Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map · About 4 minutes

Parts Language Belongs to the Person Using It

Curiosity that leaves another person free to describe their own experience

“That’s your frightened part talking.” It sounds like someone understands you. It can feel like they have stopped listening.

Said in a disagreement, this can sound remarkably like “I understand you better than you understand yourself.” The speaker may intend compassion. The person receiving it may find that their actual words have disappeared beneath an explanation they never agreed to.

Parts language can be helpful when it lets someone describe an inner conflict with less shame. It becomes troublesome when we use it to decide what is happening inside another person, especially if their disagreement is treated as further proof that we are right.

The IFS Institute's model outline includes a boundary in family work: people may talk about their own parts rather than analyze one another's parts outside sessions.[1] There is wisdom in carrying that restraint into everyday conversation. “I notice how quickly I want to defend myself” offers information about you. A label placed on your partner can close the conversation before they have given their account.

Bruno and Leila are fictional partners considering a weekend away. Leila says she cannot agree yet. Bruno responds, “A cautious part of you always stops us doing things.”

Leila answers, “I'm waiting for the rota. I don't know whether I'm working that Saturday.”

Now Bruno has information he did not have before. The respectful next step is to use it. He could acknowledge that he assumed a motive and return to the scheduling question. Continuing to search for Leila's hidden fear would ignore the answer she just gave.

Bruno's wish for a trip remains. Perhaps he also does too much of their planning. He can raise that concern with examples of the work he carries. Neither concern needs an unsupported interpretation of Leila to be legitimate.

A simpler response might be: “I jumped to a conclusion. We need your work dates before we can decide.” He need not turn this into a perfect apology or ask Leila to reassure him that he meant well. She may still be annoyed. She may also have a separate preference about traveling once the schedule is known.

One useful test of any psychological interpretation is whether the person can disagree with it. If “that doesn't fit” is always translated into resistance, the interpretation has become impossible to question. The model is then doing more to protect the speaker's certainty than to deepen understanding.

You can notice this without giving up a framework that helps you. There is a difference between inviting someone to consider an idea and requiring them to adopt it before you take their concern seriously. Sometimes ordinary words serve the relationship better.

Go back to the conversation about the trip. Set Bruno's label beside Leila's answer. What changes when he accepts the work schedule as relevant information? His wish still has a place, and so does her uncertainty. That is enough to continue from.

This conversation raises the question of what happens when somebody else uses it to tell us who we are.

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I would rather hear what you meant in your own words. There is still a conversation to be had if we can get back to those.

Companion reading · The Parts of You That Disagree

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Map Your Inner Patterns · Individual parts map (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] IFS Institute. (n.d.). The Internal Family Systems model outline. Source.

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