

# CONCRETE ATTITUDE

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## CONCRETE ATTITUDE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Neuropsychology, Cognitive Psychology, Philosophy of Mind

### 1. Core Definition

The **Concrete Attitude** is a foundational concept in neuropsychology, initially postulated by the German-American neurologist Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965). It describes a mode of mental functioning characterized by an individual's strict adherence to the immediate, tangible, and perceptual aspects of a situation, making the individual **stimulus-bound**. In this state, cognition is focused entirely on certain specific items, sensory properties, and automatic stimulants, meaning the response is dictated directly by the perceived environment rather than by internal theoretical comparisons or abstract schemas. This attitude contrasts sharply with the capacity for abstract thought, which involves transcending the immediate sensory field to deal with categories, relationships, symbols, and possibilities.

In the context of Goldstein's organismic theory, the concrete attitude represents a form of functioning that is less flexible and adaptive. An individual operating primarily under the concrete attitude finds it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to detach themselves from the present reality of objects or events. Their thinking remains fixated on the unique, specific traits of individual instances. For example, when presented with a collection of objects, a person with a dominant concrete attitude might only be able to describe the color or material of each object individually, struggling to group them into abstract classes such as "tools" or "things that are heavy," because those classes require ignoring some immediate sensory features in favor of an organizing principle.

This mental state is not merely a deficit of intelligence but rather a specific impairment in the capacity for theoretical generalization and shifting mental sets. The person is often highly capable within routine, habitual, or automatic tasks, but their abilities are severely hindered when the situation requires moving beyond the specific, immediate context. They do not generally reply to theoretical ideas, classes, or traits, because such concepts require the manipulation of symbols and possibilities that are removed from the actual presence of the items themselves. The concrete attitude, therefore, is rooted in the individual's inability to adopt an intentional, categorical approach to the world, limiting their problem-solving to trial-and-error based on direct interaction.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the **Concrete Attitude** emerged directly from Goldstein's extensive clinical observations of soldiers suffering from severe brain injuries during and after World War I, particularly those with damage to the cerebral cortex. Goldstein, seeking to understand how massive brain trauma affected overall personality and intellectual functioning, noted that many

patients exhibited specific deficits that could not be explained by simple lesion location alone. He observed a pervasive change in their relationship to the world, moving from a flexible, self-regulating interaction (the abstract mode) to a rigid, stimulus-driven dependency (the concrete mode).

Goldstein formalized this distinction in his seminal work, *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (1934). His theory fundamentally challenged reductionist views of brain function prevalent at the time, arguing that the loss of abstract capability represented a catastrophic reaction--a retreat of the entire organism to a safer, more primitive level of functioning when its primary capacity for abstract thought was damaged. The concrete attitude was thus conceptualized not as a side effect, but as a core compensatory mechanism or a pathological state arising from damage to the holistic organization of the psyche.

The development of this concept placed Goldstein within the context of Gestalt psychology, emphasizing that the individual interacts with the environment as an integrated whole, or "organism." The concrete attitude became a crucial tool for differentiating between types of intellectual impairment. Prior to Goldstein, observed deficits were often categorized simply as general mental retardation. Goldstein's work showed that the difficulty was specifically tied to the ability to form abstract concepts and shift cognitive focus, a finding that had profound implications for diagnostic assessment and rehabilitation techniques for those with cortical injuries. This historical foundation cemented the concrete attitude as a key descriptor of executive dysfunction.

### 3. Key Characteristics and Manifestations

The manifestation of the **Concrete Attitude** is characterized by several interrelated cognitive and behavioral patterns, all stemming from the inability to generalize or adopt a theoretical perspective. Individuals struggling with this attitude are described as being incapable of the intentional, proactive behavior necessary for higher-order cognitive tasks. Their behavior appears passive, reacting only to what is immediately present rather than acting based on future possibilities or hypothetical constructs.

One of the most notable characteristics is **stimulus bondage**, where behavior is irresistibly determined by the sensory qualities of the presented stimulus. For instance, if asked to sort objects that are both red and circular, a concrete thinker might start sorting by color and then, due to the perceptual salience of a large square object, spontaneously switch to sorting by size, unable to maintain the original theoretical category of "red items" or "circular items." Furthermore, such individuals exhibit a profound difficulty in **shifting sets** or changing their perspective once a task has begun, often perseverating on an initial method even when it becomes demonstrably unsuccessful.

The concrete attitude also manifests as a difficulty in dealing with the "not-real" or the hypothetical.

A person functioning concretely cannot plan effectively for the future, imagine alternative outcomes, or understand metaphors, sarcasm, or symbolic language, because these require manipulating concepts that transcend immediate, literal reality. They are bound to the specific instance; the concept of "justice" remains nebulous unless tied to a single, concrete example of a court case they experienced. Their thought processes are fundamentally non-comparative and non-relational, hindering their abilities to think outside the box or engage in complex theoretical deliberation.

#### 4. The Abstract Attitude: A Necessary Contrast

Goldstein defined the **Concrete Attitude** primarily in opposition to the **Abstract Attitude**, which represents the pinnacle of healthy, flexible human cognition. Understanding the concrete attitude requires a clear delineation of its antithesis. The abstract attitude is the intentional capacity to transcend the immediate sensory experience and manipulate categories, concepts, and relationships, allowing for adaptability and self-regulation.

The abstract attitude enables several crucial cognitive functions that are absent in the concrete mode. Firstly, it allows for the **intentional classification** of objects based on common conceptual traits (e.g., classifying apples, oranges, and bananas all under the category of "fruit," despite their immense physical differences). Secondly, it facilitates **mental shifting**, allowing the individual to rapidly move between different tasks, perspectives, or cognitive rules based on internal volition rather than external prompting. Thirdly, abstraction involves the capacity for **self-reflection and self-critique**, enabling the individual to recognize errors, plan complex steps, and understand potential outcomes before they materialize.

Crucially, Goldstein viewed the abstract attitude as fundamental to human personality and self-actualization. When an individual loses this capacity due to neurological damage, they lose the ability to organize their experiences according to goals and values, thus retreating into the automatic, sensory-driven world of the concrete attitude. This framework established a powerful dichotomy for diagnosing the nature of intellectual impairment, focusing on the quality of thought organization rather than just measurable intelligence scores.

#### 5. Clinical Relevance and Assessment

The distinction between concrete and abstract attitudes holds significant clinical relevance, especially in the fields of neuropsychological assessment and rehabilitation. The concept provides a framework for understanding cognitive deficits in conditions such as traumatic brain injury, schizophrenia, and severe aphasia, where patients often demonstrate profound difficulty with abstraction.

One of the most widely used psychometric instruments derived from Goldstein's work is the

Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST). The WCST is designed specifically to test the patient's ability to shift sets and move from concrete, perceptual sorting (e.g., matching by color) to abstract, categorical sorting (e.g., matching by shape, even when color is perceptually dominant). Failure on this test--specifically, demonstrating **perseveration** (the inability to switch rules)--is often interpreted as evidence of a dominant concrete attitude, which is frequently linked to frontal lobe dysfunction.

Furthermore, in the context of personality disorders and developmental psychology, the concrete/abstract distinction helps clinicians understand cognitive rigidity. For example, individuals on the Autism Spectrum Disorder may demonstrate highly concrete thought patterns, struggling with idioms, sarcasm, or social nuances that require abstract conceptual understanding and perspective-taking. Recognizing a concrete attitude guides therapists toward teaching skills through specific, rote instruction rather than relying on generalized theoretical principles.

## 6. Criticisms and Debates

While highly influential, Goldstein's concept of the stark dichotomy between the concrete and abstract attitudes has faced several criticisms within contemporary cognitive science. The primary debate centers on whether this division accurately reflects the complexity of human cognition or if it presents an overly simplified model of functioning.

One major criticism suggests that thinking exists on a spectrum rather than in two absolute, mutually exclusive states. Critics argue that even healthy individuals utilize concrete thinking frequently, particularly in highly automatic or sensory-driven tasks. Therefore, the difference between the 'impaired' concrete thinker and the 'healthy' abstract thinker may simply be one of degree or situational appropriateness, rather than a fundamental difference in underlying capacity. Furthermore, research has shown that contextual factors, motivation, and emotional state can significantly influence an individual's ability to engage in abstraction, suggesting that the concrete attitude is not always an inherent, fixed deficit resulting from brain injury, but sometimes a temporary functional state.

Another line of critique focuses on the philosophical implications of the concept. Some scholars argue that Goldstein's theory, rooted in organismic philosophy, is difficult to operationalize fully using modern empirical methods. While the behavioral manifestations (like perseveration) are measurable, the underlying holistic concept of the "catastrophic reaction" and the retreat to a "concrete mode" remain largely metaphorical and resistant to strict neuroscientific localization. Modern cognitive models often prefer frameworks that describe specific, modular deficits in executive function (e.g., working memory impairment, inhibition failure) rather than appealing to a global shift in attitude.

## Further Reading

[Kurt Goldstein \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Goldstein, K. \(1934\). The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man.](#)

[Wisconsin Card Sorting Test \(WCST\)](#)

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