

PURPOSIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology; Motivational Theory; Philosophy of Mind

1. Core Definition

Purposive Psychology, often synonymous with **Hormic Psychology**, constitutes a crucial school of thought that fundamentally rejects the purely mechanistic and reductionist views prevalent in psychology during the early 20th century. At its core, this approach posits that all organized animal and human behavior is inherently directed toward an end goal or purpose. Behavior is not merely a reflexive response to external stimuli, but rather an active, goal-seeking process driven by internal, inherited dispositions or instincts.

The central assumption of Purposive Psychology is the existence of **teleology** within organic life--the idea that actions are explicable by their purpose (their final cause) rather than solely by their preceding causes (efficient causes). This contrasts sharply with deterministic models, such as early Behaviorism, where consciousness and intentionality are dismissed as epiphenomena. In the purposive framework, organisms possess intrinsic drives, or *horme* (from the Greek word meaning 'urge' or 'impulse'), which endow them with conscious goals that subsequently motivate, direct, and structure their behavioral responses.

Therefore, a key definitional characteristic is the emphasis on **intentionality**. When an individual acts, that action is viewed as an attempt to satisfy a specific aim, resolve tension, or achieve a desired outcome. This intentional striving provides the essential explanation for the unity, persistence, and variability observed in complex behavior patterns, suggesting that the motivational force is derived from the anticipated future state rather than just the immediate past stimulation, thereby placing purpose, not cause, at the center of psychological explanation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The origins of Purposive Psychology are inextricably linked to the work of British-American psychologist William McDougall (1871-1938), who coined the term Hormic Psychology. McDougall developed this theory primarily in the 1920s and 1930s as a direct intellectual challenge to the rising influence of Pavlovian conditioning and Watsonian **Behaviorism** in North America, both of which sought to explain all behavior without reference to internal states, goals, or consciousness.

Prior to McDougall, philosophical roots trace back profoundly to Aristotelian concepts of final causes and later to thinkers like Franz Brentano, who emphasized the intentional nature of mental acts. However, McDougall systemized the concept into a psychological theory by proposing a comprehensive system of **instincts**. He argued that these instincts were inherited psycho-physical dispositions that determined an organism's perception, emotional reaction, and, crucially, the

striving toward the specific goal associated with that instinct. McDougall sought to establish psychology as the "science of conduct" where conduct implies goal-directed action.

While Behaviorism dominated mid-century psychology, Purposive Psychology maintained an important counter-narrative, particularly in motivational and social psychology. Its influence waned significantly after McDougall's death, largely due to the difficulty in empirically verifying the complex, inherited instincts he proposed and the inherent resistance in Anglo-American science to teleological explanations. Nevertheless, the central theme--that goals and purpose drive behavior--was later reincorporated into modern psychology through fields like **Cognitive Psychology**, Humanistic Psychology, and modern motivational theories (e.g., Goal Setting Theory), confirming the lasting value of focusing on intentional states.

3. Key Characteristics

Purposive Psychology differentiates itself from purely mechanical models through several defining characteristics related to the nature of behavior itself. These characteristics emphasize the non-mechanical, dynamic quality of goal-directed action. First, behavior exhibits **persistence**, meaning the activity continues until the goal is achieved, even if the immediate motor response fails, or the environment must change dramatically. This demonstrates a commitment to the end state, in stark contrast to simple reflexes, which cease immediately upon removal of the stimulus.

Second, behavior demonstrates **variability of action**. If one pathway to the goal is blocked, the organism will flexibly adapt its movements and efforts, seeking alternative routes to reach the same end state. This adaptability demonstrates intelligence and intentional striving, proving that the behavior is not fixed to a specific sequence of muscle contractions but is governed by an overarching purpose. The constancy of the goal, despite the fluidity of the behavioral means, is a hallmark of purposive action.

Third, Purposive behavior is characterized by the **improvement of efficiency** with repetition, leading to learning. Through repeated experience, goal-directed behavior becomes smoother, faster, and more effective. This learning process is guided by the affective response associated with success or failure in achieving the goal, reinforcing successful strategies while eliminating unsuccessful ones. Furthermore, purposive behavior involves the preparatory or anticipatory arousal of the organism, often manifesting as emotional excitement or intellectual deliberation before the action is even physically initiated, which primes the individual for goal pursuit.

4. Major Proponent: William McDougall and Hormic Theory

McDougall's Hormic Psychology is the most definitive and historically significant articulation of the purposive approach. McDougall proposed that every instinct contains three inseparable components that structure goal-directed action: the **cognitive component** (the perceptual

recognition or knowing of a relevant object or situation), the **affective component** (the specific emotion aroused by the object, such as fear, disgust, or curiosity), and the **conative component** (the impulse or striving toward an end that modifies or reacts to the object). It is this conative component, the urge to satisfy the goal, that is the essence of purpose and the driving force, or *horme*.

McDougall initially outlined a comprehensive, though controversial, list of approximately twelve primary instincts, including flight (leading to fear), repulsion (leading to disgust), curiosity (leading to wonder), and self-assertion (leading to elation). He later expanded this list, arguing that human behavior is rarely driven by a single instinct but rather by the complex compounding and organization of these primary instincts into **sentiments**, which are acquired, enduring dispositions centered around specific objects, concepts, or people (e.g., the sentiment of love for one's country or respect for an authority figure).

The concept of *horme* was McDougall's attempt to provide a psycho-physical mechanism for purpose that avoided pure dualism. He viewed the mind and body as interacting systems, asserting that the inherited neural structures (the dispositional side of the instinct) directed energy toward specific goals. Thus, while environment could determine *how* the instinct manifested, the innate, purposeful drive provided the fundamental *why* of the behavior, allowing for a systematic integration of motivational and emotional processes.

5. Relationship to Other Psychological Models

Purposive Psychology served as a primary theoretical opponent to **Radical Behaviorism**, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. While Behaviorism focused exclusively on observable events (S-R chains) and denied the scientific validity of internal states like purpose or consciousness, Purposive Psychology insisted that the exclusion of teleology rendered the study of human and animal action incomplete and inadequate. This foundational disagreement led to profound theoretical clashes, exemplified by McDougall's famous public debates with John B. Watson, underscoring the fundamental schism regarding the scientific role of intention.

Following the **Cognitive Revolution**, the principles underlying Purposive Psychology found renewed relevance, albeit often stripped of McDougall's rigid instinctual framework. Modern fields like Cognitive Psychology and Goal Setting Theory operate on the implicit assumption that behavior is guided by mental representations of desired future states (goals). For example, a cognitive approach analyzes how humans process information, monitor progress, and employ feedback loops to reduce the discrepancy between the current state and the goal state, a regulatory process entirely consistent with the striving, teleological nature proposed by purposive theorists.

Furthermore, Humanistic Psychology, championed by figures like Maslow and Rogers, echoes the

purposive emphasis on internal striving, free will, and self-actualization. While humanists use different terminology, their focus on growth motivation (non-deficit needs) and the inherent urge toward achieving one's potential aligns philosophically with the core purposive belief that life processes are fundamentally directed toward intrinsic ends. This demonstrates how the focus on purpose transcended the initial scientific critique.

6. Significance and Impact

The primary significance of Purposive Psychology lies in its historic role in preserving the focus on **meaning and motivation** during an era dominated by objective, mechanistic approaches. By insisting that consciousness and intention were real, driving forces of action, it ensured that the study of goals, volition, and complex, sustained human action remained relevant to psychological inquiry, even after its original instinctual structure was largely discredited. It provided the necessary theoretical defense for studying internal experience.

The framework also provided early insights into the integrated nature of psychological functioning. McDougall's triadic view of behavior (cognitive, affective, conative) was a vital precursor to modern holistic models of motivation and emotion, demonstrating how perception, feeling, and striving work together seamlessly to produce meaningful behavior. This emphasis on unified, goal-directed activity proved highly influential in early social psychology and the study of personality, where understanding group dynamics and the organization of individual character around persistent aims was paramount.

Although the instinct theory component faced obsolescence, the fundamental teleological perspective provided a necessary philosophical foundation for later research into non-homeostatic drives (motivations not solely aimed at reducing physiological deficits), self-regulation, and the study of personality traits defined by persistent goal pursuits. It legitimized the scientific inquiry into *why* humans act in complex, long-term ways, rather than only focusing on *how* they react immediately to environmental stimuli.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Purposive Psychology, particularly in its Hormic form, attracted significant criticism throughout the 20th century. The most acute critiques centered on the vagueness and circularity inherent in the concept of instinct. Critics, notably led by Behaviorists such as L. L. Bernard, argued that the listing of numerous instincts provided explanatory labels but lacked true predictive or mechanistic power. For example, explaining persistent aggressive behavior by saying the individual possesses an aggressive instinct was deemed circular reasoning, offering no functional mechanism other than the behavior itself.

Another major criticism was the difficulty in empirical verification. If a goal or purpose is an internal,

conscious, and intentional state (the core of the theory), it is inherently challenging to observe, measure, or manipulate scientifically according to the rigorous standards of experimental psychology developed concurrently. This reliance on introspection and inferred internal states led many mainstream researchers to deem the theory non-falsifiable and therefore unscientific, contrasting sharply with the observable variables used in conditioning experiments.

Finally, the theory struggled to adequately account for the profound influence of learning, culture, and individual differences. While McDougall acknowledged the modification of instincts, his heavy reliance on universal, inherited dispositions seemed to undervalue the critical role of environmental shaping and social learning in determining specific goals and complex adult behaviors. Modern motivational psychology addresses these criticisms by retaining the focus on purpose while replacing the fixed, inherited instinct with learned, flexible goals and cognitive planning structured by environmental context.

Further Reading

[Purposive Psychology \(Britannica Entry\)](#)

[William McDougall \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Homeic Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Purposive Behavior and Teleology in Psychology \(ScienceDirect\)](#)