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Steadfast Companions: Internal Family Systems and Complex Psychology

by Faith Harkey

Abstract: Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy is a fast-growing therapeutic modality. Although its creator, Richard Schwartz, developed the technique before encountering any of Jung's work, IFS and depth psychology are certainly cousins. Both acknowledge the existence of a psyche housing multiple, autonomous parts, insisting that the presence of internal figures is a function of a normally functioning self. Both suggest methods of inner dialogue for working with these subpersonalities. This article, then, considers what depth psychologists can learn from IFS, particularly asking, *If subpersonalities can change and grow, what are our responsibilities to these inner figures?*

Keywords: complexes, internal family systems, ethics, active imagination

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Article:

Dr. Richard Schwartz, an academic and systemic family therapist, was not familiar with Jung's work when he began noting the distinct presence of *parts* in his clients (Schwartz et al, 2017, p. 164). But the modality he would later develop, Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, would arguably become one of depth psychology's close cousins. Both approaches acknowledge the existence of a psyche housing multiple, autonomous parts, and both suggest a method of inner dialogue for working with these subpersonalities within ourselves. Both acknowledge that multiplicity can be problematic or pathological – but also insist that inner figures are a component of a normally functioning psyche, too. For Jungians, and especially those that practice active imagination, there is a lot here that is familiar.

What is especially intriguing about the growth of IFS – 10,000 therapists and lay people are wait-listed to apply for the thirty-five IFS trainings held annually¹ – is that it suggests a renewed interest in ideas not so different from Jung's, including inner work, shadow integration, and individuation. On this basis alone, it might be worth getting to know these compeers. But more than that, this paper sets out to take a closer look at IFS and what it might have to offer our depth work as individuals and as caring others.

What is Internal Family Systems Therapy?

Internal Family Systems work centers around meeting, healing, and creating good leadership

¹ Thanks to Shuka Alaei at the IFS Institute for providing these figures.

for inner parts of ourselves. I will discuss parts in greater depth below, but as a starting point, we can define them as the discrete aspects of the individual which we experience when we do things that seem 'unlike' us. A high-powered businesswoman may suddenly react like a wounded child when she is subject to an aging parent's disapproving gaze. Or, following a breakup with his present-day boyfriend, a personal trainer might binge on cookies like the rejected, overweight child he once was. These are parts.

There are a number of techniques in IFS, but one of the most fundamental involves initiating dialogues between the parts and the primary self (Goulding et al., 2002, pp. 152-158), which for the purposes of this discussion I will equate with the ego. These dialogues may take place internally, in a journal, or with a therapist in session. Over time, the primary self begins to differentiate itself from the psyche's subpersonalities, creating relationships with them instead of being overwhelmed by them. This, in turn, helps the individual develop a sense of clarity which develops into a quasi-spiritual mode, one that Schwartz calls the *Self* (2021, p. 97-101). The Self becomes the wise and capable leader of the inner family system, and the parts, in turn, are freed from the restraints of their often painful roles, allowing them to express healthier interests and gifts, which can then be integrated into the life of the individual, inner and outer.

The theory of conventional Family Systems therapy is rooted in a systems approach which "focuses on the way members of a system relate to one another" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 61). Schwartz adapts this concept to express the idea that parts should be understood as members of an *inner* family. When that family becomes dysfunctional, they are "forced out of their natural, valuable states into roles that sometimes can be destructive but are, they think, necessary to protect the person or the system they are in" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 16).

IFS principles clearly indicate that the psyche is multiple and the subpersonalities are real.

Parts have their own desires, beliefs and, perhaps most importantly for our discussion, they have autonomy, as Jung suggests the "feeling-toned complex" does (Jung, 1948/1969, p. 96). At the same time, they benefit from wise leadership, as kids might benefit from healthy parenting, or an office staff might be more successful with mindful leadership at the helm.

What are the *parts* of IFS?

With this overview of IFS in mind, we can look at the nature of parts, themselves. This is especially relevant to our discussion because a clear image of parts will allow us to more effectively examine the commonalities between IFS and depth psychology.

To start off, let's consider how Schwartz sees parts. They are "discrete, autonomous mental systems, each with their own idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, abilities, desires, and view of the world" known in other therapeutic systems as "subpersonalities, subselves, internal characters, archetypes, complexes, internal objects, ego states, and voices" (Schwartz et al, 2019, pp. 29-31). The term parts also includes those inner figures which appear as 'alters' in multiple personality. "[A]nd they exist in all of us," Schwartz explains, "The only difference is that people with Dissociative Identity Disorder suffered horrible abuse and their system of parts got blown apart more than most, so each stands out in bolder relief and is more polarized and disconnected from the others" (2021, p. 7).

Considering the picture that Schwartz paints of parts, my sense is that the depth psychological concept which best meets the range of qualities parts display is that of the complex. Let's consider why the term might be a good – if not perfect – fit.

Complexes, simply

The formal concept of the complex has been with us since Jung's discoveries during the Word Association Test (Cope, 2006, p. 104),² and, culturally, we have come to understand the idea in a sort of 'intuitive' way. It might be helpful, however, to hammer out a few points before we continue our conversation.

At their simplest, complexes can be understood as energies within the psyche that settle over us, almost ghost-like, coloring both our behavior and how we view the world. They have their own priorities and are powerful enough to affect our thinking, often departing as quickly as they came. Complexes leave us thinking, "Why did I do that? That wasn't like me, at all." Shargel's image of these figures is more lively still: "They roar up out of the unconscious once constellated, take over ego control and then drop back down into unconsciousness again once the affect is discharged" (2016, p. 64).

Though all of this roaring and haunting might seem fairly undesirable, Stevens reminds us that "Jung regarded [complexes] as normally healthy components of the psyche; complexes were, in fact, the functional units of which the ontogenetic psyche was composed. Complexes are archetypes actualized in the mind." (Stevens, 1982, p. 65). The real trouble, as Jung would remind us, is when we thoughtlessly identify with complexes. It is when I fully align, for instance, with a witchy, conniving part of my psyche that then that I can end up feeling "hag-ridden" or otherwise possessed (Jung, 1948/1969, p. 98).

While complexes can slip in, most commonly appearing as 'sides' of our personalities, they can also be more pronounced in their distinctiveness and autonomy from the primary self – the

² For a more complete look at the development of the idea of the complex, see Cope's fascinating book, *Fear of Jung* (2006).

primary self, or ego, being person we most often experience as the 'me' that we feel we are. Jung referenced such "fragmentary personalities" ultimately observing, "the deeper one penetrates into their nature . . . the more clearly do they reveal their character as *splinter psyches*" (Jung, 1948/1969, pp. 96-97).

Here we begin to see the overlap of IFS parts with complex psychology. Both systems highlight the phenomenological experience of looking inside and realizing that we are not the only ones 'in our heads.' The voices we argue with, our modes, moods and facets, each of these is an expression of an intrapsychic presence, something – *someone*, really – with its own sense of personhood. Complex psychology and IFS also observe a tendency within us to reject or sublimate these inner figures as inconvenient, undesirable, or even harmful (Jung, 1948/1969, p. 100; Schwartz, 2021, p. 11)

Complexes that endure

The term 'complex' fairly embraces a variety of inner experiences and figures: autonomous, but briefly arising washes of affect that color our experiences; recurrent feeling-tones that friends might call 'sides of our personality'; figures that appear in active imagination for a single dialogue; figures that appear in active imagination for extended dialogues, sometimes over years; alters within multiple personality systems. In Jungian thought, "even the ego is to be viewed as a complex formation" (Dieckmann, 1999, p. 1).

There is a wide gap, of course, between a fleeting emotional outburst and an alter that may dominate a dissociative system for years at a time. Similarly, most of us probably experience a clear distinction between our ego and the figures we meet in imaginal dialogues. What, then, is the essential difference between all these figures on the complex spectrum?

I propose that the answer to our question, and the quality that shifts inner parts along our spectrum, is that of *enduring*. What is unique about the alter in a multiple personality system, as opposed to a more ephemeral mother complex, for instance, is that the alter is highly *steadfast*. She has a greater psychic integrity over time.

This term, steadfast, is powerful because it honors two features of enduring complexes. First, the word conveys a spirit of loyalty. DID alters and IFS parts display an unswerving – often unappreciated, sometimes unwanted – loyalty to their home psyche that unfolds over years (Schwartz et al, 2019, p. ix), frequently holding uncomfortable emotional positions to protect more vulnerable parts of the self from the unbearable feelings that trauma creates (Schwartz et al, 2019, p. 55). And even with less traumatized complexes, the ones that 'merely' engage in maintaining difficult tensions of opposites in the psyche, they remain steadfast, too – unwaveringly faithful – over years and decades in attempting to facilitate the process of our individuation. Even when complex-rooted behaviors lead us astray, their intentions almost always find their origin in the desire for treasured things like safety and growth.

What seems to shift along the complex spectrum is a degree of structural integrity over time, the factor of steadfastness:

Increasing
Steadfastness



- The ego-complex, the multiple personality host
- Frequently appearing alters in multiple personality systems, especially those capable of taking over 'executive control'
- Figures that appear in active imagination on an ongoing basis / IFS parts / recurring complexes that form 'sides' of the personality / some multiple personality alters
- Figures that appear in active imagination for a single dialogue or encounter
- Rare or briefly occurring complexes that depart as quickly as they arrive

So, if we move forward with the idea that, in IFS, as well as in long-term active imagination interactions, at least some of the figures we are working with are *steadfast complexes* – where does that leave us?

Can complexes grow and change?

One of the central tenets of IFS is that parts, even antagonistic ones, when freed from their extremely polarized positions, begin to demonstrate rounded personalities. They can and do form relationships, they have preferences, and they can grow – perhaps even experiencing a form of sub-individuation. "Once they are free," Schwartz says, "they transform" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 89).

Jungians haven't been so certain that troubled complexes are redeemable. Stein says, in less than glowing language, that "intervention can alter them somewhat" (Stein, 1998, p. 49-50), and Shargel observes that, "The analytic literature describing psychological complexes is less than hopeful regarding prognosis." She goes on to say that progress is often "smashed to pieces once the complex comes up again" (2016, p. 67).

But let's remember Jung's admonishment: "the mask of the unconscious is not rigid—it reflects the face we turn towards it. Hostility lends it a threatening aspect, friendliness softens its features" (Jung, 1983, p. 274). If we expect troubled complexes to resist us, if we assume the only 'steadfast' thing about them is their troublesome nature, our assumptions doubtlessly will be met with a response in kind.

Another critical point as we consider the potential for growth and healing in complexes is this: IFS dialogues, like the longer-term inner dialogues of active imagination, give complexes an opportunity they do not get when we are merely talking 'about' them – the experience of the

passage of time.

One of Freud's most fascinating observations is that "The processes of the system Unconscious are *timeless*; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all (Freud, 1989, p. 582). In the inner world, then, the complex lives in a timeless state, as befits an intrapsychic figure with an archetypal core (Jung, 1977, p. 289; Whitmont, 1969, p. 68). However, when the steadfast complex is welcomed into the temporal world, when it has linear, narrative conversations with a therapist, the ego complex, or other members of the internal system, it becomes subject to past, present and future. As those of us who live in the material world understand, that which is subject to time is subject to change. By welcoming our steadfast complexes into the flow of time, we offer them the opportunity to become something other than a figure trapped in an "emotional lockdown" (Shargel, 2016, p. 66). They have a chance to experience themselves as more than a function – 'the angry part of me,' 'the bad daughter' – and to understand that they live within a larger narrative. A narrative, in turn, creates perspective, which then allows for growth and change.

Finally, there is the fascinating question as to whether complexes might become *more* steadfast if we invite them into imaginal dialogues more frequently. In my own experience, there are some inner figures who appear once and never return, even if invited. But there are others who, after several invitations to active imagination, do come to feel more robust. They communicate more clearly and their form appears with greater sharpness. In time, they give off a sense of presence so distinct that, even if they shift in their physical appearance -- as they sometimes do when they present in dreams -- I am able recognize these figures by the felt sense of them, alone. This increasing steadfastness, in turn, seems to facilitate the development of supportive, reciprocal relationships with these complexes. Imagine, for example, being on a first-

name basis with your money complex and chatting with her over coffee *before* she gets constellated, *before* you discuss the household budget with your spouse. This is a powerful alternative to unconscious identification with a complex and all the potentially negative outcomes associated with it.

Do we have a responsibility toward steadfast complexes?

If complexes can change and grow, do we have a responsibility to facilitate their development?

Jung certainly advocates for the importance of bringing the inner life into dialogue with the conscious mind. It is, he writes, "a grave mistake to think that it is enough to gain some understanding of the [inner world] images and that knowledge can here make a halt. Insight into them must be converted to an ethical obligation...The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon man" (Jung, 1963, pp. 192-193).

Lakh puts it even more plainly: "Acknowledgement of the rejected, inferior and unwanted parts, and taking responsibility for them is a result of deep individual work that we all should do" (2020, p. 45). And Neumann (1969) goes so far as to suggest a *New Ethic* based on the foundations of inner work. His book is certainly worth a close reading for those who ask questions of responsibility as relates to the inner world.

Inner work, then, can be a form of activism directed at healing the outer world. And it certainly facilitates our mental health and individuation. These are important aims. But might we have equally important obligations to these steadfast complexes of our inner worlds, just as we have we have responsibilities to the people in our outer communities, in our families, in our households? One of Romanyshyn's students observes that working with inner figures "is

daunting because it implies a responsibility to them ... in the same way that I am responsible to beings in the stick-and-stones world" (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 181).

If we are our *outer* brother's keepers, is it right to do any less for the persons inside ourselves who cry out from their places of tension and discomfort with such power and energy, as complexes do?

In his classic text, *Inner Work*, Johnson makes a compelling argument that we have a duty to our subselves. A responsibility exists because, in a very real sense, we helped create the injury. Many of these figures have been the subject of the sort of rejection we humans reflexively express against our inner shadows, and virtually all parts have been neglected unless we have made the critical shift of doing regular, committed imaginal work. We must "learn to listen to the ones whom we have kept mute...to honor those whom we have dishonored" (1986, p. 184). If they are angry, perhaps it is because they were wounded, but provided with no help or options for repair.

Why does it matter what we call them?

In the first part of this article, I emphasized the connection between the parts of IFS and the Jungian concept of complexes. But why not simply refer to parts as 'imaginal figures,' note the likeness to the concepts of depth psychology, and be done with it? Does it really matter if we call them complexes, steadfast or otherwise?

Certainly, both James Hillman and Mary Watkins choose to avoid any particular label or term for "psychic presences" (Watkins, 2000, p. 70; Hillman, 1975, p. 12). For these writers, I suspect, a fairly delineated term like 'complex' might impress upon inner figures our own egoic logic and expectations. While I sympathize with this view – I have every interest in respecting

the viewpoints and preferences of parts – I believe there is a certain, important door that opens when we approach inner figures specifically as complexes.

Jung viewed the complex as a fundamental structure in our psyche – so fundamental that we, ourselves, can be understood as ego-complexes. In this way, the 'I' who is writing this article and the 'you' who is reading it – we are just one more complex in our respective psyches. The implications of this are profound. To the degree that I, a complex, am autonomous, I must respect that my imaginal figures are autonomous, as well. To the degree that I, myself, am deserving of respect and care, so are the other steadfast complexes in my psyche. In short, I have no special status. Or, if I do, it is only my own degree of steadfastness that is unique: I am, in theory, the most steadfast of all the complexes of my inner world.

In conclusion

Jung is very clear about the centrality of the complexes in the psyche: complex is how we're built. No complex, no psyche. But I am not sure most of us have viewed the figures of active imagination in this light. Our tendency, instead, is to acknowledge them when we experience their activity or effects, but to consider them as 'gone' when we are not working with them directly. The truth, however, is this: *summoned or not*, our complexes are present. We are, each of us, from ego-complex to Self, a galaxy of constellating complexes. The additional message of IFS – that parts, when treated as inner neighbors and friends, can and do grow much in the way of external people – offers an important addendum to complex theory: that the steadfast complexes within us are *persons*, and so are deserving of care and attention, just like those in the outer world. When we attend to these selves, when we send the signal, *I am listening* and *You are welcome here*, we stand a real chance of developing an enduring harmony in our inner world.

In a very real sense, we owe a debt – of gratitude, at the very least – to the ones inside us who might be called parts or complexes. If you're sitting here reading this article today – just as I am typing it out here at my keyboard – it is because our steadfast complexes have done so much of the heavy lifting in our lives. And the work of helping them heal and grow can begin so simply: with a simple invitation to chat, a heartfelt intention to bring them home.

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