

Introduction to the Pattern System

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The Pattern System is a way of understanding your personality in a way that can lead directly to psychological healing and personal growth. It also helps you to understand other people—why they respond as they do, what makes them tick. It gives you a much more detailed understanding of yourself than other personality systems that assign you a personality type (or a few types).

Once you have understood the Pattern System and explored yourself according to its model, you will come away with a comprehensive map of your psyche. You will be able to see your strengths and your defenses, your places of pain and how you compensate for them. You will understand the structure of your inner conflicts and see the leading edge of your growth. The Pattern System will make clear what you need to explore next to resolve the issues that are most important to you. You will know where there is underlying pain, shame, or fear that must be healed. You will know which psychological capacities you can develop (or are already developing) to make your life happier and more productive.

The Pattern System enables you to understand each of the **parts** of your psyche, sometimes called subpersonalities. You can think of them as little people inside you. Each has its own perspective, feelings, memories, goals, and motivations. For example, one part of you might be trying to lose weight, and another part might want to eat whatever you want. We all have many different parts, such as the procrastinator, the lover, the inner critic, the lonely child, the rebel, the caretaker, and so on. These have been documented by many different schools of psychotherapy.[\[1\]](#)^[1]

The most effective of these schools, and I believe, the cutting edge in psychotherapy today, is Internal Family Systems therapy (IFS). The Pattern System works hand and hand with the IFS model, though it is compatible with most approaches to therapy. As I explain the Pattern System in this article, I will introduce those IFS concepts needed to understand it.

The Pattern System addresses a number of dimensions of psychological functioning, such as power, self-perception, conflict, support, intimacy, emotion, safety, and risk. In each dimension the Pattern System shows what your primary issues are, what parts are typically involved, and what the psychological dynamics are behind each issue. It also shows what healthy attitudes and behavior are like and how to get there. Let's look at a detailed example of one dimension, **Work**, to show how they are structured.

Bill's Work Patterns

Bill is working on a big new marketing project. He spends long hours every day and has very little time with his wife and young son. When friends ask him why he is working so hard, when his wife asks him why she never sees him, he says, "I want to get ahead. I want to get a quick promotion and become highly successful." However, when looked at objectively, 50 hours a week would be enough in Bill's company for him to do quite well, but Bill regularly puts in 60-

70 hours, often going back to work on the weekends. Few people at his firm are doing this, even people who are successfully moving up the ladder. Bill sometimes skips meals. He occasionally works late into the night, even when there is no deadline the next day. He is often so tired the next day that the quality of his work suffers. There is something driving Bill that goes beyond what is really needed for his dreams of success. Sometimes his striving even gets in the way of his success. It certainly gets in the way of the rest of his life.

When Bill started exploring himself psychologically, he discovered that there was a part of him that drove him to work so hard. This part felt that it was crucial for Bill to devote every waking hour to work. It had to make sure that Bill was competent and very successful. This is an example of the **Striving Pattern**. This pattern has to do with striving for success and the feeling of competence. Striving means making a great deal of effort, often working so much that family, leisure, and health suffer. Sometimes it means being so goal oriented that you don't really enjoy the work. Striving can involve choosing work or goals that have more to do with money, power, security, or self-esteem than creativity, purpose, or enjoyment. You might think about whether or not you have a Striving Pattern, and if so, what yours is like.

Striving comes from a need for success that will ward off painful feelings. Each dimension in the Pattern System is structured around a **Need** and a **Threat**. The Need is a healthy capacity or experience that you want, and the threat is something that can cause you pain. In the Work Dimension, the Need is for **competence** and the Threat is **failure**. Each pattern in this dimension involves an attempt to feel competent or avoid failure, or both.

Bill has a second part with a major role in his psychological dynamics around work. When Bill was in his early years of high school, he wasn't a high achiever; quite the opposite. He spent his time having fun rather than doing his homework. He watched a lot of TV. He hung out with friends. He did just about anything except his school work. When he had an important project, he would procrastinate and then end up with a rush job that got a poor grade. Sometimes he didn't do his homework at all.

This behavior came from an entirely different part of Bill. This part wanted to avoid doing anything where he would be graded or evaluated. It was afraid of failure, and it dealt with this fear by avoiding projects that could involve failure—virtually all school and work projects. This, of course, was unconscious. If you had asked Bill why he wasn't doing his homework, he would have said he didn't feel like it.

This is an example of the **Procrastinating Pattern**, which involves staying away from action of the sort that is evaluated. It is clearly an attempt to avoid the Work Dimension Threat, which is failure. If you are run by a Procrastinating Pattern, you avoid really engaging in projects. Or you delay your work in ways that makes things hard for you or your co-workers. Some people procrastinate by being indecisive; others are forgetful, timid, or passive. Some procrastinate by distracting themselves with other things. Some just never think they could do anything to make their life better.

Procrastination is involved any time that you would like to do something or plan to do something, and then don't follow through on it. Whenever a part resists taking action to move your life forward, when it puts things off or get confused about how to proceed, you wonder why

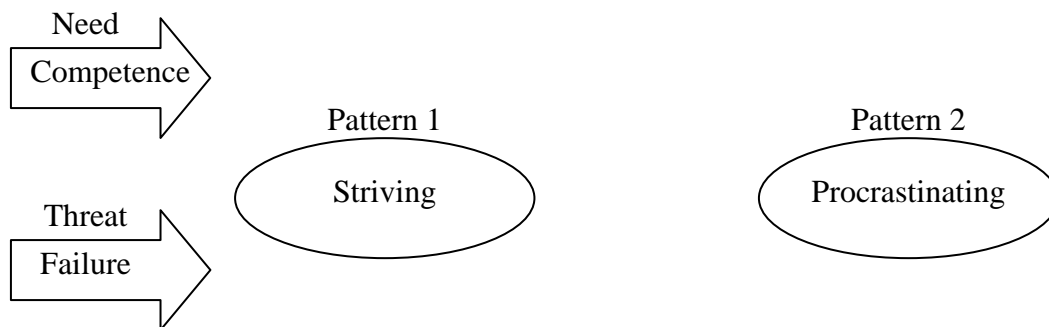
life seems to be passing you by. It is important to realize that a Procrastinating Part has a positive intent for you. It is trying to protect you from the shame of failing. Even though this strategy doesn't work, it is important to appreciate this part's efforts on your behalf. Think about whether you have a Procrastinating Pattern and what form it might take. For a detailed article on the Procrastination Pattern, [click here](#).

When Bill got into his junior year of high school, he realized that he wanted to get into a good college, so the Striving Part became dominant in Bill's psyche, and Bill worked hard through the rest of high school and college. Triggered by a major setback at work during his 20's, Bill's Procrastinator took over again for a time. But after a while the Striver re-asserted itself, and Bill has been working hard ever since.

However, that doesn't mean the Procrastinator has disappeared. It is constantly there in the background of his psyche. Whenever a new project comes up, the Procrastinator wants to avoid it, and the Striver fights with the Procrastinator to get Bill working.

We can represent these two patterns along with the Need and Threat in the Work Dimension as follows (more will be filled in shortly):

The Work Dimension



Healthy Capacities

These problematic patterns are not the whole story in this dimension. We also have parts that function in healthy ways. After Bill has worked through the issues that impel his parts to strive and avoid, they will also function well.

Let's look at an example of this. Sarah has a part of her that accomplishes a great deal. She loves her work and feels good about what she gets done and how well she does it. She doesn't avoid doing what is needed, but she doesn't work obsessively either. This is an example of a healthy capacity, the **Competent Capacity**. Striving is really an extreme of Competence. If you have a Striving Pattern it simply means that you are taking your Competent Capacity to an

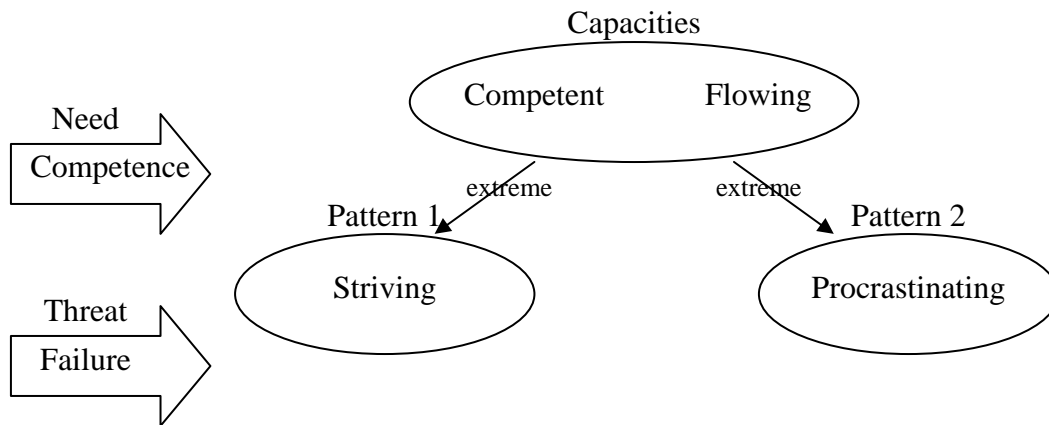
extreme that doesn't work for you. And conversely, Competence is a healthy version of Striving. Competence involves working in a way that is satisfying and successful and doing this in a way that is relaxed, confident, and balanced with the rest of your life. This is the way we naturally function, when we aren't driven by an extreme part. It obviously meets the Need in this dimension for competence.

There is also a healthy version of Procrastination, called the **Flowing Capacity**. Flow means functioning in life with ease and relaxation, not being overly attached to outcome, being present in each moment while still taking care of business. Sarah has the Flowing Capacity as well as the Competence Capacity in her work. They support each other. The Flowing Capacity means that your work flows in a pleasurable, easy way as you accomplish things. You allow yourself to take time off for rest and fun but not in a way that prevents you from accomplishing what is needed. You are present and open and at ease while you work, and this adds to your enjoyment of the activity.

Procrastination is different from Flow in that you take it easy to such an extent that you don't function well. You devote yourself too much to relaxation and recreation without foreseeing the consequences.

We can now fill in more of the Work Dimension.

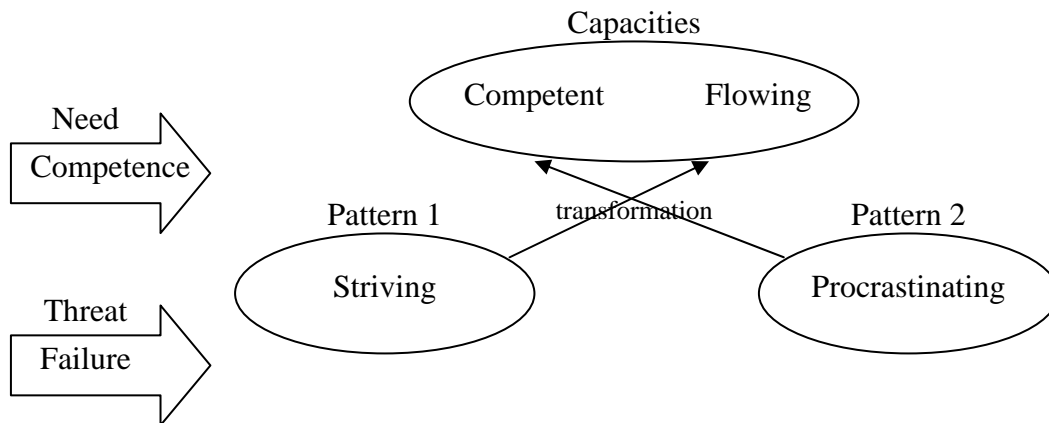
The Work Dimension



The capacities (Flowing and Competent) are complementary; that is why they are in the same circle. They work together by supporting each other in being healthy. The goal in each dimension is to have both healthy capacities operating. To have a Competent Capacity, you must also have some amount of the Flowing Capacity. If you were Competent without any Flow, that would really be a Striving Pattern, like Bill. Similarly, to have an Flowing Capacity, you must also have some Competence. If not, you would really be Procrastinating.

This graphic shows you what is needed to transform a pattern and therefore what capacities to develop in yourself. For each pattern, you need to develop the complementary capacity on the other side of the chart. So to transform Striving, you need to develop more Flow, and to transform Procrastination, you need to develop more Competence. This is shown in the following graphic:

The Work Dimension



Even if you have a pattern strongly, that doesn't mean that it operates all the time. Bill's Striving Pattern is activated at work. When he is home, he is able to be much more relaxed. Even when engaged in a work-like activity, such as planning a family holiday, Bill does it in an easy, competent way. In that situation, he exhibits the healthy capacities in the Work Dimension.

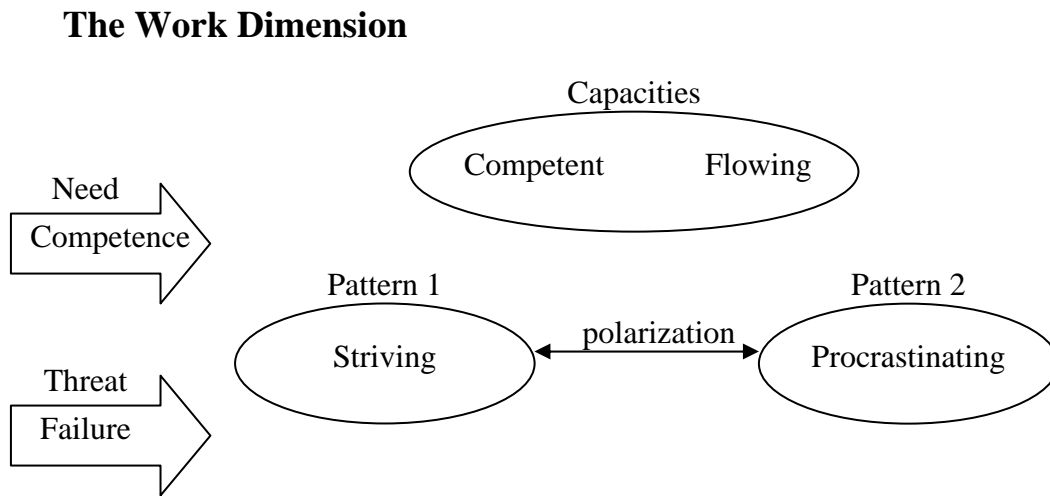
Each of your patterns and capacities is activated under certain circumstances and not others. It is triggered by certain people, or certain types of people. A certain pattern may be activated by men, or by situations where you are being observed, or by large groups of strangers, or by angry people. A certain capacity might be activated by intimate one-on-one situations or by challenges. So to truly understand your personality, you must not only know your patterns and capacities but under what circumstances they are activated.

Polarized Patterns

The Procrastinating and Striving Patterns are polarized with each other. This is represented by the double headed arrow in the graphic. Remember how Bill's Procrastinating and Striving parts often fight each other to determine how Bill is going to act. The Striver wants him to work very hard and the Procrastinator wants him to avoid work. They act in extreme ways partly because each one is trying to compensate for the extreme behavior of the other. The Striver feels forced to overwork not only because of a fear of failure but because of a fear of procrastination. It is afraid that if it lets up at all, the Procrastinator will take over, and all would be lost. If the Striver considered relaxing, it is afraid that Bill would be plunged into the laziness of the Procrastinator. And since this has happened in the past, the Striver has reason for this fear.

The Procrastinator, on the other hand, is reacting to the Striver. It is sick and tired of Bill's working to death. It longs for a rest and some fun. So it is constantly fighting with the Striver to lighten up and relax. It rebels loudly against the tyranny of the Striver. His procrastination isn't just from a fear of failure, it is also a protest against overworking. Yet the more it rebels, the more it scares the Striver and the more obsessive the Striver becomes, threatening the Procrastinator even more. So these two parts make each other more extreme.

In IFS, this is called **polarization**. The two polarized parts are not only in conflict, but they scare each other, and each feels justified in its extreme behavior because it has to compensate for the extremes of the other. This is shown here:



Our culture pushes people in the direction of Striving. It is built into our educational system and especially our corporate culture. This encourages the development of a Striving Pattern in some people and creates reactive Procrastination in others.

If you have both Striving and Procrastinating Patterns, are they polarized in your psyche? How do they fight each other? How do they trigger each other to be more extreme?

Exile Patterns

There is even more to the story of the patterns in the Work Dimension. Let's see this by continuing with Bill. In the course of his therapy, Bill got to know his Striving part more fully. A good way to get to know our parts is to hear from them using creative methods developed by IFS and find out what their concerns and goals are. In the process of doing this, Richard Schwartz, the founder of IFS, learned that each one of our parts has a positive intent for us. No matter how misguided and even destructive its behavior, each of your parts is acting the way it does in an attempt to help you in some way, usually to protect you from some kind of pain.

As Bill got to know his Striving part, he got curious about why it pushed so hard. It said that it was very important that Bill be a big success. He asked it what it was afraid would happen if he didn't work so hard. (This is a crucial question in IFS.) The part said it was afraid that Bill would be a failure, that he would be seen as incompetent and end up as a nobody. Bill's Striver is what IFS calls a **manager** part. The job of managers is to take care of navigating the external world and to avoid pain.

Through further exploration, Bill discovered that his Striving part was trying to protect him from the pain of a child part of him that actually feels incompetent and like a failure. This is an **exile**. Exiles are in pain that comes from childhood. Managers try to keep exiles pushed under where their pain can't be felt. Exiles, on the other hand, want to get out. They want their pain to be heard and hopefully healed.

Bill took some time to get to know this exiled part of him. Bill felt inadequate as a child because he grew up in a town where sports were everything, and he wasn't good at sports. He was also criticized a lot by his father when he couldn't do things that any child would have a hard time doing, and this made him feel like a failure. This caused Bill to have low self-esteem and feel incompetent, which is an example of the **Inadequate Pattern**. This pattern involves feeling that you aren't OK because you can't do something, or because you can't do it well enough or can't succeed. It means feeling that there is something wrong with you because you aren't smart enough or strong enough, outgoing enough or beautiful enough, for example. You feel that you don't measure up; you can't make the grade. Each person's Inadequate part will have somewhat different fears and a different history. Some may feel inadequate in certain areas of life (such as dealing with new people) and not in others (such as accomplishing tasks), or vice versa.

In the Pattern System, the pain of an exile is a result of the Threat in that Dimension. So in the Work Dimension, the Inadequate Pattern is a result of failure or being made to feel like a failure in childhood.

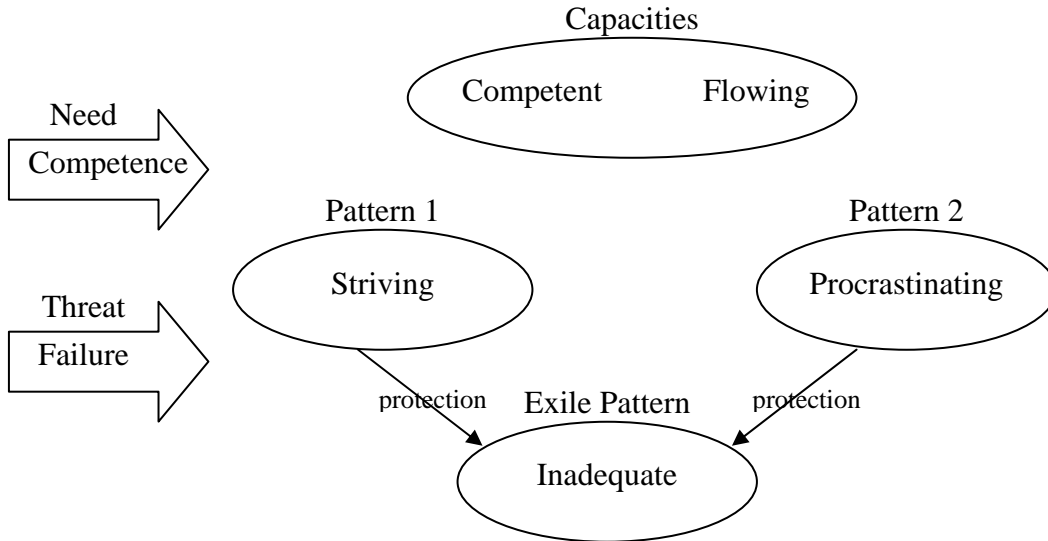
Having an Inadequate Pattern is not the same as recognizing your objective limitations. We all have limitations on what we can do and be in the world. We only have so much talent or intelligence or whatever it takes to be successful in a certain endeavor. To recognize this is obviously good. If we accurately recognize what we can and can't do, and we don't feel bad about ourselves, this is not the Inadequate Pattern. It is just being realistic and wise

Bill's Inadequate Part was unconscious. In fact, it was kept out of consciousness and deeply buried by the Striving Part. The Striver felt that if it worked hard enough and was successful enough, it could keep the Inadequate Part hidden forever. That was its goal, to protect Bill from the pain of the Inadequate Part. That is why it worked so hard, even harder than was really necessary for success. This was not a rational decision by Bill. The real reasons for his striving were unconscious. It was driven by a desperate need to exile his feelings of inadequacy.

Bill's Procrastinator was also trying to protect against the Inadequate Part, but it used a completely different strategy. It wanted to avoid feeling inadequate by avoiding any work that could fail. Of course, this backfired. It actually led to the feeling of inadequacy it was trying to

circumvent. This often happens with parts; they have a narrow perspective that prevents them from seeing the results of their behavior.

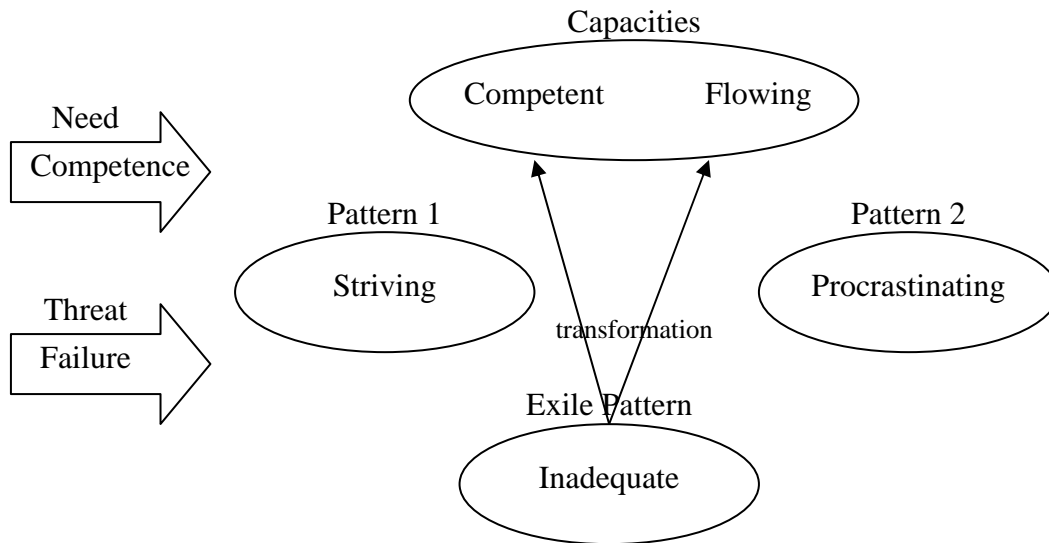
The Work Dimension



Patterns can be transformed by getting permission from the manager (the Procrastinator or the Striver) to get to know the exile involved (the Inadequate Part), and then healing the pain that the exile is carrying. Then the manager can relax and take on a healthier role in the psyche because its no longer needs to protect against the exile. IFS has a very effective method for helping exiles to let go of the burdens they carry from childhood. The Pattern System shows the relationships between the managers and the exiles they protect in each dimension, thus pointing to way toward the healing that is needed.

We can now say more about the relationship between Exile Patterns and Capacities. Flow is a capacity we are all born with; it gets blocked when you develop the Exile Pattern of Inadequacy and then a protector pattern of Striving or Procrastination. Therefore when you do the internal work to heal the Inadequate Pattern and its protector, the Flowing Capacity natural emerges. The same is true for the Competent Capacity; this emerges naturally after healing the patterns that have been blocking it. We can show these additional relationships as follows:

The Work Dimension



You might want to think about whether or not you have an Inadequate Pattern and what form it takes for you. What do you feel you are lacking? What do you think you can't do? How does that make you feel?

In this article I have just provided short descriptions of these patterns and capacities. Much more could be said about each one. In fact, one of the advantages of the Pattern System is that we can really tell you a lot about each pattern—the various forms it can take, how it may behave, how to detect it, how it may affect your life, what it feels like in your body, what it may be trying to do for you, what parts it might be protecting, how it interacts with other parts and other people, and how to heal it. We can also tell you how to most effectively relate to people with a given pattern. With exile patterns, we can also tell you where they may have come from in your childhood. With capacities, we can tell you what they feel like experientially, what they add to your life, and how to develop them to higher levels, including spiritual development.

By exploring your patterns and capacities in a given dimension, you end up with a comprehensive understanding of your strengths and blocks, the dynamics between your parts, and your underlying issues. This provides a roadmap to the work you need to do to heal your parts, resolve your issues, and enhance your healthy functioning.

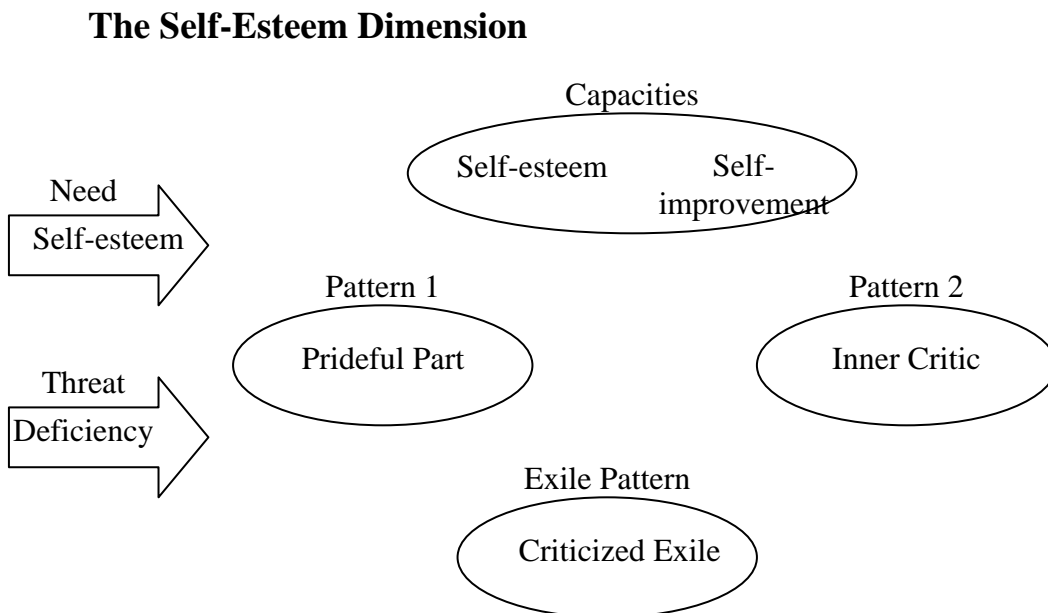
Other Dimensions

There are many dimensions in the Pattern System. They all have a structure similar to that of the Work Dimension. Each one has two complementary capacities and two polarized patterns that are extremes of those capacities. And each one has an Exile Pattern. To illustrate this, let's look briefly at one other dimension, the **Self-esteem Dimension**.

In this realm, one healthy capacity is **Self-esteem**, which involves feeling valuable in an intrinsic way that doesn't depend on outward success or responses from others. The other capacity is **Self-improvement**, which involves being willing to look at yourself realistically to see what you need to work on.

The extreme version of Self-esteem is the **Prideful Part**, which is obsessed with your self-esteem and your positive qualities. It depends on your performance or achievement to feel good about yourself. It often shows off how great you are. It may exaggerate your good qualities and in order to feel better than others. This is an attempt to protect against the Criticized Exile, who believes that there is something wrong with it, and feels shame, guilt, and worthlessness. The extreme version of Self-improvement is the **Inner Critic**, which is the part that judges, condemns, dismisses you.

We can graphically represent this realm as follows:



You can see that the Self-esteem Dimension is laid out similarly to the Work Dimension. The other dimensions also have a similar form. Some of the interpersonal dimensions in the Pattern System are power, support, care, responsibility, intimacy, safety, honesty, and trust. Some of the other dimensions are purpose, energy, emotion, clarity, risk, action, and pleasure.

Conclusion

By exploring yourself and determining your patterns and capacities in each dimension, you can get a map of your psyche that will help you in working through your issues and

becoming more fulfilled and successful in your life. By understanding each of the dimensions and patterns, you can also become wiser in observing and responding to other people.

This article has introduced the Pattern System by focusing on just one dimension. Future writings will describe each dimension, capacity, and pattern in more detail. Look for workshops and classes on the Pattern System in 2010, both in the San Francisco Bay Area and by telephone.

[\[1\]](#) Jungian Analysis, Gestalt Therapy, Psychosynthesis, Voice Dialogue, Ego State Therapy, Internal Family Systems Therapy