

HOLISM

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October 11, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *HOLISM*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=40996>

HOLISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Philosophy of Science, Medicine, Anthropology, Sociology

1. Core Definition

Holism represents a fundamental approach to understanding human behavior and scientific inquiry predicated on the view that a system must be analyzed as a whole, rather than as a mere collection of its constituent parts. Specifically concerning human beings, **holism** maintains that the individual is a unified organism wherein biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects are fundamentally and inextricably integrated. This perspective rejects reductionism, asserting that the properties of the whole cannot be predicted or fully explained by analyzing its parts in isolation. For the holistic scientist, the totality--whether it be a physical system, an organism, or a complex behavioral pattern--possesses emergent properties that transcend the sum of its components. Consequently, any attempt to understand a phase of behavior requires viewing it in direct relation to the total organism immersed within its environmental setting, thereby doing justice to the **integrity and uniqueness** of the individual experience.

The central tenet of holism is that all aspects of existence are interdependent and mutually influential. Emotions, drives, perceptions, and physical reactions do not operate in separate silos but exert an essential, reciprocal effect on one another. This integrated functionality implies that phenomena, such as health, illness, or learning, must be assessed across multiple dimensions simultaneously. In contrast to segmented or specialized views that isolate variables, the comprehensive approach championed by holism seeks a full explanation of behavior that acknowledges the complex interplay of internal physiological states and external environmental contexts, making it a critical framework for interdisciplinary study, particularly in the humanities and life sciences.

2. Intellectual Context: A Reaction to Fragmentation

The emergence of holism in psychiatry and psychology originated as a direct reaction against historically dominant approaches that tended to fragmentize and compartmentalize behavior and the human mind. Prior to the holistic movement, many influential theories sought to reduce complex human activity into discrete, manageable, but isolated components. One target of this critique was **faculty psychology**, which segmentally categorized mental functions into separate capabilities such as will, intellect, and emotion, failing to account for their essential synergy. Another major fragmentation criticized by holistic thinkers was the deeply entrenched **Cartesian dualism**, which artificially separated the mind (or soul) from the body, thereby precluding a unified understanding of psychophysical phenomena.

Furthermore, holism explicitly challenged the various forms of **reductionism** prevalent in 19th and early 20th-century behavioral science. These reductive approaches sought to simplify complex human actions down to basic, elemental units, such as a mere set of reflexes, instincts, conditioned responses, or rudimentary sensory elements. The holistic counterargument is that such reductive analysis strips behavior of its meaningful context and integrated structure. By failing to account for the organizing principles that bind these elements together into a functioning whole, these fragmented models inevitably miss the emergent qualities of consciousness, personality, and adaptive behavior, necessitating a shift toward studying totalities rather than isolated mechanisms.

3. Historical Development and Key Proponents

While holism reflects a general trend across various scientific fields, its specific development within psychology and medicine is largely attributed to seminal work by two key figures. The holistic point of view was significantly advanced by Adolf Meyer, who formalized the theory of **psychobiology**. Meyer's approach insisted on studying the entire life history and environmental context of the patient, viewing mental illness not as an isolated disease entity but as a maladaptive reaction of the whole personality to biological, psychological, and social stressors. His work was instrumental in establishing an integrated view of pathology.

Concurrently, the concept was powerfully articulated by Kurt Goldstein, who originated the **organismic theory**. Goldstein's work, particularly his research on brain-damaged soldiers, demonstrated that injury to one part of the brain affects the functioning of the entire organism, which then reorganizes itself to achieve a new level of coherence and adaptation. His central tenet was the drive toward self-actualization, arguing that the organism strives to fulfill its potential as a totality, confirming that the parts must be understood only in light of the central, governing principle of the whole organism. Their collective work forms the historical bedrock upon which contemporary holistic and systemic theories are built.

4. Foundations in Scientific Observation and Trends

The holistic approach gained traction due to a convergence of observations and developments across diverse scientific disciplines, providing powerful evidence that the nature of reality is fundamentally integrated and non-reductive.

Biological and Physical Sciences: Early biological theories, such as those posited by Hans Driesch, viewed maturation and development through the lens of the **total organism** rather than localized cellular processes. Furthermore, observations in physics and chemistry demonstrated non-reductive principles; for instance, the macroscopic properties of a chemical compound like salt cannot be simply predicted from the properties of its isolated elemental ingredients, sodium and chloride, illustrating that combination creates emergent qualities.

Psychological Integration (Gestalt): The rise of Gestalt psychology provided compelling evidence for holism by emphasizing the organism's basic integration of experience into patterns and configurations (Gestalten). Gestalt theory rigorously demonstrated that perceptual and other wholes are not merely reducible to a summation of their sensory parts, famously stating that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

The Medical Model Shift: A significant factor was the gradual rapprochement between organic and functional approaches within both psychiatry and general medicine. This evolution promoted the crucial idea that every illness, whether physical or mental, is ultimately a condition of the **total organism**. This shift encouraged the medical practitioner to concentrate their efforts on the patient (the man) and his overall systemic condition, rather than narrowly focusing solely on the specific symptom or isolated disease (the disorder).

5. Evidentiary Basis in Clinical Practice and Socio-Cultural Context

Clinical observations provided substantial practical support for the holistic framework, particularly concerning the interaction between mind and body, and the influence of environment on mental health. The development of organic treatments for previously defined functional illnesses--such as **electroshock therapy** and the introduction of psychotropic drugs--demonstrated a clear physical basis for conditions historically viewed as purely psychological. Conversely, evidence also emerged showing that volitional factors, such as the patient's intrinsic will to live, could significantly influence the course and prognosis of physical illnesses, highlighting the power of mental state over physiological outcomes.

The **psychosomatic approach** explicitly confirmed the holistic view, showing that emotional factors are often deeply involved in the etiology and expression of specific physical conditions, including peptic ulcers, migraine headaches, and asthma. Furthermore, studies revealed that even the course of severe brain disorders--such as general paresis, senile dementia, and cerebral arteriosclerosis--can be profoundly affected by the patient's attitudes, disposition, and overall psychological integration. This clinical convergence led to the recognition that emotional factors are potentially involved in a very large percentage--perhaps fifty per cent--of all ailments for which patients seek treatment, cementing the necessity of considering the emotional and psychological aspects in all medical interventions.

Finally, the holistic perspective was validated by investigations into the social and environmental determinants of human experience. Studies revealed a different incidence of mental disorder across various socioeconomic levels and in differing cultural environments, demonstrating the powerful influence of external systems. The observation of culture-bound syndromes, such as *latah* and *running amok*, further emphasized that the definition, expression, and type of mental disorder are significantly shaped by the historical and sociocultural milieu, proving that human behavior and

pathology cannot be understood outside of the immersive environmental setting.

6. Significance and Contemporary Impact

The sustained influence of these various factors has brought the holistic approach prominently to the forefront of contemporary science. As a result, modern research draws heavily upon a vast array of research areas in its attempt to understand complex human behavior and effectively treat mental disorder. This necessary integration requires input from disciplines traditionally considered separate, including **physiology, neurology, sociology, anthropology, and psychology**.

The comprehensive methodology mandated by holism informs various contemporary fields. In medicine, the Patient-Centered Care model reflects holistic principles by treating the person, not just the disease. In sociology and psychology, the development of systems theory and ecological models relies fundamentally on the idea that an individual is embedded within multiple interacting systems (family, community, culture). The continuous integration of these diverse disciplines ensures that holism remains one of the major, enduring trends in the contemporary study of man, promoting a comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of the human condition.

Further Reading

[Holism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Adolf Meyer \(Psychiatrist\)](#)

[Kurt Goldstein](#)

[Psychobiology](#)

[Organismic Theory](#)

[Gestalt Psychology](#)