can lead to healing and transformation. Systems that contain multiple levels of learning, Kovach (2009) and Peters (2012) tell us, can create a research path which is most effective when aligned with the values of Indigenous peoples who participate.

### **The power of language: Speaking for a range of voices**

Language knowledge is a step toward understanding how Indigenous consciousness of self might stand side-by-side with Western awareness about self (see Whorf, 1950, for groundbreaking linguistic research). Schwartz (1995) respects the power of languages to surface different systems of knowing. At my

workshop, I gave definitions for several IFS terms, including *self*. We explored how the healing wisdom of Indigenous cultures might relate with IFS, a systems model of healing. Duran (2006) and Schwartz point to ways that language arising from systems knowledge can be shared between cultures in Indian Country and the IFS community.

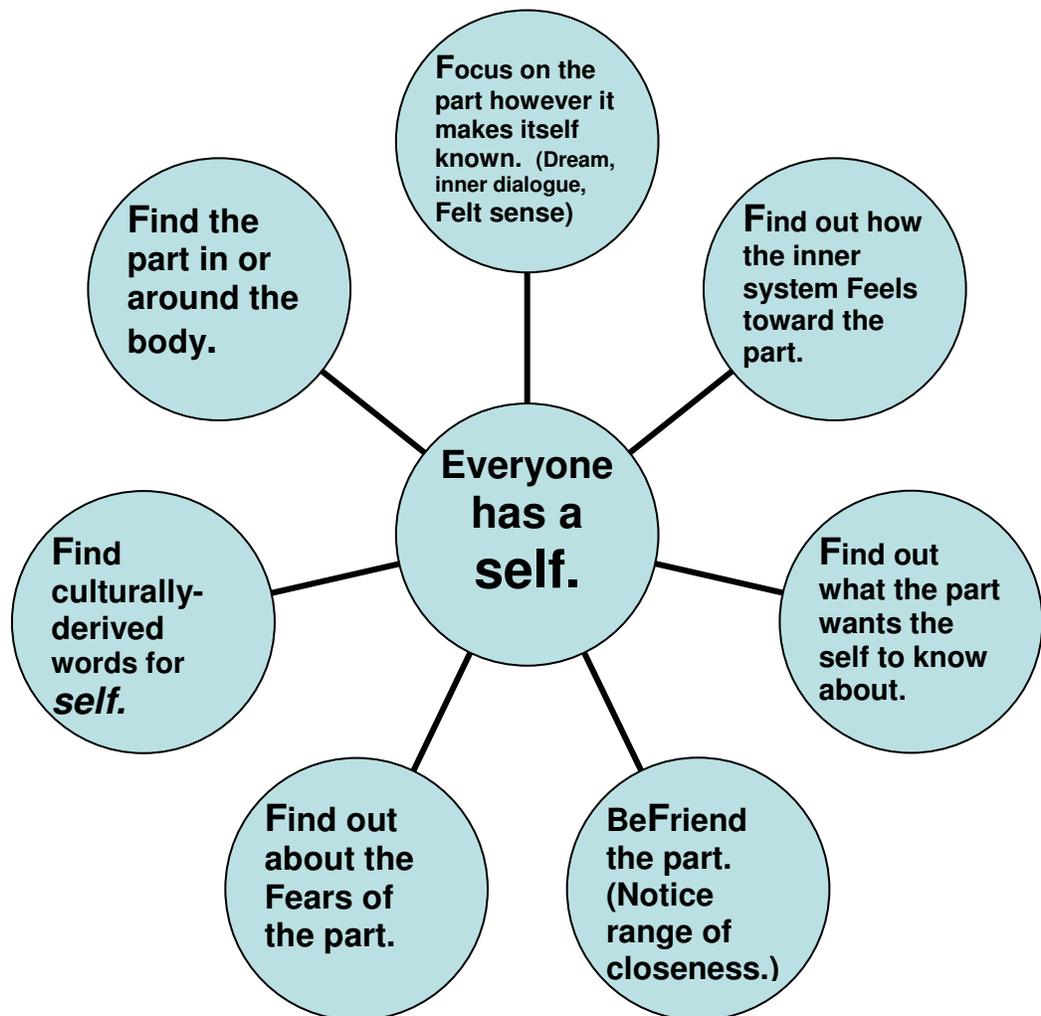
Most of us have an intuitive sense about the word *self*, but few find it easy to define. At the SIP conference, I heard an Elder psychologist from one Indigenous tradition inquire of another from a different tradition. “What is the word for *self* in your language?” The response, “There isn’t any.” Understanding of the term *self* is bridged between Western psychological and Eastern spiritual concepts, particularly in mindfulness-informed therapies (Schwartz, 2011), yet the connection between constructs of self in Indigenous worldviews on healing and Western psychologies remains at the trailhead stage of exploration. Schwartz (2004) and the IFS community maintain that a Larger Self is integral with the individual self. One way of talking about the IFS understanding of self is to speak of the center in all humans as the *knowing Center* as Cajete (1994) describes. The human knowing Center reflects and is interconnected with the Great Knowing Center and the knowing Center in other living things. Duran (2006) speaks of this soul center as a person’s spiritual identity, a standing in the seventh sacred direction, the within direction, which is the center of the universe. Another way is to relate the Great Heart of the Cosmos, Parry’s (2006) description, with the heart of humans and the heart of life in all beings. This universal essence is known as the within direction, sacred space, heart, soul, center, the void, source, no-self, self, and more.

In the IFS language, parts of the self or subpersonalities are simply called *parts*. In Indian Country the terms *spirit* or *guide* or *place* in our self might be preferred. Using my own parts as an example in the workshop, I demonstrated in a vignette how the roles of parts and the self differ. The IFS sense of core self is known by qualities that include compassion, calmness, humor, and interconnectedness. As constraints to living from these qualities are lifted by what IFS calls an unburdening process, the self, soul, or knowing Center is freed to take its natural role as leader of the internal system of parts. In the vignette, I acted out examples from three different groups of parts that IFS language calls *managers*, *firefighters*, and *exiles*.

Manager parts and firefighter parts use different tactics to protect the inner system from being overwhelmed from impacts of trauma. Their protector roles are an attempt to keep an individual in control of all situations with strategies to wall off extremely painful feelings from conscious awareness. Protector strategies include critical judging, overworking, violence, addictions, and dissociation. Exiled parts hold painful emotions that threaten to overwhelm an individual. When these agonizing feelings are shut off from the conscious self

over time, exile parts become increasingly extreme. In their desperation to be understood and cared for, exiles can break through to flood feelings of rage, terror, humiliation, loneliness, and grief within the inner systems.

**Figure 1**  
**Getting Started Practicing with the IFS Model: Getting to Know a Part**



Using the letter *F* as a memory device in the first stage of getting to know a part details the dynamics of working with IFS. Figure 1. The process of getting

to know another person does not follow a step-by-step list. Similarly, the *F*'s of getting to know a part are not linear either. The knowing Center or self *F*ocuses on a part, *F*inds out its fears and story, and be*F*riends it as an organic process of offering appreciation and respect for the pain a part has endured. Building trust is imperative.

Identifying parts and speaking for parts can be therapeutic and honors an Indigenous value of listening to a range of voices (Kovach, 2009). I invited each participant to share feelings, beliefs, felt sense, physical awareness and/or experiences of three different parts. Speaking format was:

Part of me \_\_\_\_\_.  
Part of me \_\_\_\_\_.  
And, another part of me \_\_\_\_\_.

Had I spoken for my own parts present during this exercise, I might have disclosed, "Part of me is delighted seeing so many people in this workshop! Part of me is prayerful out of nervousness. And, another part of me wishes we had hours to move beyond basic identification of parts and into a demonstration of the IFS unburdening process."

In this constraint-releasing model, an unburdening process is a second therapeutic phase following the *F* steps of finding and befriending parts. A term in IFS language, *burdens*, means "extreme ideas or feelings that are carried by parts and govern their lives. Burdens are left on or in parts from exposure to an external person or event." Burdens can accrue over generations to include historical or ancestral trauma. The source of burdens can also be constraining environments (see Schwartz, 1995, for detailed original concepts). Unburdening can happen when a part feels fully witnessed by the self. IFS views the self's two states, being and acting, to be like particle and wave states or witness and active states. When a part feels compassionately witnessed by the self, it is ready to allow the self an active role in healing. The part may tell its story to the self in words, dreams, imagery, memory scenes, inner knowing, or body memories.

I respect both Indigenous and Western psychologies as vast, complex systems. By going to the inner dimensions together, my intention was to privilege both cultures of inquiry. Side-by-side best practices may yield the most harmonious, balanced use of healing resources (McVicker, 2010). In closing guided meditation, consciously sharing the whole Heart of the Cosmos with all living beings honored Indigenous and IFS agreement in belief that healing arises from the inside. An Elder in the circle, a psychologist, voiced concluding words, "Sacred space is different from psychological space. This way of working can be useful."

**Witnessing from the within direction: Compassionate connections that heal**

IFS is seen as more than a therapeutic technique by those who use the model. As Schwartz (2013) has often been cited as saying, “It is a conceptual framework and practice for developing love for ourselves and each other”. Indigenous scholars, according to Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008), are leading the way with methodologies of the heart, emancipatory love in the form of rigorous research. Through clinical case studies Duran (2006) holds that psychologies in Indian Country are valued when they are liberating and decolonizing. Springing from the heart to liberate through love while maintaining rigorous standards, IKR and IFS share related language and frameworks.

Looking at IFS through an IKR lens focuses attention on areas of relevance to NAIs including decolonization, persistence of wellbeing after historical trauma, and ongoing forms of colonization. Both the healing practice and the research methodology are similarly set into a field of community interrelatedness, directed by the aims and intentions of the community for systemic change. Coherence exists in underlying framework and language. Internalized oppression is often a result of generational oppression. For survival, protective parts learn to dominate the inner systems by mirroring extreme oppressive tactics experienced in the outer world. Support for accessing self or knowing Center is built into the IFS way of practice. From this healing center that naturally has a desire to create balanced connections internally and externally, experiences acquired from exposure to burdened worldviews can be found and witnessed.

Witnessing from the within direction is culturally congruent with most traditions in Indian Country. From a culturally familiar center, discernment is available from a larger consciousness. Broad understandings of prayer and courageous listening are overlaps in IFS and IKR. When unburdening transformations begin to liberate inner belief and memory systems from the impacts of trauma and indignities, ways to renew cultural identity within different worldviews are also discernable. The strengths of the self are then free to nourish the inner life and serve the community. In Woods et al (2011) preliminary findings with Alaska Native Peoples, collective self-esteem is fed by individuals who have released negative thoughts. Mutuality with a stronger collective, in turn, feeds and strengthens the individual from depression and psychological distress. IFS healing at first finds a part carrying negativity from the past, then focuses there, befriending the part until it feels that the core self understands its pain enough to restore its dignity. Ultimately, compassionate focusing on the negative experiences of the part in connection with the healing qualities of the self frees the part and releases it into capacity for positive feelings. The loving connection between the wounded part and the sacred knowing Center, the self, is essential to healing.

**Application of IFS in Indian Country: Resonance with Indigenous values, methodologies, worldviews**

How effective is IFS in Indian Country? Is the IFS model a liberating psychology/healing practice? Can it help to transform internalized oppression? Does it support decolonization? Or is IFS a Western therapy masquerading as a culturally-derived treatment that really privileges assimilation ethics pervasive in Western science and psychology? IFS is a newcomer in Indian Country and the SIP workshop time was brief. The role of the self as understood in the IFS community in transforming internalized oppression and ancestral burdens is a topic that needs time in more Indigenous circles for detailed exploration.

As we listen to our own language about distributed learning communities and IKR, we hear harmonious resonances with the IFS model: *Open-structured methods for accessing intuitive knowing; internal and external knowledge; respect at each interaction point; relational reciprocity in balance; minimally hierarchical ways; systemic change that requires leadership with compassion; leadership that aligns multiple levels of learning with the voices and values of all participating; compassionate witness from a knowing Center.* I hear from my own experience, from stories around Indian Country in the US and Canada, and from listening at the SIP conference that IFS can be a healing model in Indian Country.

I gained increased personal affirmation that IFS could have wide application in Indian Country. Looking at the healing model through the lens of IKR focused the similarities of Indigenous values, methodologies, and worldviews with the framework and language lens of IFS. Adjusting the two lenses like a pair of binoculars, I found clearer perspective for deeper inquiry. Inquiry starting points include: 1) A deeper view of the similarities and differences between IFS Western roots and NAI worldviews and values; 2) More inquiry into how parts are perceived in relationship with self on a culture-by-culture basis; 3) How does IFS interface with psychologies/healing practices where kinship systems or communities of humans hold equal respect for all life forms? The word *self* is challenging to define and translate. Finding ways to describe and make discernments about perceptions of self in those who walk in many worlds is an open area for inquiry. Demonstrations that take place in Indian Country which share how the IFS unburdening process can transform, harmonize, and balance human interiority are needed. As the model is used more widely by NAIs over time, deeper listening to individual and community outcomes will generate specific inquiries for exploring its efficacy.

Arriving home from the SIP conference, I saw a wild turkey feather clothespinned upright to the mailbox. Part of me wondered, "Who would leave this magnificent tail feather at such a perfect time?" Part of me flashed inner

knowing about meaning connected with the feather. And another part wondered about borderlands where sacred space and psychological space become different. The IFS model may find usefulness in Indian Country when the knowing Center is allowed to set the field for liberating dialogue between Indigenous and Western psychologies and worldviews.

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