

**I Am the Very Worst Person on Earth and Other Myths:
Understanding and Reconciling With the Inner Critic**

by
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I certify that I have read this paper and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a product for the degree of Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology.

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Abstract

I Am the Very Worst Person on Earth and Other Myths: Understanding and Reconciling With the Inner Critic

by Noah Gershman

The Inner Critic is as ubiquitous and challenging a psychological phenomenon as there is. It is often a significant factor in cases of low self-esteem, addiction, depression, anxiety, and other psychopathologies. The Inner Critic manifests as a disparaging internal voice that critiques and restricts one's thoughts, actions, and impulses. It makes demands for perfection in the uncompromising language of *musts* and *shoulds* and punishes any deviation or perceived failure with guilt, self-judgment, self-hatred, and shame. This qualitative, alchemical hermeneutic thesis explores the premise that the Inner Critic's central function is one of self-defense, *not* self-destruction. The author surveys how the Inner Critic develops, how it behaves, and how psychotherapists might work with it in a clinical setting. Theoretical perspectives ranging from psychoanalytic, object relations, depth psychological, imaginal, trauma-informed, cognitive behavioral, and mindfulness modalities are introduced and considered.

Dedication

for the Whales

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Chapter I

Introduction

Nobody tells me it's them, not me. If it's anybody, it's me.

— George Costanza, *Seinfeld: The Lip Reader*
(cited in David & Seinfeld, 1993)

Area of Interest

Across the spectrum of scientific and philosophical inquiry, there exists a common conviction that living things are essentially driven to thrive and survive. Logic follows that behavior should manifest in pursuit of creativity, collaboration, fulfilment, and growth. It seems inconceivable that any organism could develop a capacity for self-destruction. *Why would it?* But the fact is, self-directed hostility is as central to the modern human experience as eating or sleeping or taking a step. Self-hate is a uniquely human speciality. Although most beings act only in the interest of flourishing, we the people possess a perplexing predilection for engaging in patterns of counterproductive self-abuse. So how is it that one can come to loathe oneself, to become convinced of one's own inherent worthlessness, to feel atrocious in all one pursues, or to give up trying altogether, based on an erroneous certainty that everything one attempts is predestined to fail? What or *who* is the internal voice that chastises, judges, harangues, belittles, excoriates, and ridicules?

It has been called the “malevolent mind,” the “life-hating superego,” “the catastrophe machine,” “the dark self,” “daemon,” “diabolos” (Kalsched, 1996). The list reads like the passenger manifest from a cruise for supervillains, and each of these

monikers is apt. But perhaps the culprit is best known by the benign designation: *Inner Critic*, which to my mind is a bit like referring to the predator from *Jaws* as “Lil’ Sharkie.”

The Inner Critic wields apocalyptic powers. I have witnessed people close to me so plagued by its self-detesting propaganda, so tormented by shame and seemingly irreversible doom, that they have been pushed to abject despair and, in some cases, suicide. It is tempting to label the Inner Critic a monster. It is clearly the nemesis of comfort and prosperity. But most of the authors cited in this thesis (e.g., Fairbairn, 1994; Freud, 1923/1953a, 1933/1953b; Guntrip, 1968; Kalsched, 1996, 2013; Stone & Stone, 1993; Straub, 1990; Walker, 2013) have insisted that despite substantial evidence to the contrary, it does in fact serve a survival-promoting, self-protective function. There is consensus that underlying all its castigating conduct, the Inner Critic’s sole purpose is to defend us against perceived existential threat. Seeking to make sense of this paradox is the prime motivation for my research.

Guiding Purpose and Rationale

My main goals in producing this thesis are to (a) synthesize a polytheoretical understanding of this complex topic; (b) assemble a primer—albeit decidedly incomplete—for other curious clinicians seeking an overview of the origins and functionality of the Inner Critic; and (c) identify clinical approaches that can be utilized in working through Inner Critic challenges with clients. I have studied the Inner Critic through the lens of various orientations—psychoanalytic, object relations, depth psychology, imaginal, trauma-informed, and cognitive behavioral modalities. It was important to me that I engage with my subject from a standpoint of compassion, inspired

by the notion that the Inner Critic's foremost function is one of self-defense, *not* self-destruction.

Research Methodology

Research problem: There is a dearth of existing research synthesizing diverse psychotherapeutic theories on and offering eclectic approaches to working with the Inner Critic in a clinical setting.

Research question: How can clinicians better understand the development, function, and expression of the Inner Critic in order to engage more effectively with it in the therapeutic context?

My approach is qualitative, with an emphasis on exploration, as opposed to the quantitative objectives of extracting conclusions and establishing data. My prevailing research methodology is *alchemical hermeneutic*, although the personal significance of the material imbues my presentation with a heuristic, or autobiographical, sensibility. Traditional hermeneutic research involves a theoretical review of established perspectives on a topic and the contemplation of various ideas in relation to one another. American psychologist Robert Romanyshyn (2007) proposed an alchemical hermeneutic approach as one wherein the researcher is called to a subject rather than arriving at it through deliberation. This description applies to my process. “Perhaps all our attempts at research are sacred acts whose deep motive is salvation or redemption. Maybe all our research reenacts the Gnostic dream of the fall of soul into time and its desire to return home” (p. 68). The Inner Critic is a theme that demanded my attention, and my “deep motive” in undertaking this project is certainly one of “salvation or redemption.” My own

experience with the Inner Critic has been the defining psychological struggle of my life.

It is, without question, the catalyst for this work.

Ethical Considerations

I have no ethical quandaries regarding the contents of this thesis. All material involving human participants referenced herein was produced by others and has been previously published. The only identifiable individual introduced by me is myself. I have considered the well-being of the researcher and, although internal conflict is central to my topic, I am pleased to report there has been none on this point. I proceed with the blessings of all my intrapsychic figures, including my Inner Critic, who feels fairly, if inadequately, represented.

Overview of Upcoming Chapters

In Chapter II, I review some of the most compelling theories I found in my research. I believe they provide a solid framework for defining what the Inner Critic is, how it comes to be, and how it functions. I begin at the beginning with Austrian neurologist and father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud's (1923/1953a) conception of the superego. I then introduce British object relations psychologists Ronald Fairbairn's (1994) and Harry Guntrip's (1968) explanations of the inception and expression of the internal saboteur and antilibidinal ego. Next, I outline Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung's theory of complexes and explore American Jungian analyst Donald Kalsched's (1996, 2013) premise of the Inner Critic as a trauma response. I review American psychotherapist Pete Walker's (2013) analysis of the link between complex PTSD and perfectionism. Finally, I present a partial summary of American psychologists Hal and

Sidra Stone's (1993) extensive writings on the Inner Critic's typical dynamics and characteristics.

Chapter III is dedicated to clinical applications and practical methods for working with the Inner Critic in the psychotherapeutic context. I integrate the concepts presented in Chapter II with new theoretical perspectives and propose a comprehensive approach to treatment. In addition to techniques suggested by authors cited in Chapter II, I incorporate Swiss clinical psychologist Sonja Straub's (1990) thoughts on meeting the Inner Critic with compassion, American archetypal psychologist James Hillman's (1975) vision of personification, and tools derived from cognitive behavioral modalities, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), and anesthetic therapy.

Chapter IV provides a summary of Chapter II's literature review and Chapter III's overview of clinical applications. I present my conclusions and urge interested readers to pursue further inquiry into authors, namely, American psychoanalyst Nancy McWilliams (2011) and German psychoanalyst Karen Horney (1950), whose brilliant work I was limited by the scope of this thesis to include.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud may have been the first in the field of psychology to theorize about self-criticism. Much of his work focused on the dynamic between the *conscious* and *unconscious* jurisdictions of the human *psyche*. The term *psyche* will be used throughout this thesis in reference to what Freud also called *the mind*. In his foundational 1923 book *The Ego and the Id*, he wrote, “The division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis” (Freud, 1923/1953a, p. 13). According to Freud, consciousness comprises whatever psychic material occupies one’s awareness in any given moment. It is not possible, or practical, for all the psyche’s contents to be present in one’s scope of awareness at once. Thus, the vast majority is repressed and stored in the unconscious, where it remains “latent and capable of becoming conscious” (p. 14). Unconscious material can take the form of memories, intuition, behavioral patterns and impulses, feelings, fantasies, dreams. Freud likened the unconscious process to “thinking in pictures,” as opposed to the conscious process, which he found more akin to “thinking in words” (p. 21).

Freud (1923/1953a) also conceived the well-known tripartite model of the psyche consisting of the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. Although he developed and wrote about these concepts in the beginning of the 20th century, he first explicated the relationship between them in *The Ego and the Id*. Therein, he defined the ego as “the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes,” to which “consciousness is attached” (p. 17).

The ego equates to the cognitive, analytical, executive-functioning mind. Whereas the ego begins to develop in early childhood, Freud believed the id is present from birth. The id embodies the basic impulsive drives. “For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions” (p. 25). The ego operates predominantly in consciousness, while the id’s operations are wholly unconscious. There is a constant tension between the two, as the rational mind seeks to tame the irrational instincts. “In its relation to the id [the ego] is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse” (p. 25).

Freud (1923/1953a) used the term *superego* interchangeably with *ego ideal* in reference to the third and final component of the psyche. He wrote, “This ego ideal or super-ego [is] the representative of our relation to our parents. When we were little children we knew these higher natures, we admired them and feared them; and later we took them into ourselves” (p. 36). Freud postulated that the superego is formed through the psychic *internalization* of one’s parental figures and the moral criteria that they represent. *Internalization*, as defined by the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, is “the nonconscious mental process by which the characteristics, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes of other individuals or groups are assimilated into the self and adopted as one’s own” (“Internalization,” 2018, def. 1). In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud (1933/1953b) stated, “External restraint is internalized and the super-ego takes the place of the parental agency and observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child” (p. 61). He provided further perspective in *The Ego and the Id*:

Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, of reality, the super-ego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world, of the id. Conflicts between the ego and the ideal will . . . ultimately reflect the contrast between what is real and what is psychical, between the external world and the internal world. (Freud, 1923/1953a, p. 36)

Throughout a child's development, the influence of other authority figures such as teachers and societal leaders is also internalized, adding to and reinforcing the behavioral standards an individual comes to perceive as absolute. "Injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship" (Freud, 1923/1953a, p. 37). With these mandates in place, as one goes along in life, one has a sense of when one is doing something "wrong" or failing to do what one understands to be "right." Operating independently from the ego, the superego functions as a largely unconscious internal arbiter. It imposes high expectations and moral imperatives upon, and often in spite of, the ego and monitors compliance through the mechanism of self-judgment.

Freud (1933/1953b) observed that even mild or moderate modeling of parental authority tends to manifest in the superego as oppressive.

The super-ego seems to have made a one-sided choice and to have picked out only the parents' strictness and severity, their prohibiting and punitive function, whereas their loving care seems not to have been taken over and maintained. . . . The super-ego can acquire the same characteristic of relentless severity even if the upbringing had been mild and kindly and had so far as possible avoided threats and punishments. (p. 62)

Therefore, according to Freud, the superego demands, punishes, and prohibits stridently, whether or not one's actual parents did. "The super-ego is the representative . . . of every moral restriction, the advocate of a striving towards perfection" (pp. 66–67). The superego does not tolerate half-measures. To be adequate and escape its admonishments, one must endeavor to be perfect. As an individual inevitably fails to meet those lofty

criteria, low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority arise. The superego is where self-reproach is generated. It is the Inner Critic—the source of all self-contempt and shame.

The super-ego applies the strictest moral standard to the helpless ego which is at its mercy; in general it represents the claims of morality, and we realize all at once that our moral sense of guilt is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego. (p. 60)

From a developmental standpoint, Freud (1923/1953a) understood the superego's reason for existing to be a regulatory function, specifically the repression of what he called the *Oedipus complex*. He believed the superego's principal task is to suppress the infant id's powerful unconscious impulses of sexual desire or idealized love (otherwise known as *libido*) for one parent and rivalry or hatred toward the other. "The child's parents, and especially his father, were perceived as the obstacle to a realization of his Oedipus wishes; so his infantile ego fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself" (p. 34). However, once the Oedipal phase has passed, and the child's libidinal and aggressive impulses have been successfully regulated, the superego, which sprang up out of necessity, remains installed as a vigilant psychic watchman.

Freud (1923/1953a) observed that the more repressed an individual's outward destructive and aggressive impulses are—that is, the less they act out upon others—the more destructive and aggressive their ego ideal will become in its punishment of the self. But Freud also made it clear that there are no circumstances in which one can escape the wrath of the superego. It is a spectrum of bad to worse.

The more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego. It is like a displacement, a turning round upon his own ego. But even ordinary normal morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality. It is from this, indeed, that the conception arises of a higher being who deals out punishment inexorably. (p. 54)

Freud (1933/1953b) described how this “inexorable punishment” appears to increase in severity during bouts of major depression, or what he called “melancholic attacks”:

[The] super-ego becomes over-severe, abuses the poor ego, humiliates it and ill-treats it, threatens it with the direst punishments, reproaches it for actions in the remotest past which had been taken lightly at the time—as though it had spent the whole interval in collecting accusations and had only been waiting for its present access of strength in order to bring them up and make a condemnatory judgement on their basis. (p. 61)

Indeed, in his explanations of the superego, Dr. Freud described a punitive, arbitrarily self-attacking mechanism that resides within everyone. More stringent parental and authority figures may result in a more scathing superego, but even in cases of mild parenting, the superego will still be harsh in its judgments, moral imperatives, and self-abuse. Freud (1923/1953a) came to the conclusion that the ego is “a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego” (p. 56).

Further perspective on Freud’s theories was elucidated in a 1955 article titled “‘Psychology of ‘Perfectionism’” by Austrian psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler in collaboration with Theodore Bransford. In their text, they cited Bergler’s 1949 article “Transference and Love” written in collaboration with Austrian psychiatrist and student of Freud, Ludwig Jekels:

The structure of the superego . . . consist[s] of two constituents: ego ideal and “daimonion.” The ego ideal, as originally postulated by Freud, consists of the child’s indestructible narcissism plus the introjected images of the educators (as seen through the child’s projections). This ego ideal also contains all the high-pitched expectations of the child concerning his grandiose future. The daimonion sector of the superego (accumulation of the child’s undischargeable aggression) misuses the ego ideal for its own unsavory purposes of torture. By quoting the ego ideal’s unachievable expectations, and contrasting them with the actual achievements of the adult, the discrepancy—who ever achieved everything he

promised himself as a child?—is felt in guilt, dissatisfaction, depression.
(Branfman & Bergler, 1955, p. 13)

Ronald Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip (Object Relations)

In his book *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, Ronald Fairbairn (1994) sought to reimagine Freud's model of the psyche “in favour of a classification couched in terms of an ego-structure split into three separate egos—(1) a central ego (the ‘I’), (2) a libidinal ego, and (3) an aggressive, persecutory ego . . . designate[d] as the internal saboteur” (p. 101). In Fairbairn’s reworked schema, the central ego took the place of the ego and the libidinal ego replaced the id. He did not seek to rebrand the superego, as he felt it remained necessary to the psychological explanation for guilt. Instead, he proposed that the superego and the internal saboteur, which essentially correspond in function, could coexist. Please note, use of the term *object* hereafter refers to a person other than and in relation to oneself.

According to Fairbairn (1994), the internal saboteur develops in the following manner: On some occasion in early childhood, the dependent infant encounters an interruption of his mother’s nurturing attention. It might be the temporary deprivation of her nourishing breast or a lapse in access to her sheltering embrace in a moment of need. The infant experiences a libidinal frustration, which in turn gives rise to an impulse of aggression. This aggression clashes with the child’s love for and need of his mother. The result is ambivalence. Fairbairn postulated that ambivalence is intolerable for the child and so, when confronted with this dissonance, the infant responds by psychically splitting the object of his mother in two—a good/accepting object, who nurtures and satisfies his libidinal needs, and a bad/rejecting one, who does not.

The child has little facility for controlling external experiences and responds to the circumstances with the only capacity he has. He “employs the defensive process of internalization to remove [the bad object] from outer reality, where it eludes his control, to the sphere of inner reality, where it offers prospects of being more amenable . . . in the role of internal object” (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 172). The bad mother is introjected, allowing the split-off good mother to continue existing externally, where the infant depends upon her for his survival. Now, the infant is confronted with another conundrum—how to deal with an intolerable *internal* bad object? “He splits the internal bad object into two objects—(a) the needed or exciting object and (b) the frustrating or rejecting object; and then he represses both these objects (employing aggression . . . as the dynamic of repression)” (pp. 111–112). Even still, the ego maintains its libidinal attachment to these repressed objects. “It is in this way that the two subsidiary egos, the libidinal ego and the internal saboteur, come to be split off from the central ego, and that a multiplicity of egos arises” (p. 115).

Prior to this ordeal, the infant had been impulsive and freely expressive. Without the use of language, his nonverbal articulations of affect and his mother’s attuned responses had been their primary mode of communication. However, in light of his newfound ambivalence, the child may no longer feel safe expressing emotions. He has experienced what he perceived to be rejection and deprivation of love by his mother. In reaction, he felt hatred (aggression) toward the rejecting/bad object. The child understands instinctively that acting on his aggression could result in further repudiation and loss of the good object. This, in turn, would only increase his exposure to the bad. Simultaneously, the infant surmises the potential peril of demonstrating his libidinal

longing for his mother and being met with denial, which, Fairbairn (1994) wrote, would be “equivalent to discharging his libido into an emotional vacuum . . . an affective experience which is singularly devastating” (p. 113).

The child undergoes a profound sense of shame over having needs that were neglected. He feels worthless. He concludes, perhaps it is *he* who is bad. Perhaps he was asking too much. Fairbairn (1994) suggested that the intensity of the self-attack is proportionate to the intensity of the child’s need, meaning that the rejected child most starved for love will come back at himself with a maximum degree of self-disgust. This self-critical reaction is compounded by the child’s incapacity to get what he wants—further evidence of his own essential inferiority. “At a still deeper level . . . the child’s experience is one of . . . exploding ineffectively and being completely emptied of libido. It is thus an experience of disintegration and of imminent psychical death” (p. 113).

Fairbairn continued:

Reduced to its simplest terms, the position in which [the infant] finds himself placed would appear to be one in which, if, on the one hand, he expresses aggression, he is threatened with loss of his good object, and, if, on the other hand, he expresses libidinal need, he is threatened with loss of his libido (which for him constitutes his own goodness) and ultimately with loss of the ego structure which constitutes himself. (p. 113)

The processes of internalization and splitting do not eliminate the child’s need for his mother as an external object. The child’s aggression and libido have still not been fully metabolized, and the risk of their assertion toward the rejecting mother has yet to be resolved. There is one further step:

The child seeks to circumvent the dangers of expressing both libidinal and aggressive affect towards his object by *using a maximum of his aggression to subdue a maximum of his libidinal need*. In this way he reduces the volume of affect, both libidinal and aggressive, demanding outward expression. (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 115)

The internal saboteur channels its aggression into assailing the problematic libidinal ego, thereby subduing its libidinal demands. This is an intrapsychic process, in which one of the child's egos beats up another. "The attack of the internal saboteur upon the libidinal ego represents a persistence of the hatred which the child comes to feel towards himself for the dependence dictated by his need" (p. 115). This is the birth of self-judgment around vulnerability and interdependence—the birth of the Inner Critic. This self-destructive psychic warfare can rage on endlessly because both the libidinal ego and the internal saboteur are separate from the central ego and its confines of consciousness.

It is upon the phenomenon just mentioned that Freud's conception of the super-ego and its repressive functions is based; for the uncompromising hostility which, according to Freud, characterizes the attitude of the super-ego towards id impulses coincides exactly with the uncompromisingly aggressive attitude adopted by the internal saboteur towards the libidinal ego. Similarly, Freud's observation that the self-reproaches of the melancholic are ultimately reproaches directed against the loved object falls readily into line with the aggressive attitude adopted towards the exciting object by the internal saboteur. (p. 115)

Having eliminated the option of expressing aggression outward at the abandoning love object (bad mother), the individual's aggression boomerangs inward. The external good mother survives unscathed, and the internalized bad mother triggers a chain reaction resulting in the cultivation of the child's emergent regime of self-hate.

The child would rather be bad himself than have bad objects. . . . One of his motives in becoming bad is to make his objects "good." . . . The sense of outer security resulting from this process of internalization is, however, liable to be seriously compromised by the resulting presence within him of internalized bad objects. Outer security is thus purchased at the price of inner insecurity; and his ego is henceforth left at the mercy of a band of internal . . . persecutors. (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 65)

Fairbairn's fellow object relations psychologist Harry Guntrip detailed his own observations on the subject in his 1968 book *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and*

the Self. Guntrip emphasized the impact of environmental and attachment/relational factors on the developing psyche:

An inadequate environment, and particularly an inadequate mother, exposes the infant to steadily increasing awareness of his smallness, weakness, and helplessness. . . . Somewhere in the midst of that chaos, the psyche . . . owns these reactions [and] is unable to grow a secure sense of wholeness. . . . Gradually the child must grow to feel . . . that it is too frightening to be weak in an unfriendly and menacing world, and also that one cannot afford to have needs that one cannot get satisfied. He must realize that such needs make one dependent, and if you cannot change your world, you can try to change yourself. (p. 189)

Guntrip (1968) posited that in early childhood the inadequately cared-for individual learns the instability of interdependence. Weakness and neediness come to be seen as perilous imperfections, abhorrent qualities one must take pains to eliminate. One concludes that if their caretakers and environment cannot offer security, the only option is to generate a sense of control for and within themselves. Self-mastery is understood as critical to one's survival. Any failure to achieve it is viewed as evidence of one's own deficiencies. "A self-frustrating situation of deep internal self-hate arises, along with a concentrated attempt to drive and force oneself to the conscious feeling and behaviour that is regarded as adult" (p. 189). Moving forward through life, one develops a self-protective intolerance for anything within that is vulnerable, weak, dependent, or inept and strives always to become the opposite—strong, independent, invincible, perfect.

Guntrip (1968) provided the following analogy to illustrate the dynamic between the three ego structures as defined by Fairbairn (1994), using the term *antilibidinal ego* interchangeably with *internal saboteur*.

The central ego of everyday living working in one room and wanting to forget what is going on elsewhere; the distressed, weak and helpless child shut away in the unconscious as a disowned and hated libidinal ego in an immature state; and the implied, if repressed, antilibidinal ego hating the child and regarding him as a nuisance to be got rid of. (Guntrip, 1968, p. 192)

One learns to suppress, through the internal violence of the antilibidinal ego, the needy, wounded child (libidinal ego) within, and to develop an “ego of everyday living”—the confident, capable persona, or central ego, one believes is necessary for successful functioning in the world.

The child models his own fear and hate of his immaturity on the parental attitudes of intolerance and rejection of it, so that he comes to treat his own primary needy dependent but now disturbed self as if it were a part of his whole self that he could disown, split off, hide and repress, and even crush out of existence, while his “ego of everyday living” is compelled to develop tougher or at least more socially approved. (Guntrip, 1968, p. 187)

The antilibidinal ego wages an endless hate campaign against dependency and weakness, always seeking to ambush and destroy the libidinal ego rather than support it with the compassion and protection it so badly needs. In these conditions, healthy psychic development is almost impossible, whereas psychopathologies, including a ruthless Inner Critic and fixation on perfection, are provided fertile soil for growth.

In depressed and obsessional persons the central ego may be all but captured by the antilibidinal ego. In these patients, hostile self-attack and punishing self-mastery are quite visible. All sado-masochistic phenomena are expressions of the deep-down persecution of the libidinal ego by the antilibidinal ego. (Guntrip, 1968, p. 189)

One comes to fear the intrapsychic assaults of the antilibidinal ego more than any threat one could face from outside experience. *“Very early in life a human being tends to become cruelly divided against himself and becomes a self-frustrating and . . . self-destroying creature . . . a much greater danger and menace to him[self] than the outer world normally and usually is”* (Guntrip, 1968, p. 189). When confronted with obstacles in external reality, it is the *internal* interference, the Inner Critic’s loud voice of no confidence, that often makes rising to the occasion impossible rather than the extrinsic

challenge itself. “Difficulties in real life that could actually be met and coped with, are repeatedly felt to be intolerable because of the weakening effect of the self-persecution and the incessant fear and hate kept going inside” (pp. 189–190). Thus, the antilibidinal ego can add self-defeat to its list of accomplishments.

C. G. Jung and Donald Kalsched

One of C. G. Jung’s many significant contributions to the field of depth psychology was the concept of the psychological *complex*. According to Jung (1948/1969a), a complex may be described as a recurring disruptive thought or behavioral pattern that arises unexpectedly out of the unconscious. “Complexes interfere with the intentions of the will and disturb the conscious performance. . . . They appear and disappear according to their own laws; they can temporarily obsess consciousness, or influence speech and action in an unconscious way” (p. 97 [*CW 8*, para. 253]). In a 2014 article titled “Complexes and Imagination,” Swiss Jungian analyst Verena Kast wrote,

Each experience with a similar topic or a similar emotion is identified and understood in terms of the complex; we react in the structure of the complex and therefore we reinforce it. . . . Complexes are life problems but also express the central themes of our life. They are what determine our psychic disposition. (pp. 682–683)

These criteria can be applied to the Inner Critic, which will be explored as a complex later in this section.

Donald Kalsched’s books *The Inner World of Trauma* (1996) and *Trauma and the Soul* (2013) both focused on the relationship between childhood trauma and the development of the self-attacking, or inner critical, complex. Kalsched (2013) defined childhood trauma as

unbearable pain . . . a breakdown in those inter-human mediational processes through which the child’s volcanic affects (love and hate) become humanized,

metabolized, and rendered into language by those caring for him. If these affects are too strong, or the parent's "holding capacity" too weak . . . a psychic breakdown is threatened. (p. 132)

Consistent with previously presented ideas, Kalsched's (2013) definition refers to the life-altering rupture that occurs when a child's intense experience of pain is caused or fails to be alleviated by their caretaker. Whereas "trauma" is often associated with isolated violent or devastating events, Kalsched proposed a broader view, taking into consideration whatever a child might perceive to be existentially threatening. Certainly, instances of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect and abandonment, would be deemed traumatic. But Kalsched also recognized less obvious examples, such as humiliation, rejection, or miscommunication, to be fundamentally traumatic in the psychological development of many individuals.

Kalsched (1996) provided the following hypothesis for what he called "the origin of the dark self" (p. 17). It resembles Fairbairn's (1994) inception theory for the internal saboteur. To summarize Kalsched's take on Fairbairn's ideas: The internal experience of an infant is beset with intense sensations fluctuating between safety, comfort, and satisfaction in one extreme and discomfort, frustration, and agitation in the other. It is the business of the mother to empathically attune to her child and help them integrate these polarized affects. For example, the mother senses when her baby is uncomfortable and provides relief, giving form to the feeling and restoring homeostasis. Occasional interruption of this dynamic is normal and important to the child's psychic growth. It is healthy as long as the mother eventually reestablishes balance. As these lapses repeat throughout development, the infant's psyche begins to differentiate and the child adapts to contain their own affects, their ego gains its own capacity for tolerating ambivalence

and strong conflicting emotions. “Everything depends upon a gradual humanization and integration of the archetypal opposites as the infant wrestles with tolerable experiences of frustration (hate) in the context of a good-enough (not perfect) primary relationship” (Kalsched, 1996, p. 19).

A time may come, however, when a child’s process of tolerance building is prematurely interrupted and the normal dependency needs—love, soothing, comfort—it looks for from its mother are denied without repair. As in Fairbairn’s (1994) example, when a child is rejected, libido and aggression surge and conflict. If the child expresses its need or frustration, through crying or a temper tantrum, and is in turn ignored, admonished, or punished, the child comes to understand that both its needs and its externalized responses are futile and bad. The child’s aggression toward their ineffective, abusive, or neglectful parents may then be turned inward and used to repress or punish their own dependency, which they have now come to hate about themselves. Thus, the Inner Critic complex emerges. “The aggressive energies of the psyche are turned back upon the dependent aspects and we have an internal environment where self-attack for neediness is a constant occurrence” (Kalsched, 1996, p. 23).

In cases of extreme abuse and neglect, this cycle may reach existentially critical levels. If the child’s caretaker is the perpetrator, is completely absent in their moment of need, or is rageful in response, the child’s inchoate ego may be threatened with irreparable destabilization. For the child, this ordeal might represent “a break in life’s continuity, so that primitive defenses now become organized to defend against a repetition of ‘unthinkable anxiety’ or a return to the acute confusional state that belongs to disintegration of nascent ego structure” (Kalsched, 1996, p. 33). In other words,

unconscious emergency rescue measures kick in to protect the child from psychological annihilation. In the face of overwhelming experience, the normal primal defensive reaction is to flee from the source of injury. But for a child, particularly an infant, physical retreat is likely not possible. The only option may be psychic escape or *dissociation*—a fragmenting of the ego, whereby the vulnerable soul is split off and transported to a protected internal space (Kalsched, 1996).

To prevent . . . destruction, we might say that an archetypal “force” comes to the rescue. This archetypal force represents a self-care defensive system which is far more archaic and devastating than the more common level of ego-defenses. We might think of this figure as “Mr. Dissociation” himself—an emissary from the dark world of the unconscious, a true *diabolos*. (Kalsched, 1996, p. 34)

Kalsched (1996) theorized that trauma response may involve the manifestation of an internal figure—in some cases a benevolent savior or guardian angel, but in most, something sinister like a “*diabolos*” (Greek for devil).

The outer trauma ends and its effects may be largely “forgotten,” but the psychological sequelae of the trauma continue to haunt the inner world . . . [as] what Jung called the “feeling-toned complexes.” These complexes tend to behave autonomously as frightening inner “beings.” (p. 13)

The function of this intrapsychic demon is to terrify the child by taking the most extreme measures possible to ensure they do not risk an expression of need or emotional outburst that could result in further existence-threatening traumatic events.

A child who is violated and violated again and again over time develops tremendous anger that it cannot express to its persecutors. Instead, this aggression is directed back into the inner world toward the neediness that the child repeatedly feels, but must repeatedly repress. When harnessed by the defensive system, these aggressive energies turn into something monstrous. (Kalsched, 2013, p. 90)

It is only through the Inner Critic’s vicious onslaughts that it can ensure the capitulation necessary to the child’s survival. “In effect, the diabolical figure traumatizes the inner

object world in order to prevent re-traumatization in the outer one" (Kalsched, 1996, p. 14).

The phrase "childhood trauma" commonly evokes instances of physical and sexual abuse, catastrophic injury, abandonment, and so forth. But trauma may also occur in more benign situations and can be as impactful to the victim as circumstances that might be considered more severe. Kalsched (2013) recounted a vivid clinical example of one such trauma and noted how this quintessential experience gave rise to his client's Inner Critic and a persistent, lifelong sense of shame.

A little girl [Sandra] reach[es] out for her mother with a handful of flowers in total loving exuberance—a moment of complete, unguarded *enthusiasm*. . . . We might say that something of this child's unique, God-given personal spirit or soul was reaching across a threshold here in search of reception by reality, an inner act of love awaiting an outer response. This response did not occur. Sandra's gesture was not met. Her spirit in this moment could not therefore "incarnate"—could not become real.

... "No, No Sandra! What's the matter with you! How could you? You picked those flowers from Mrs. Smith's garden. Now you apologize to her." . . . Fifty years later, Sandra . . . still feels the shame of it. And the "voice" of this shame remained a relentless chastising voice. . . . "No, No Sandra! What's the matter with you!" This voice made sure that underneath all her outward success and personal accomplishment, there remained a deep sense of her own failure in the eyes of this (now) perfectionistic and deforming mirror.

Shame seems to be our feeling-response when *who we are* is found unacceptable, not merely *what we've done*. If someone criticizes our actions in a particular situation, this may cause us guilt, but it doesn't cut to the core like the humiliation provided by Sandra's mother at this moment. The moment was *traumatic* because the source of Sandra's spontaneous, loving gesture was something innocent and good in herself that we associate with the soul's potential life. In this case there was no resonant response in her mother for her daughter's soulful expression. Instead there was a distorting mirror. When this happens repeatedly, the soul cannot indwell—cannot actualize itself in the space between self and other to become an *inner* source of sustenance. Instead, the spark of life in a person must go into hiding to survive. (pp. 162–163)

... Sandra had such a story as almost all children do who have their spontaneous gestures violated by the world. She thought there was something "wrong with her"—a defect or a set of inadequacies that rendered her life an inevitable "failure," and that accounted for her unhappiness. She didn't know what this defect could be, but she was convinced it was "her fault." (p. 164)

As with Sandra, many individuals repress traumatic moments like this one beyond the access of their consciousness. The memory may vanish, but the enduring convictions of defectiveness and shame become weapons used by the Inner Critic in its maniacal crusade to protect that hidden away “spark of life” from any further violation.

Just as the immune system can be tricked into attacking the very life it is trying to protect (auto-immune disease), so the self-care system can turn into a “self-destruct system” which turns the inner world into a nightmare of persecution and self-attack. (Kalsched, 1996, p. 24)

Ensconced as a complex, the Inner Critic will likely terrorize the trauma survivor with incessant autonomous onslaughts indefinitely, or until the individual undertakes the arduous therapeutic process of identifying and confronting it.

Pete Walker

Pete Walker (2013) also explored the relationship between trauma and the formation of the Inner Critic, specifically examining the emergent role of perfectionism. In an article titled “Shrinking the Inner Critic in Complex PTSD,” Walker considered the connection between inner critical thoughts and destabilizing emotional flashbacks, proposing that “the PTSD-derived inner critic weds shame and self-hate about imperfection to fear of abandonment, and mercilessly drives the psyche with the entwined serpents of perfectionism and endangerment” (para. 1).

Walker (2013) believed that fraught childhood attachment resulting from routine neglect or abuse creates an environment in which a child may develop a compulsion toward perfectionism. In Walker’s view, the perfectionist impulse is the child’s attempt to win the previously denied safety and affection they yearn for from their parents. *If only I were perfect, I would get the love I desire.* But when efforts to attain positive attention

fail time and again, the Inner Critic flares up, attributing the alienation to something essentially wrong with the child.

Desperate to relieve the anxiety and depression of abandonment, the critic-driven child searches the present, and the future, for all the ways she is too much or not enough. The child's nascent ego finds no room to develop and her identity virtually becomes the superego. (Walker, 2013, "Psychogenesis," para. 1)

The child learns that their normal feelings, needs, and human fallibilities are defects that justify abandonment and abuse. They become convinced that the only way to earn love and respect is to transform themselves from the reprehensible creature they are into something perfect.

Perfectionism is the unparalleled defense for emotionally abandoned children. The existential unattainability of perfection saves the child from giving up. . . . Perfectionism also provides a sense of meaning and direction for the powerless and unsupported child. In the guise of self-control, striving to be perfect offers a simulacrum of a sense of control. (Walker, 2013, "More on Perfectionism," para. 1)

Perfection is subjective and, in the context of early childhood, can only be verified by the affirmative response of a caretaker. Although a child's efforts to obtain validation may prove futile, perfectionism provides them with a sustaining, if misguided, sense of agency and hope. In any given situation, they can always try harder to improve, they can always be better. But it is always all on them. The child comes to believe that their every setback is due to their own inherent flaws, and this in turn gets internalized as shame. Walker (2013) concurred with German American developmental psychologist Erik Erickson's "emotional math: 'Shame is blame turned against the self,' adding that it is also the parent's disgust turned into self-hate" ("Using Anger to Shrink the Inner Critic," para. 1). Walker wrote:

Perceived imperfection triggers fear of abandonment, which triggers self-hate for imperfection, which expands abandonment into self-abandonment, which amps

fear up even further, which in turn intensifies self-disgust . . . on and on it goes in a downward spiral of fear and shame encrusted abandonment. (“More on Perfectionism,” para. 2)

Hal and Sidra Stone

Husband and wife psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone dedicated much contemplation to the subpersonalities of the Self. They co-created a therapeutic modality called voice dialogue, which, building upon the Jungian practice of active imagination (described in Chapter III), encourages individuals to engage with their internal *selves* through spoken and written imaginal interactions. According to Stone and Stone (1993), the “personality is made up of a group of subpersonalities, or selves” (p. 13). The Stones drew a distinction between *primary selves*, who “are primary in our lives—they determine who we are and how we act” (p. 13), and *disowned selves* who are “pushed away and not allowed into our conscious lives . . . equal and opposite to the primary self that makes up our personality” (p. 14). They also believed there is an *initial self*—“the Vulnerable Child, whose protection is the aim of the primary selves” (p. 15). In their paradigm, the Inner Critic is considered one of the most prevalent primary selves. Their book *Embracing Your Inner Critic* (Stone & Stone, 1993) is dedicated to defining the Inner Critic and detailing practical approaches for working with it.

Stone and Stone’s (1993) explanation for the origin of the Inner Critic aligns with the ideas of the others reviewed in this chapter. They too believed that in early childhood, individuals learn to contain and repress their emotions in an attempt to avoid punishment or abandonment by their parents. “The infant learns that crying is bad and anger becomes . . . a *disowned self*” (p. 14). The Stones agreed that unexpressed aggressive energy gets

redirected into the unconscious where it builds up and becomes “daemonic.” This daemonic energy is what powers the Inner Critic’s self-directed attacks.

Beyond observing the impact of initial ruptures between parent and infant, Stone and Stone (1993) went on to consider the multitude of judgmental messages one receives throughout childhood—from quick-tempered spankings and verbal scoldings to admonishing sideways glances issued in response to a poor choice of outfit or minor breach of decorum. They believed that these disapproving reactions from caretakers often spring from a desire to see their child succeed and establish a functional presence in the world. Although the parents’ intentions may be altruistic, the child tends to process these gestures as an indication that *there is something wrong with me*. Over time, signals like this compound to form the belief that “if only you would improve yourself all would go well” (p. 9)—a conviction that eventually becomes a refrain.

We . . . develop a “self,” a separate subpersonality, that criticizes us before our parents—or anyone else, for that matter—can! The Inner Critic is a self (or subpersonality) that develops to protect us from being shamed or hurt. It is extremely anxious, almost desperate, for us to succeed in the world and to be accepted and liked by others. (p. 9)

The Stones understood the Inner Critic to be a product of the internalized judgments of caretakers and others but also the explicit and implicit evaluations imposed upon an individual by the pervasive cultural ideals and societal expectations experienced throughout the daily course of their life.

The Inner Critic is the wellspring of low self-esteem and shame. “It is your Critic who feels you are rotten to the core. It is your Critic who feels you must never let anyone know who or what you are because you are a mistake” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 74). But it is also the Inner Critic who keeps people from attempting to prove it wrong by preempting

potentially redemptive acts with cruel reminders of one's inherent inadequacy and the certainty that whatever might have been attempted was doomed from the get-go to inexorable failure. The Inner Critic issues persistent reminders of a lesson learned in early childhood—that perfection is the only way to ensure people will embrace, rather than exclude, you. “It desperately wants us to avoid that primal pain, and the only way it can handle it is to make us perfect. To make us perfect it must criticize us because it has no other way to help us” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 51). Based on the premise that the individual is essentially flawed, the Inner Critic insists that one change into “someone who it imagines will be acceptable to others” (p. 74), causing one to renounce their true self in favor of a false one.

Stone and Stone (1993) observed that although the fiercest criticism always comes from within, it can be easily provoked or exacerbated by external reproach. Effective incoming insults tend to zero in on the precise spot where one is most vulnerable. They trigger shame and provide confirmation of an already self-loathing-oriented bias. “Imagine dealing with an adversary standing in front of you when an invisible man is standing behind you hitting you on the head and choking you at the same time!” (p. 51).

The Inner Critic is a brutal evaluator when it comes to delivering a product or performance, or being at the center of attention. Stone and Stone (1993) underscored the Inner Critic’s fixation on comparison. It haunts one with examples, sometimes years old, of when somebody else’s achievement was more exceptional than one’s own. The Inner Critic’s standard is not just perfection, but the *pinnacle of perfection*. “If your worth as a human being depends upon being better than everyone else, then you become worthless

when you are no longer the best!” (p. 147). The Stones portrayed the Inner Critic as an endlessly demanding figure who can never be gratified—“The harder you try to change yourself, the stronger it gets. Try to please it, and it will grow” (p. 5).

The Inner Critic is the master of no-win situations. Its punishing self-destructive onslaughts drive people into states of unbearable anxiety and depression, provoking them to seek comfort and relief. “Unfortunately, many of the things that you do to make life bearable (addictive, codependent, or antisocial behavior) prove just how bad you are, the Critic panics and intensifies its attacks, you feel even more ashamed, and the cycle continues” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 74). Stone and Stone (1993) believed the Inner Critic is “the one voice in us that is able to stop our personal growth entirely, or at least to stunt it severely. It blocks our ability to live a creative life” (p. 6).

The Inner Critic sabotages relationships. It insists that the price of love is perfection and relies upon external validation to establish self-worth. But when genuine praise and affection *are* offered, it recasts them as deceptions, contending that these undue affirmations could not possibly be true. “It tells us that we do not deserve anything good” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 165). To preempt the potential devastation of rejection, it throws into question whether one is entitled to love at all. “The Inner Critic feels vulnerable. It is panicked that you will mess up, that you will prove unacceptable when someone really moves in close to you, that your relationship will not last, and that you will ultimately be abandoned” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 120). It convinces people they are inadequate. By way of relentless self-sabotage, the Inner Critic keeps individuals from seeking, engaging in, and receiving the intimacy, love, and support that would be so instrumental to their healing. “The message that it puts across is that you, as a human

being, are just not enough. You must be improved upon before you are fit for relationship with another human being" (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 121).

Summary of Literature Review

This chapter outlined several perspectives on what the Inner Critic is, wherefore it comes into being, and how it operates. I introduced Freud's (1923/1953a, 1933/1953b) foundational concept of the superego and object relations psychologists Fairbairn's (1994) and Guntrip's (1968) explanations of the internal saboteur and the antilibidinal ego. I also described Kalsched's (1996, 2013) and Walker's (2013) ideas about the Inner Critic-forming psychological impacts of childhood trauma and Hal and Sidra Stone's (1993) understandings of the Inner Critic's typical patterns, dynamics, and characteristics.

Chapter III

Findings and Clinical Applications

Among the authors I have cited (e.g., Fairbairn, 1994; Freud, 1923/1953a, 1933/1953b; Guntrip, 1968; Kalsched, 1996, 2013; Stone & Stone, 1993; Walker, 2013), there is universal agreement that the Inner Critic is born of attachment ruptures in early childhood. It may develop in response to a single event or the accumulation of many. Typically, the inciting incident involves a child experiencing rejection, deprivation, humiliation, derision, or outright abuse from their primary caretaker. These circumstances trigger a highly charged affect response, often characterized as an ambivalence between dependency and antipathy. The child becomes hyper-aware of their feelings, fearing that an outward assertion of vulnerability or anger might irritate their parent and result in further alienation. To regulate a potentially perilous reaction, the unexpressed aggression is turned inward in the form of self-hatred, and an unconscious, self-protective mechanism is spontaneously generated within the child's psyche—the internal policeman we call the Inner Critic.

Moving forward, the Inner Critic seeks to protect the individual from the perceived existential danger of future rebuke or abandonment by bombarding them with self-attacks designed to keep their behavior in check. It convinces them they are vile and worthless to dissuade them from taking actions that might expose them to the unbearable pain of rejection and failure. Not unlike the Precrime Division in American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's (2002) short story *The Minority Report*, this intrapsychic

cop seeks to anticipate infractions of its strict ideals and dole out punishment to prevent misdeeds before they can occur.

In Freud's (1923/1953a) view, the reproachful, punitive superego is as fundamental a structure of the psyche as the thinking ego and the feeling id. The harshness of each person's Inner Critic varies, ranging from moderate self-consciousness to crippling self-doubt. The degree of its intensity may be determined by many factors, including the inherent sensitivity of the individual, their capacity for expressing outward aggression, and the nature, frequency, and severity of the circumstances contributing to their complex.

I was personally drawn to this subject, as I myself have been hounded by a merciless Inner Critic for as long as I can remember. Mine has caused me hellacious suffering, anxiety, and depression, routinely torpedoed nascent relationships and creative projects before they could get off the ground, and completely eviscerated my sense of self-worth. It has led me, on many occasions, to question whether or not I should, or even deserved to, go on living. I identify with the complex PTSD survivors described by Kalsched (1996, 2013) and Walker (2013). As a child who experienced epidemic neglect, I developed an obsession with perfectionism, convinced that if I could only prove myself worthy through achievement, I would never find myself starved for affection again. But despite my dogged optimism, my Inner Critic was always there on the sidelines with its megaphone to shout me down as despicable and doomed to a lifetime of failure. My intention in producing this thesis is to gain some insight into the origins of the Inner Critic and explore methods for working with it in the clinical setting. In this chapter, I outline some of the approaches I discovered.

In undertaking this topic, it was important to me that I cultivate a compassionate disposition. It is tempting to describe the Inner Critic as horrendous; frequently, its behavior is proof of that point. But antipathy directed at the Inner Critic is always antipathy directed at the Self. I can report from personal experience the inclination to construe believing everything is wrong with you as further evidence that everything is wrong with you. As an accomplished self-loather, I appreciate the paradox of hating oneself for hating oneself. But the Inner Critic is not the Self, it is an *aspect of* the Self. And it is a phenomenon intrinsic to our humanity. The majority of authors cited in this thesis agree that its true purpose is to protect the most vulnerable part of us from harm. With that in mind, I was determined to approach the Inner Critic with an open heart.

One of the first sources I encountered in my research was a dissertation titled *Stalking Your Inner Critic: A Process-Oriented Approach to Self-Criticism* written by Sonja Straub (1990). I was drawn to Straub's work because she and I seemed to share an outlook. She wrote, "Most of the literature . . . considers self-criticism a sick and neurotic behavior . . . a human waste product which needs to be thrown out" (p. 41). She also observed that "in one form or another, we will have to face our garbage again" (p. 43). Negativity begets negativity. Shunning and denigrating the Inner Critic does not eliminate it. It only puts it through the same callous treatment that brought it into being, the same wounding from which it needs so badly to recover.

Straub (1990) took a benevolent view: "Useless or even disturbing 'garbage,' if it is unfolded and lived with awareness, can develop into something very beautiful that can bring us into close contact with our inner wisdom and the essence and purposefulness of life" (p. 49). She surmised, as did Stone and Stone (1993), that the discerning and self-

protective characteristics of the Inner Critic can be integrated as useful, rather than destructive, forces. It is from a similarly forgiving perspective that I have come to believe treatment of the Inner Critic should proceed. According to Jung (1921/1971), “To have complexes does not necessarily indicate inferiority. It only means that something discordant, unassimilated, and antagonistic exists, perhaps as an obstacle, but also as an incentive to greater effort, and so, perhaps, to new possibilities of achievement” (p. 529 [*CW 6*, para. 925]). Through understanding comes acceptance, and through acceptance, healing. “If we approach the critic in this respectful manner it may become an important messenger and element on our path to individuation” (Straub, 1990, p. 16). Or, in the words of American philosopher Ice-T, “Don’t hate the playa, hate the game” (as cited in Ascencio & Marrow, 1999).

Clinical Applications

In my view, the clinical treatment process should begin with a comprehensive explanation by the therapist, to their client, of what the Inner Critic is and how it typically functions. Hal and Sidra Stone’s 1993 book *Embracing Your Inner Critic* is a phenomenal resource. It is written in concise, engaging, plainspoken language easily readable by almost anyone. Although the book could be recommended to clients as a form of psychoeducation or bibliotherapy, I suggest that clinicians looking for an accessible way to define the Inner Critic give it a read. The main point the Stones emphasized throughout their book—and I feel it is essential to state it again and again—is that the Inner Critic’s core intention is one of self-defense, *not* self-destruction. This attitude is shared by most of the authors I have cited. “The archaic defense is not just a

pathological formation bent on destruction, but is primarily a protective system with a never-to-be violated core of personhood at its center” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 211).

The Inner Critic’s central mission is to safeguard us from obliteration, not cast us into obliteration’s path. But as we have learned, it functions on a primitive, largely unconscious level and accomplishes its goal by brutalizing us and beating us down. It is a club-wielding Neanderthal keeping a loved one from walking off a cliff by breaking their kneecaps. Its heart is in the right place, but its tactics are all wrong. I believe the principal objective in working with the Inner Critic is to foster one’s compassion for it and, by extension, foster one’s compassion for oneself. “For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule” (Dhammapada as cited in Miller 1881, p. 5).

Processing trauma. To some extent, all the scholars referenced herein viewed the Inner Critic as a byproduct of childhood trauma. However, Kalsched (1996, 2013) and Walker (2013) are the only two who focused on trauma explicitly. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) (*DSM-5*) defined *trauma* as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271). Traditionally, cases of trauma have been understood as those in which an individual suffers or witnesses catastrophe, sudden instances of turmoil, or extreme acts of physical or sexual abuse. But there is growing acceptance in the mental health field for a broader description than the one commonly embraced in the past.

In describing childhood trauma, Kalsched (1996) referred to English object relations psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott:

For Winnicott, trauma is always about a failure of the environment/mother to provide care that is “good enough” to sustain an active, creative relationship

between inner and outer reality. If the mother's care is erratic, overstimulating, or grossly neglectful, a split starts to open up between the infant's psychosomatic "true" self and a (primarily mental) "false" self that is precociously organized to screen the true self from further trauma and to act as a *substitute* for the environment which has become unbearable. (p. 124)

This more expansive view allows for the idea that dramatic circumstances need not be the defining factor. If a person experiences a situation as traumatic, they have suffered a trauma and it must be treated as such.

Kalsched (1996, 2013) proposed that trauma induces a self-protective dissociative state in which the victim's psyche becomes drastically fragmented. He believed the individual's "core of personhood," or soul, gets spirited away at the moment trauma occurs and locked in an impenetrable psychic fallout shelter as a matter of survival. In turn, the Inner Critic deploys to stand watch and take whatever draconian measures are needed to keep the soul from being exposed to further threat. In Kalsched's view, one chief therapeutic goal is to gain the Inner Critic's trust and convince it to let its guard down. Only then can the protected/imprisoned soul be freed so that the reunified psyche may resume its natural pursuit of creative growth and wholeness. Kalsched likened the therapeutic process to the protagonist's journey in Italian poet Dante Alighieri's (1320) famous canto to the *Inferno*:

[Consider] the inter-subjective process of analytic psychotherapy: This is a world into which the analytic "pilgrim" will have to descend with his guide (therapist) in order to unearth the fragments of his unremembered pain that have been haunting him from within—those dissociated self-states that are so infused with pain that they cannot be remembered. (Kalsched, 2013, p. 87)

According to Kalsched (1996), a crucial first step for the client is to break their self-defeating, self-defensive patterns by consciously recalling the fact of their trauma and acknowledging it out in the open. The therapist's most valuable contribution to this

process is simply providing compassionate witness. “The unconscious repetition of traumatization in the inner world which goes on incessantly must become a *real* traumatization with an object in the world if the inner system is to be ‘unlocked’” (Kalsched, 1996, p. 26). Therefore, in order to *relieve* one form of suffering, the client must first *relive* another.

The therapist supports their client in processing the trauma, beginning with the affirmation that whatever happened was not the client’s fault, then encouraging purposeful mourning of the loss of innocence, loss of childhood, loss of beloved objects, and irreparable loss of a part of oneself. It can be deeply healing for a person to learn the unnamed anguish for which they have been taking the blame has external origins beyond their control. This recognition can facilitate a release of the internalized shame and fear that have made the Inner Critic so overpowering. (In the following, Kalsched mentioned Dis—a reference to the Devil, borrowed from Alighieri’s (1320) *Inferno* and used frequently by Kalsched to personify the Inner Critic.)

It is only when the innocent core of the dis-integrated self is allowed to suffer that the imprisoning enclave of Hell is broken open. Until his powers are lessened through inner and/or outer acceptance, Dis remains; the “God who turns all suffering into violence.” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 90)

A strong therapeutic relationship is critical to this process. It creates a contained, nurturing environment in which the client can be vulnerable and learn, perhaps for the first time, that it is safe to be so. “This means helping the patient to become reconciled to accepting help for his weakness, so that the libidinal ego may become re-endowed with the energies that had been turned to antilibidinal ends” (Guntrip, 1968, p. 195).

Considering the unconscious nature of trauma material and the intolerable affect states it can trigger, Kalsched (1996) suggested the use of nonverbal, art-oriented interventions as

potentially more conducive to accessing clients' repressed memories and emotions. It is not necessary that the traumatic event be articulated in words, only that the quality of feeling be expressed. "We know, however," Kalsched noted, "that this process never happens without the release of much rage and aggression" (p. 36).

Walker (2013) argued that releasing pent-up fury is fundamental to a client's rehabilitation. "Recovering the anger of the fight response is essential in healing Complex PTSD" ("Using Anger to Shrink the Inner Critic," para. 1). After all, the Inner Critic is formed of repressed hostility, which, in many cases, has never been discharged. "The more a man controls his aggressiveness, the more intense becomes his ideal's inclination to aggressiveness against his ego" (Freud, 1923/1953a, p. 54). Bottled-up rage becomes the atomic energy source for the Inner Critic's blistering self-attacks. Walker (2013) noted, "Until the fight response is substantially restored, the average Complex PTSD client benefits little from the more refined and rational techniques of embracing, dialoguing with, and integrating the valuable parts of the sufficiently shrunken critic" ("Embracing the Critic," para. 1). Guntrip (1968) wrote,

If the primary natural self, containing the individual's true potentialities, can be reached, protected, supported, and freed from the internal persecutor, it is capable of rapid development and integration with all that is valuable and realistic in the central ego. The total psyche, having regained its proper wholeness, will be restored to full emotional capacity, spontaneity, and creativeness. Resistance to this therapeutic process is long kept up by the antilibidinal ego which dedicates all the patient's anger, hate, and aggression to crushing his needs and fears. The antilibidinal ego is not re-integrated *qua* antilibidinal. Its aggression is taken back into the service of the libidinal ego and matured. (p. 195)

Personification. Hal and Sidra Stone (1993) emphasized the importance of developing what they called an *Aware Ego*. This term refers to the capacity for identifying one's own internal selves and observing the thoughts and patterns of behavior

that manifest under their influence. In regard to the Inner Critic, this awareness begins with the recognition that “it is not ‘I’ who is critical of me, it is my Critic who is critical of me” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 58). It is vital that one learn to separate from their Inner Critic in this way and appreciate that it is a sovereign self who can be met and reasoned with.

Throughout this thesis, I have alluded to the Inner Critic as an entity, a *who*, as opposed to an abstract idea. I have capitalized the label, as one would with any proper noun. This approach is known as *personification*—endowing psychic phenomena with a defined, often human, character. Jung (1943/1966) believed that “every autonomous . . . complex has the peculiarity of appearing as a personality, i.e., of being personified. . . . A naïve intelligence at once thinks of spirits” (p. 145 [*CW* 7, para. 312]). He wrote, “The confrontation with the unconscious usually . . . involves . . . the recognition of an alien ‘other’ in oneself, or the objective presence of another will” (Jung, 1954/1967, p. 282 [*CW* 13, para. 481]). Personification is integral to distinguishing the Inner Critic from oneself.

In his 1975 book *Re-visioning Psychology*, James Hillman wrote, “By means of personification ‘fictions of mind’ become ‘objects of sight’” (p. 7). He contended that by giving an animate form to a complex, one can begin to distance oneself from it, so one may interact with it as an independent being. This can be accomplished through visualizing or describing it, drawing or sculpting it, giving it a face, attributes, a name. “Objectify your Inner Critic . . . make it concrete . . . start to see it as a physical reality outside of yourself. . . . Giving the Critic a name is a further step in the process of making it more objective” (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 22). According to Hillman:

Personifying helps place subjective experiences “out there;” thereby we can devise protections against them and relations with them. Through multiplicity we become internally more separated; we become aware of distinct parts. Even should unity of personality be an aim, “only separated things can unite,” as we learn from the old alchemical psychologists. (1975, p. 31)

The perspective gained from personification can unlock unconscious details, revealing that one’s Inner Critic embodies or resembles an internalized person from one’s life—mother, father, teacher, friend. The Inner Critic may speak in that person’s voice and even repeat precise phrases they said. Or perhaps one’s Inner Critic is an alternate version of oneself, representing some unresolved event or moment in time.

Personification creates a bridge between the conscious awareness of a complex and its unconscious roots. It gives body to thought. It makes contemplation relational.

“Personifying not only aids discrimination; it also offers another avenue of loving, of imagining things in a personal form so that we can find access to them with our hearts” (Hillman, 1975, p. 14).

Rational emotive behavior therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. To whatever extent one may embrace their Inner Critic, there will still be a lifetime of toxic propaganda left playing on repeat to reconcile. As the iconic Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi reportedly said, “Your thoughts become your words. . . . Your words become your behavior. . . . Your behavior becomes your habits. . . . Your habits become your values. . . . Your values become your destiny” (as cited in Gold, 2001, p. 65). The Inner Critic is a pernicious spin doctor. Its survival depends upon relentlessly reinforcing the premises that *there is something wrong with you; you are bad and worthless; you can’t ever do anything right*. These beliefs may become so fixed to one’s self-image that they

can seem almost impossible to contradict. Cognitive behavioral approaches can be very effective in disempowering persistent, corrosive, self-denigrating thoughts.

Here, I focus on two cognitive behavioral modalities—rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) and cognitive therapy, also known as cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT. Editors Raymond Corsini and Danny Wedding's (2013) compendium *Current Psychotherapies* provided an in-depth explanation of both. REBT was developed by American psychologist Albert Ellis in the early 1960s. American psychiatrist Aaron Beck established cognitive therapy at around the same time.

Ellis and Ellis (2013) proposed that negative self-directed thoughts are most often “irrational” and tend to operate in the imperative language of *shoulds* and *shouldn’ts*, *musts* and *must nots*. Shoulds and musts are tyrannical. They are perceived as sacred commandments, not to be violated under any circumstances. Ellis came up with the term “musterbation” to describe musts’ compulsive, self-obsessed quality. With his philosophically based REBT approach, he sought to counterattack clients’ absolutistic thinking by confronting it with rigorous questioning and logical analysis. By identifying specious, self-antagonizing beliefs, the REBT therapist and their client can collaborate on disproving and replacing them with new, more rational and productive ideas.

CBT is a straightforward, user-friendly technique that also employs a variety of analytical interventions, including thought-stopping, Socratic dialogue, and reframing. CBT practitioners work with clients to examine their automatic, dysfunctional thoughts and biased core beliefs, also known as *cognitive distortions*, and to redefine and reframe them using a process called *cognitive restructuring* (Corsini & Wedding, 2013). The following is an imagined example of how the process might work:

A young woman who has never before played the guitar buys one with lofty dreams of becoming the next Prince Rogers Nelson. After a few frustrating days of awkward, atonal strumming, she decides it is a lost cause and that she should ditch her rock star fantasies and never again touch an instrument because she is a wretched piece of shit who always fails at everything she tries. This individual could employ several CBT tools to rationally reconsider her searing self-indictment. Some cognitive reframes she could try might be the following: *I just picked up a guitar for the first time this week. How good can someone with no musical experience expect to be after just a few days? Actually, I've already gotten pretty decent at figuring out chords. It probably took Prince thousands of hours of practice before he started wowing people with his ability. Perhaps some lessons would help. Even if I never get to be as genius as "The Purple One," I can still make music, have fun, and with patience, eventually get to be alright. How can I be sure my playing is awful when I haven't given anyone else the chance to react? Maybe I'm not as dreadful as I think. Even if I do quit, or suck at guitar forever, does that make me totally undeserving of love? Does lack of perfection at one thing ensure lifelong failure at everything else? Good enough is good enough.*

Working through cognitive distortions such as catastrophizing, black-and-white thinking, and overgeneralization can help an individual debunk their Inner Critic's claims and prove to be extremely therapeutic. With increased objectivity and clarity, one can begin to identify the self-defeating nature of their thoughts and consciously question their validity and usefulness. Ideally, through practice, this process can be internalized and used habitually to mitigate the Inner Critic's ill effects. Pete Walker (2013) wrote,

The client's addiction to only noticing what is wrong and what is dangerous, like most addictions, requires lifelong management. In the early work, I encourage the client to challenge the critic's monocular negative focus over and over with all the ferocity she can muster. ("Using Anger to Shrink the Inner Critic," para. 2)

Walker (2013) cited the cognitive behavioral approach as instrumental to his work with Inner Critic-afflicted PTSD clients. He created a comprehensive overview of common adverse beliefs and ways to address them (included in Appendix A). In addition to challenging self-critical thinking, Walker prescribed another CBT-oriented intervention known as thought-substitution:

I encourage clients to immediately confront the critic's negative messages and processes with positive ones. . . . Moving quickly into thought . . . substitution often obviates a headlong tumble into the downward spiral. . . . I often ask the client to write out a list of his positive qualities and accomplishments to recite when he finds himself lost and drowning in self-hate. ("Thought Substitution," para. 2)

Shoulds. Following in the footsteps of Ellis and Beck, American psychologist James Elliott (1996) developed a cognitive behavioral approach called *anthetic therapy*, specifically focused on treating the Inner Critic.

AT [anthetic therapy] holds that the inner critic oppresses and blocks the individual through imposing shoulds (and shouldn'ts, which are seen as "corollary shoulds"). If the shoulds are not obeyed, the inner critic inflicts one or more emotional punishments: feelings of defectiveness, shame, inferiority, and guilt. (p. 89)

Elliott promoted the use of tools he called *anthetic challenging* and *anthetic dialogue*, which involve active interrogation of dysfunctional beliefs and negative self-talk, similar to the Socratic dialogue method fundamental to REBT and CBT. Elliott advised that therapists help their clients to distinguish between wants and what he called *imperative shoulds*.

Imperative shoulds (i.e., those having their origin in the inner critic) can be distinguished from ordinary wants in the following way: If you do not get what the imperative should calls for, you feel psychological pain associated with lowered self-worth. . . . If you do not get what the want calls for, you simply feel disappointed—but your feelings of self-worth are unaffected, and you do not experience any of the emotional punishments that would otherwise be experienced. (p. 90)

According to Elliott (1996), it is possible to have a want and a should for the same thing. A should implies an inflexible mandate, bellowed in the punishing voice of the Inner Critic, the failure of which to achieve is a shameful recognition of one's inherently flawed character. A want is simply something one wants. Elliott believed that separating the two is an invaluable therapeutic step. Want indicates a self-interested desire, whereas

should implies an unconsidered and unwavering obligation. It is much more pleasant to pursue what one wants. Elliott suggested that clients examine and reevaluate their relationship with shoulds. Clients can be reminded that shoulds are something they have the authority to decline. Elliott called this a *releasing statement*. “In the releasing statement, the client takes back the right that the inner critic has taken away (e.g., ‘I have the right to refuse to work late when asked’)” (p. 94). This reclaimed agency to stand up for oneself is analogous to restoring the fight response, as advocated by Walker (2013).

Elliott (1996) also established the concept of *recipe shoulds*, which he considered a healthier approach. As opposed to the imperative should, the recipe should is a conditional formula: *If X, then Y*. Using the example provided above, it might take this form: *If I want to make a little extra money or cultivate a better relationship with my boss, then perhaps I should work late*. Employing recipe shoulds is a simple way for individuals to reflect on where their actual motivations lie and gain an awareness of those decrees that are preprogrammed and arise as core beliefs and automatic thoughts.

Active imagination and voice dialogue. In *Embracing Your Inner Critic*, Hal and Sidra Stone (1993) presented numerous practical ways of working with the Inner Critic, including several concise self-exploratory exercises. I have compiled some of these materials in Appendix B. The Stones also recommended a modality they developed called voice dialogue. The voice dialogue process is comparable to a technique that Jung pioneered called *active imagination*, which he described as engaging with one’s inner figures in a sort of waking dream. “The object of active imagination is to give a voice to sides of the personality . . . that are normally not heard, thereby establishing a line of communication between consciousness and the unconscious” (Sharp, 1991, p. 3).

Active imagination is typically initiated through expressive arts such as painting, drawing, collaging, sculpting, music, and dance. “Often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has wrestled in vain” (Jung, 1958/1969b, p. 72 [CW 8, para. 180]). Frequently, creative, intuitive, generative activities open a conduit for unconscious material to emerge that may otherwise remain inaccessible during the more rational, intellectual, interpretive exercise of conventional talk therapy. “The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable. . . . But this development is not achieved by a simple analysis of the fantasy material; a synthesis is also needed by means of a constructive method” (Jung, 1921/1971, p. 63 [CW 6, para. 93]).

With voice dialogue, active imagination takes the form of role-playing. The therapist engages in conversation with their client’s various subpersonalities or selves. For the purpose of the following example, assume that the chosen self is the Inner Critic. Stone and Stone (1993) described their process in this way: Having previously encouraged the client to personify their Inner Critic, the therapist asks the client to visualize where in the room their Inner Critic is sitting. The therapist then invites the client to physically move to that spot in the room. Next, the client is asked to embody, or “become,” their Inner Critic as the therapist begins to dialogue with it. The therapist may ask the client’s Inner Critic questions such as these: *What is it you hate so much about the client? What are their shortcomings? What specific issues do they need to improve upon or address?* The therapist may also urge the Inner Critic to introduce and talk about itself, explain how and when it came to be, and say why it behaves the way it does.

Voice dialogue can be a powerful method for gaining objectivity. It can draw out deeply repressed material and give it both a voice and a witness, which can prove to be

illuminating and cathartic for the client. Voice dialogue can also be used to access the client's hidden disowned selves, the counterparts to the corresponding primary selves, like the wounded Inner Child. "An inner critic never emerges alone. It always has a victim, the criticized one, somewhere in the system" (Straub, 1990, p. 84). Inviting the selves out of the internal realm of the psyche and into open conversation and collaborative exploration with a therapist can help cultivate profound new dimensions of self-discovery. Once the Aware Ego has the insight and capacity to ally with the Inner Critic and actively take part in caring for the Inner Child, the regime of self-hatred will likely let up.

According to Stone and Stone (1993), it is also possible for one to do voice dialogue with oneself through journal writing. In this solitary form, a person takes up both sides of the exchange. The Aware Ego acts as the "I" that initiates the conversation and interacts with the other selves as the individual transcribes the dialogue from the spontaneously unfolding intrapsychic back-and-forth. Often, the voices arising in the client will surprise them. All parties, the Aware Ego and the selves, are allowed to speak freely, without being judged or urged to change their views. The objective is to listen, learn, and foster meaningful communication among one's selves.

You must step into the fantasy . . . and compel the figures to give you an answer. Only in this way is the unconscious integrated with consciousness by means of a dialectical procedure, a dialogue between yourself and the unconscious figures. Whatever happens in the fantasy must happen to *you*. (Jung, 1950/1973, p. 561)

In Conclusion

The ugly thing first needs to be embraced and loved and kissed before it will transform into a beautiful prince. Repressed critics often come out first in a painful general way, making comments like, "you can't do anything right," or "you are the most stupid person on earth." . . . These comments are painful . . . and may be the reason why the inner critics are often so hated and feared. They are also untrue, since it is impossible for somebody to always do everything wrong. In order to get the real message, we have to . . . learn to follow and unfold

the process. Critics often have useful messages and a great deal of wisdom. . . . But first they need to be invited in; then they will change, and develop into allies or friends who can not only accompany us on our way to wholeness and individuation, but can also drive us forward.

Straub, 1990, pp. 83–84

Having met and made peace with the Inner Critic, one may begin to see it as an adviser and learn to integrate its intelligence in productive new ways. It can help one develop great discernment, discipline, sensitivity, self-awareness, humility, and a tendency to consider others' opinions and give them the benefit of the doubt. In moderation, these are valuable assets.

The Inner Critic's vigilance may sometimes be effective in determining how best to proceed with a situation, evaluate its feasibility or safety, and set healthy boundaries. But having gained control, the Aware Ego can decide which of these messages are useful, which require urgent attention, and which can be reframed or respectfully disregarded. The Inner Critic's attunement to high moral standards can be useful when facing an ethical quandary. But one need not be paralyzed with self-judgment and shame. Instead, one may draw on this sensibility to make considered decisions and act as a conscientious citizen, neighbor, and friend. The Inner Critic's grandiose ideals and pull toward perfection can motivate a person to strive for excellence in their work. Only now, the Aware Ego has the capacity to recognize that improving one's performance can be a case-by-case *want* rather than an imperative *should*. There is a difference between despising oneself for perceived defects and inadequacies and having a sense of where one has room to improve. If one does not meet their own inflated expectations, they have the option, the *freedom*, to accept the result of their efforts as is or try again, knowing the outcome has zero bearing on their inherent value in the world.

But perhaps the Inner Critic's greatest benefit can be derived from the sense of hope that perfectionism inspires. The underlying message is: *Things can always get better.* Liberated from a self-flagellating agenda, an optimistic faith in resilience and boundless possibility can prove to be an invaluable resource.

What a boon to our personal growth it would be to recognize this critical voice as a voice, nothing more and nothing less, and to be able to deal with it in an objective way! *The ability to separate from the Inner Critic and no longer be dominated by its negative injunctions will result in a major shift in one's sense of self-esteem and self-worth.* (Stone & Stone, 1993, p. 36)

I do not intend to wrap this all up with some sort of schmaltzy Hollywood-style happy ending. To be sure, tending one's Inner Critic is a lifelong proposition. Mine has been with me for every word of this thesis—and the many thousand I deleted—insisting that what I had written was “lame” or may reveal my half-baked grasp of the material. But my Inner Critic has been reduced from a Godzilla to a Garfield. Instead of wreaking havoc all across my inner world with fangs and claws and napalm breath, now it just grumbles sarcastically and tugs on my shirt. As with so many challenges, the Inner Critic's power diminishes as our awareness and understanding of it grows. I have learned from personal experience it is possible to transcend decades of abject, Inner Critic-generated anguish and anxiety to arrive at a place of relative peace. I believe *your* Inner Critic can be approached and reasoned with, convinced to put down its weapons, and invited to join you as a valued companion in your pursuit of a more engaged, creative, fulfilling life.

Chapter IV

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

This thesis explored the Inner Critic—how it develops, how it functions, and how psychotherapists might approach its attendant challenges in the clinical setting. In Chapter I, I presented the perplexing contradiction between the conviction that all living things exist to flourish and the fact that human beings possess a strange compulsion toward self-destruction and self-abuse. I introduced the premise that, despite its punishing conduct, the Inner Critic is a misunderstood protector, fighting to save us from existential threat.

In Chapter II, I presented various viewpoints on the inception and behaviors of the Inner Critic. I began with Sigmund Freud's (1923/1953a, 1933/1953b) concept of the superego, which he defined as the ultimate source of guilt, shame, and self-reproach. I reviewed Ronald Fairbairn's (1994) explanation for the attachment rupture-induced origins of what he called the internal saboteur. Following Fairbairn, I shared Harry Guntrip's (1968) observations of how the antilibidinal ego manifests and accomplishes its self-protective goals. Next, I considered Donald Kalsched's (1996, 2013) thoughts on the relationship between childhood trauma and the emergence of the Inner Critic as an intrapsychic guardian. I incorporated Pete Walker's (2013) ideas regarding complex PTSD and the evolution of perfectionism as a defense. I concluded Chapter II with a

partial synopsis of Hal and Sidra Stone's (1993) extensive analysis of the Inner Critic, including an overview of common self-sabotaging patterns, dynamics, and beliefs.

In Chapter III, I outlined practical approaches for working with the Inner Critic clinically. I expressed my view, shared by Stone and Stone (1993) and Sonja Straub (1990), that therapeutic work with the Inner Critic is ideally pursued from a standpoint of compassion. I emphasized two critical points: (a) The Inner Critic, with all its self-hating attacks and negative messaging, is an *aspect of*, but not synonymous with, the Self, and (b) The Inner Critic's core intention is one of self-defense, *not* self-destruction.

I put forth Kalsched's (1996, 2013) and Walker's (2013) indicated goals of assisting clients in recognizing the childhood traumas by which their Inner Critics may have emerged and processing related feelings of anger and grief. I presented James Hillman's (1975) and Stone and Stone's (1993) takes on personification—the practice of conceptualizing one's complexes as relatable inner figures whom one can visualize, separate from, and interact with to cultivate new insight. I surveyed REBT, CBT, analytic therapy, and related skills for questioning and disempowering negatively biased self-talk, core beliefs, and automatic thoughts. Finally, I described C.G. Jung's active imagination and Stone and Stone's (1993) voice dialogue technique, wherein clients are encouraged to imaginably embody and speak aloud as and with their Inner Critics.

Clinical Implications

In my limited clinical experience as a psychotherapist, I have found that the Inner Critic affects a majority of people seeking treatment. It is well-established by the research in this thesis that the Inner Critic is a pervasive, if not universal, human fixation. It is also clear that American society's highly idealized standards for achievement are likely to

exacerbate the perfectionistic strivings and comparative self-judgments that make most - people's Inner Critics so intense to begin with. My goals in writing this thesis were to enhance my readers' comprehension of what the Inner Critic is and how it can be encountered with compassion. I encourage fellow practitioners to integrate a spectrum of orientations in order to meet this phenomenon with a more expansive, holistic view. Surely, there are many applicable therapeutic approaches that I am still unaware of or was limited by the scope of this project to address.

Recommendations for Further Research

There is a good deal of existing literature on the Inner Critic. In fact, I compiled many more resources than I was able to review. I would, however, like to draw the reader's attention to a couple of perspectives I intended to include but ultimately did not have the breadth in these pages to detail. I became fascinated with the work of Nancy McWilliams. In her 2011 book *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis: Understanding Personality in the Clinical Process*, she defined the *depressive personality structure*, the features of which are consistent with those arising in relation to the Inner Critic—low self-esteem, high sensitivity to criticism, a ubiquitous sense of being at fault. “Depressive people are agonizingly aware of every sin they have committed, every kindness they have neglected to extend, every selfish inclination that has crossed their minds” (p. 239).

McWilliams (2011) observed, “These well-known depressive dynamics create a pervasive feeling one is bad, has driven away a needed and benevolent person, and must work very hard to prevent one’s badness from provoking future desertions” (p. 241). According to McWilliams, the default defense mechanism for depressives is introjection, the same process by which one internalizes the external judgments that mutate into the

inner critical voice. She wrote that therapy with depressives “to be effective, must include an exorcism” (p. 240)—indicating a rooting out of or reconciling with a demonic internal figure. Although my research has led me to believe the Inner Critic is present across almost all personality structures, it is intriguing to consider one that is essentially synonymous with it.

I was also compelled by Karen Horney’s theories. In her 1950 book *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self- Realization*, Horney explored “self-hate and self-contempt” and “alienation from self”—writing in-depth chapters under each of those headings. It was Horney who coined the term “tyranny of shoulds,” first identifying the common, self-mandating tendency upon which Ellis, Beck, and Elliott subsequently built their ideas.

The neurotic sets to work to mold himself into a supreme being of his own making. He holds before his soul his image of perfection and unconsciously tells himself: “Forget about the disgraceful creature you actually *are*; this is how you *should* be; and to be this idealized self is all that matters. You should be able to endure everything, to understand everything, to like everybody, to be always productive”—to mention only a few of these inner dictates. Since they are inexorable, I call them “the tyranny of the should.” (pp. 64–65)

One last suggestion for further inquiry is the mindfulness-based approach. Numerous contemporary mindfulness teachings promote a disposition of unconditional self-acceptance and loving kindness. When applied consciously as an active practice, self-love can be remarkably effective in neutralizing a tenacious Inner Critic. American psychologist and cofounder of the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion Kristin Neff outlined the concept on her website. She defined self-compassion as “a practice of goodwill, not good feelings” (Neff, 2019b, para. 2) The idea is not to simply replace “bad” thoughts and sensations with “good” ones but rather to cultivate a more conscious

and self-forgiving worldview. “Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings” (Neff, 2019a, para. 3). In addition to encouraging a new way of thinking, many mindfulness modalities incorporate positive self-talk, heightened present-centered awareness, meditation, and breathing techniques.

Final Thoughts

In closing, I offer the following from the great 20th-century dancer and choreographer Martha Graham:

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. (as cited in De Mille, 1991, p. 264)

APPENDIX A

Perfectionism and Endangerment Attacks

(excerpted from the article “Shrinking the Inner Critic in Complex PTSD” by Pete Walker (2013) and reprinted with the author’s permission)

Here then is a list of 14 common inner critic attacks divided into the key categories of perfectionism and endangerment. Each is paired with a healthier (and typically more accurate) thought-substitution response.

PERFECTIONISM ATTACKS

1. Perfectionism: My perfectionism arose as an attempt to gain safety and support in my dangerous family. Perfection is a self-persecutory myth. I do not have to be perfect to be safe or loved in the present. I am letting go of relationships that require perfection. I have a right to make mistakes. Mistakes do not make me a mistake. Every mistake or mishap is an opportunity to practice loving myself in the places I have never been loved.

2. All-or-None & Black-and-White Thinking: I reject extreme or overgeneralized descriptions, judgments, or criticisms. One negative happenstance does not mean I am stuck in a never-ending pattern of defeat. Statements that describe me as “always” or “never” this or that, are typically grossly inaccurate.

3. Self-Hate, Self-Disgust, & Toxic Shame: I commit to myself. I am on my side. I am a good enough person. I refuse to trash myself. I turn shame back into blame and disgust, and externalize it to anyone who shames my normal feelings and foibles. As long as I am not hurting anyone, I refuse to be shamed for normal emotional responses like anger, sadness, fear, and depression. I especially refuse to attack myself for how hard it is to completely eliminate the self-hate habit.

4. Micromanagement/Worrying/Obsessing/Looping/Over-Futurizing: I will not repetitively examine details over and over. I will not jump to negative conclusions. I will not endlessly second-guess myself. I cannot change the past. I forgive all my past mistakes. I cannot make the future perfectly safe. I will stop hunting for what could go wrong. I will not try to control the uncontrollable. I will not micromanage myself or others. I work in a way that is “good enough,” and I accept the existential fact that my efforts sometimes bring desired results and sometimes they do not. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” – The Serenity Prayer.

5. Unfair/Devaluing Comparisons: to others or to one’s most perfect moments. I refuse to compare myself unfavorably to others. I will not compare “my insides to their outsides.” I will not judge myself for not being at peak performance all the time. In a society that pressures us into acting happy all the time, I will not get down on myself for feeling bad.

6. Guilt: Feeling guilty does not mean I am guilty. I refuse to make my decisions and choices from guilt; sometimes I need to feel the guilt and do it anyway. In the inevitable instance when I inadvertently hurt someone, I will apologize, make amends, and let go of my guilt. I will not apologize over and over. I am no longer a victim. I will not accept unfair blame. Guilt is sometimes camouflaged fear. – “I am afraid, but I am not guilty or in danger.”

7. “Shoulding:” I will substitute the words “want to” for “should” and only follow this imperative if it feels like I want to, unless I am under legal, ethical, or moral obligation.

8. Overproductivity/Workaholism/Busyness: I am a human being, not a human doing. I will not choose to be perpetually productive. I am more productive in the long run, when I balance work with play and relaxation. I will not try to perform at 100% all the time. I subscribe to the normalcy of vacillating along a continuum of efficiency.

9. Harsh Judgments of Self & Others/Name-Calling: I will not let the bullies and critics of my early life win by joining and agreeing with them. I refuse to attack myself or abuse others. I will not displace the criticism and blame that rightfully belongs to them onto myself or current people in my life. “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.” – Jane Eyre

ENDANGERMENT ATTACKS

10. Drasticizing/Catastrophizing/Hypochondriasisizing: I feel afraid but I am not in danger. I am not “in trouble” with my parents. I will not blow things out of proportion. I refuse to scare myself with thoughts and pictures of my life deteriorating. No more homemade horror movies and disaster flicks.

11. Negative Focus: I renounce over-noticing and dwelling on what might be wrong with me or life around me. I will not minimize or discount my attributes. Right now, I notice, visualize, and enumerate my accomplishments, talents, and qualities, as well as the many gifts Life offers me, e.g., friends, nature, music, film, food, beauty, color, pets, etc.

12. Time Urgency: I am not in danger. I do not need to rush. I will not hurry unless it is a true emergency. I am learning to enjoy doing my daily activities at a relaxed pace.

13. Disabling Performance Anxiety: I reduce procrastination by reminding myself that I will not accept unfair criticism or perfectionist expectations from anyone. Even when afraid, I will defend myself from unfair criticism. I won’t let fear make my decisions.

14. Perseverating About Being Attacked: Unless there are clear signs of danger, I will thought-stop my projection of past bullies/critics onto others. The vast majority of my fellow human beings are peaceful people. I have legal authorities to aid in my protection if threatened by the few who aren’t. I invoke thoughts and images of my friends’ love and support.

APPENDIX B
Getting to Know Your Inner Critic

(The following is a series of seven worksheets derived and excerpted from the book *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal and Sidra Stone [1993] and reprinted with the authors' permission)

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR INNER CRITIC

(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

1. **Tuning in.** Over a one-to-three-day period of time, pay attention to the critical things you say or feel about yourself. For example, you might be looking in the mirror, as you do every morning, and suddenly you become aware of how much time you spend looking disapprovingly at your face. Notice what you don't like about it. Pay attention to the things you say or feel about yourself that you take for granted. "I'm way too fat. I can't stand my hair. My nose is just too big!" When someone says that they can't stand something about themselves, it is not the person who is speaking. It is the Inner Critic that is speaking. . . . Your Critic is there talking in your head all the time.

Catch hold of it and listen to what it is saying. What does it think is wrong with you? What were the mistakes you made during the day? Where could you have done better? What have you overlooked? What should you have done differently? The things that make you dissatisfied with yourself reflect the judgments of your Inner Critic. Many people have an easier time catching hold of the Critic if they record its comments in a notebook.

2. **Compare.** Now compare notes with other people. What are some of the similarities and differences between the comments of your Critic and the Critics of other people? Talk to as many people as you possibly can because comparing your Inner Critic to others' begins to take the sting out of your own Inner Critic's comments which, up until this time, have seemed accurate and specific to you alone.

You will be surprised to find that others' Critics tell them the same things that yours tells you. You can easily see the exaggeration and inaccuracies of other people's Critics. This gives you additional power and objectivity. . . . These sharings can even get hilarious, because Critics do have a way of getting pretty outrageous.

3. **What Does Your Critic Look Like?** Now that you have heard what your Inner Critic sounds like, we would like you to see what it looks like. The following exercise gives you a way to objectify your Inner Critic, to make it concrete, and to start to see it as a physical reality outside of yourself.

Take a piece of paper and draw a picture of your Inner Critic. . . . Use your imagination and remember that this is not a test of your artistic ability. Relax and have fun. There are no rules.

Now, if it is appropriate to you, give it a name. You may find that this is the name of someone near and dear to you whom your Critic resembles, like one of your parents or a teacher. Or it may have a name that is all its own. Giving the Critic a name is a further step in the process of making it more objective.

WHERE DID YOUR CRITIC COME FROM?

(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

In the following exercises you will have the opportunity to uncover the roots of your Critic. It did not originate in the heavens above, but it grew in the fertile soil provided by the judgments of the people around you. As you see the origin of your Inner Critic's favorite judgments, your Aware Ego grows in strength and objectivity.

1. In the first exercise, you already have recorded a number of statements made by your Inner Critic. Take each statement separately and ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Does this statement sound like somebody I know? For example, if the statement is, "You are too bossy," this might be something your mother used to say to you. Pay particular attention to your parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunts, teachers, and religious leaders.
 - b. When do I first remember being concerned about this issue? This may be difficult, but sometimes a particular incident or period in life was so painful that the Critic jumped in quite suddenly to "help."
2. Write down your mother's favorite judgmental comments about you. If she did not say these out loud, what was it about you that you knew displeased her?
3. Think of the ways in which your mother judged other people. Write down some of her favorite judgments about others.
4. Write down some judgmental comments that your father made about you when he criticized you. If he did not say these out loud, what was it about you that you knew displeased him?
5. Think of the ways in which your father judged other people. Write down his favorite judgments of others.
6. What were the worst characteristics that a person could have, according to your grade school classmates?
7. What were the worst characteristics that a person could have, according to your high school classmates?
8. What were the worst characteristics that a person could have, according to your college classmates?
9. What are the worst characteristics that a person could have, according to your current friends?

WHAT IS YOUR CRITIC'S AGENDA FOR YOU?(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

1. How many books do you have in your bedroom waiting to be read? What does your Critic say to you about the fact that you have not read those books?
2. What does your Critic say to you about the way that you eat? How does it want you to improve your health?
3. What are some other areas in which your Critic feels that you should do better? Consider physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual improvement.
4. To whom does your Critic compare you? Who can do it (whatever *it* is) better? Who is more evolved than you are?

WHEN AND WHERE DOES YOUR CRITIC ATTACK?(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

Let us look at your own special Critic Attacks, those times when your Inner Critic runs amok and there seems to be nothing that you can do to stop it.

1. Some people always leave us feeling bad about ourselves. Who are the people in your life who consistently bring on Critic Attacks in you? Once you have thought of someone, consider the following questions:
 - a. Close your eyes and visualize the last time you were together or the last time that you spoke with each other. What exactly did he or she do or say that made you feel bad? (It usually is a direct or implied judgment or a comparison of some kind.) Try to recall this as specifically as you can.
 - b. What was your response? Can you picture or remember what happened?
 - c. Can you make the connection between the Critic Attack and what was said to you?
 - d. Can you see situations where this happens with other people?
2. Over the next three days, pay careful attention to your pattern of Critic Attacks. After they pass and you are feeling somewhat better, try to understand what caused them. Do they happen at a particular time of day or with a particular person? Were you criticized? Were you under stress? Did your husband say something to you? Were you particularly hungry or tired?
3. At some time when you are not in the middle of a Critic Attack, think about your own pattern of attacks and . . . see if you can begin to figure out ways of dealing with them. Pretend that you are giving advice to someone else about how to deal with the situations that leave you open to attacks. If at any point you feel your Critic taking over, wait a while and come back to this work at another time, either alone or with someone else.

HOW DID YOUR INNER CRITIC TRY TO ADAPT TO OTHER PEOPLE?(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

1. In growing up, you probably had to become a certain way in order to please your parents or your siblings. What did you have to do in order to please them?
 - a. What behavior was demanded of you?
 - b. Did you do what they wanted, or did you rebel?
 - c. Did you have an assigned role in your family? How was it different than the role of your siblings?
2. How did your Inner Critic fatten up on the judgments of people close to you?
3. Do you have any sense of how you might have played out the disowned self of your parent (or parents)?
4. Which of your teachers made you feel bad by their judgments, and which made you feel good by their lack of judgment toward you? What did you feel bad about?

HOW DOES THE INCOMPARABLE COMPARER WORK IN YOUR LIFE?(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

1. Can you think of people in your life that the Inner Critic compares you to? Does it compare you to one or more of your siblings, cousins, parents, stepbrothers or stepsisters, colleagues, or friends?
2. Pay close attention to what the Critic finds wanting in you and how it uses these judgments in the comparisons that it makes.
3. Does it compare you to public figures—people in the world of film or politics or any other field of work?
4. What does the Incomparable Comparer say about your body when it compares you with someone else?
5. As you listen to the Incomparable Comparer make its comparisons, is there anything that you could do that could possibly make it right? Is there anything you could do that could possibly make you equal to the other person?

The answer to this question is invariably a resounding “no!” We can only feel bad until we recognize that these comparisons are being made by the Critic and that we do not have to play the game.

HOW DOES YOUR INNER CRITIC SABOTAGE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS?(excerpted from *Embracing Your Inner Critic* by Hal & Sidra Stone, 1993)

Your Inner Critic evolved in your familial relationships and plays a part in your current relationships. These exercises will help you to see how this works.

1. In your family of origin, with which family members did you play the role of the Judge? What did you judge about them?
2. In your family of origin, do you remember which family members judged you? If so, what were their criticisms?
3. Can you hear your Inner Critic repeating these criticisms of you? If so, what are they?
4. Where, in your current relationships, do you sometimes become the Judge? Whom do you judge currently? Do you sense this other person's feelings of inadequacy?
5. Where do you sometimes feel like an inadequate child in your current relationships?
6. Who in your present relationships seems to judge you? Whose judgments frighten you? What judgments are particularly upsetting?
7. Do you remember the last time that someone became silent in your presence? What did you think that person was thinking about you?
8. The next time that someone is silent in your presence, try to tune in to how your Inner Critic interprets this silence. Do you begin to think that the silent person is angry with you? disapproving of you? bored with you?
9. What does your Inner Critic whisper in your ear when someone says something nice to you?

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