The Masks We Wear: The Gospel and Internal Family Systems Therapy

By Eric L. Johnson, Ph.D. & Chuck DeGroat, Ph.D. AACC National Conference 2014
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www.Christianpsych.org
Christians have different views of psychology

Why?

Modern psychology produced a profound scientific account of human beings and developed complex ways of dealing with psychological problems, without God.

This created a challenge for the Church, that resulted in different understandings of how to meet it.

There are three major views.
Integration of Faith and Psychology

Major representatives

Bruce Narramore

Mark McMinn

Everett Worthington

Stan Jones

Dominant approach at Christian graduate schools
Integration of Faith and Psychology

Goal
To integrate the Christian faith and psychology

Common slogan: “All Truth is God’s Truth”

Key Insight
Christians need to do therapy and counsel according to Christian values

Limitation
Tends to begin with modern psychology and accept its rules. Little distinctly X’n content
Biblical Counseling

Major representatives

Jay Adams
David Powlison
John MacArthur
Ed Welch
Biblical Counseling

Goal
To rely on God’s ways of healing the soul

Common slogan: “The sufficiency of Scripture”

Key Insight
Scripture is authoritative and necessary for Christian counseling because it is God’s soul-care guidebook

Limitation
Does not tend to utilize any of the resources of modern psychology and psychiatry
Christian Psychology

Major representatives

Robert Roberts

Paul J. Watson

Diane Langberg

Leanne Payne

Paul Vitz
Christian Psychology

Goals

To build on and combine the strengths of the other two models

The ongoing development of distinctly Christian psychological theory, research programs, and clinical practice.

To offer a Christian alternative to modern psychology models, where appropriate, by beginning with the psychology of the Bible and the Christian traditions, while learning from modern psychology and psychiatry.
Main themes of a Comprehensive Christian Counseling Model

1. The triune God is the center of human life

2. Humans live within a grand theodrama in which the triune God is gradually and increasingly manifesting himself and his glory.

This theodrama can be summarized as creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.
The Main Events of the Theodrama

**Creation:** Humans are made in God’s image, made for God, and are fundamentally a unity.

**Fall:** Humans are born in sin and alienated from God and neighbor, shameful and guilty, and also more or less psychologically damaged and internally fragmented.

**Redemption:** Union with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is central focus of X’n counseling, to promote maturity, coping, healing, and strengthening of one’s brain/soul.

**Consummation:** Human life is oriented now towards heaven (where Christ is) and an eternal future with God.
3. A *Relational* model of human life

(In contrast to the one- or two-dimensional models of secular psychology)
4. A multi-level, hierarchical, holistic model of human nature
Today’s Agenda

- To understand a secular therapy model—*Internal Family-Systems Therapy*—accurately, on its own terms
- To interpret and critique it from a Christian standpoint, and translate it, where possible, into a Christian framework
- To develop a Christian model of therapy that begins with a Christian framework, but is enriched by engagement with IFS therapy
Description of IFS Model

Psychopathology

With attachment theorists, interpersonal neurobiologists, and the like, IFS assumes that our brain has a unique capacity to “manage” and “adapt” amidst the suffering and traumas of life.

Significant trauma (abuse/abandonment) can cause significant “splitting,” to the point of disassociation.

Ordinarily, this splitting renders limits awareness of all that is happening internally.
Description of IFS Model

Internal dynamic structures

The Self is at the center of the IFS, an inherently good center to our being, marked by 8 C’s - Calmness, Curiosity, Clarity, Compassion, Confidence, Creativity, Courage, and Connectedness.

Notice, these 8 C’s are not a whole lot different than the 9 fruits of the spirit in Gal. 5 - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—However, they are virtues derived from creation, rather than redemption.
Description of IFS Model

Internal dynamic structures

In addition, the inner world of humans has the capacity to develop “parts,” which can arise in response to trauma. Other theories call these subpersonalities or ego-states or states-of-mind.

Schwartz has identified 3 kinds of parts:

* **Managers** (or Protectors): These parts manage or protect us from threat, pain, up’s and down’s. They operate at work or when one needs to perform. Sometimes called the “false self” or the persona.

* **Exiles**: These are the parts of you that hold deep pain or shame. They often feel like children. Too scared to come out.

* **Firefighters**: When triggered by shame or anxiety, these parts show up with a strategy to numb the feeling or control it (acting out).
Description of IFS Model

Form of Psychotherapy

Problem
The parts act semi-autonomously and rigidly, that limit full-functioning and flourishing, preventing the central self from wisely guiding and regulating the system.

Goal of therapy
To have the parts surrender their semi-autonomous independence and allow the Self to guide and regulate.

How does this happen?
The therapist and the counselee get to know and trust the parts and address their needs so they willingly give up their autonomy and become willing to work together with the rest of the self-system.
Description of IFS Model

Form of Psychotherapy

Development in the therapy

Therapist takes the lead in this exploration, but gradually transfers over the process of reconciling the parts to the Self

Techniques

*In-sight:* The therapist invites the counselee to imagine what the parts look like and to explore their values and needs from within, asking questions of the Self to guide this internal work

*Direct access:* The therapist engages in conversation with the parts directly, asking about their values and needs
My interest in IFS Therapy

My own self-therapy with Jesus regarding my old self and new self taught me about the existence of powerful internal objects that seem to have a semi-autonomous existence inside my soul.

Thomas Merton’s limited discussions of the Christian’s true self and false self.

My experience with Men at the Cross which involves Christian psychodrama, working with parts, and reference to false selves.

Reading and watching Lord of the Rings and similar literature.

Attending a stimulating seminar on IFST at an AACC conference that made little reference to redemptive-history.
A Christian Critique of IFS Therapy

Positive

1. Takes very seriously the existence of "parts," which are a result of "reflexivity," the created ability to reflect on oneself, and tendency of the fallen brain/soul to split and fragment

2. Yet, the self is regarded as central
   This allows the counselee to differentiate the parts and the self, while affirming the person at the core

3. Strong willingness to listen to the counselee and trust his or her experience and direction

4. Many other therapists or psychologists posit some notion of parts: Jung, Hermans, psychodrama, Rowan
A Christian Critique of IFS Therapy

Positive

5. Parts language provides a good language-tool to help mentalize/objectify/disidentify with aspects of one’s inner world
A Christian Critique of IFS Therapy

Negative

1. There are additional techniques that can be used to help identify and resolve parts, incl. guided imagery, the two-chair technique, journaling, the mirror technique, and psychodrama. Especially important: homework

2. Internal “Family” Systems therapy?
A Christian Critique of IFS Therapy

Negative

3. Humans are fundamentally alone—there is no relationship with God

4. It’s only a *creation* model. No Fall or redemption.
   So, the parts are viewed as all-good
   No recognition of the role of God in the soul-healing

5. Schwartz believes parts do not need to be eventually integrated into the self. This treats the parts as a good, rather than a result of fallenness.
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Christian Distinctives

God is central to human life and soul healing.

The Theodrama

- Humanity is alienated from God and in ethicospiritual bondage to Satan and sin. The world is under the control of Satan (1Jn 5:19)
- God has initiated a rescue operation headed up by Jesus Christ, who came to earth to bring about a massive reversal in human history that is still going on
- Every believer’s story of healing, therefore, is a part of the theodrama
- Christian psychotherapy and counseling, therefore, is directly involved

So Jesus Christ literally plays an essential role in the theodrama of the healing of parts for Christians. And so does the Holy Spirit.
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Christian Distinctives

- Jesus Christ is God’s public therapeutic intervention into human psychopathology
  - Christ’s life demonstrated God’s way of life/flourishing for humans on earth
  - Christ’s death ended the reign of Satan and sin over humankind (Col 1:13)
  - Christ’s resurrection brought in the new creation (2Co 5:17; Col 1:18)

- Sinfulness, brokenness, and internal fragmentation now characterize human life

- Shame and guilt saturate the human heart and have helped to constitute some of the parts. Jesus Christ took all our shame and guilt away and made us perfect in Christ
Because of their union with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, Christians are participants in the theodrama, and addressing and redeeming their fragmented parts is one way Christians participate.

One of the challenges of Christian psychotherapy and counseling is the appropriation and internalization of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection within the soul, so that everything within dies and all that is good is raised from the dead, alive with God.
The Apostle Paul gave us an important redemptive-historical psychological distinction in the Christian self between the “old self” and “new self”

“The old self has been crucified” (Ro 6:6)

“And do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator.” (Col 3:9-10)

“You…were taught in him…to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph 4:22-24)
I want to add one notion to Paul’s redemptive-historical self-system: the created self is created good, but is also fallen.

The created self is designated by one’s name. It is the person I am and you are. It includes all of one’s created goodness, and for believers it is that which is fallen and redeemed.
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Christian Distinctives

How do these three selves (created self, old self, and new self) relate to the parts and to what Schwartz calls the self?

The Christian is the created self/new self, so what Schwartz calls the self is the Christian’s created self/new self. It is the good that I am in Christ.

The parts all have a core of created goodness (that has been taken over by the old self). This core can be redeemed in Christ.

The old self refers to all the badness of the parts—those parts that are evil and that need to be put to death, along with the damaged, aspects of the parts, that can be healed and redeemed and brought into the new self.
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Distinctive Christian Techniques

- Bring Jesus into the internal world using mental imagery
- Need to help counselee distinguish between created goodness at the core of the part and the fallen aspect of the part. Christ’s redemption enables us to differentiate them and them address each aspect, for example, differentiate
  - The “inner critic” into the good law of God/the conscience and the voice of Satan, the accuser
  - The unresolved created need that triggered the Firestarter from its self-destructive nature and behavior
  - The legitimate sadness and fear of the little child from its hopelessness and passivity
- Take fallenness of the parts (old self) to the cross, through confession/ repentance (for sin) or surrender (for damaged creation)
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Distinctive Christian Techniques

Bring the created parts to Jesus to be affirmed and resurrected

In my opinion, the 3 kinds of parts should generally be evaluated in the following way:

**Managers:** These need to be differentiated into good, created aspects and fallen aspects and dealt with accordingly: bring the goodness into the new self and crucify the bad as part of the old.

**Exiles:** These need to be recognized as good, valid aspects of one’s story that needs to be incorporated into the new self.

**Firefighters:** What triggers them needs to be affirmed, but they are harmful parts of the old self and need to be taken to the cross.
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Distinctive Christian Techniques

- Read relevant Bible passages and invite parts into them
  - To console a little child: Mt 18:5-6
  - Help new self recognize the old self is crucified and new self is in union with Christ and has been resurrected Romans 6:4-6

- Using a two-chair technique, new self and old self can have a conversation, or

- “What would Jesus say?” Counselee can imagine herself as Jesus having a conversation with the little girl, or

- Therapist can be involved as a role-modeling advocate
Internal Theodrama Therapy

Additional Resources

*The Drama of Doctrine* by Kevin Vanhoozer, and
*Faith Seeking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*

*The Healing Presence* by Leanne Payne

*Restoring the Shattered Self: A Christian Counselor’s Guide to Complex Trauma* by Heather Gingrich

*Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* by Diane Langberg

*Transformative Encounters*, ed. by David Apperly & George Oschlager

*Foundations for Soul Care: A Christian Psychologist Proposal Abuse* by Eric L. Johnson
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Powerpoint slides available at www.Christianpsych.org