Holism

It has long been an article of faith among anthropologists that our profession derives its claim to a distinctive space in academia because of its holistic approach. Robert Borofsky (1994:12–3), writes that the proposition “cultures need to be studied as wholes, not as fragmented pieces” forms part of the “shared traditions” that “hold cultural anthropology together.” Who among us has not assured our introductory students that they have done the right thing in taking ANT 1001 because, unlike the heathen sociologists or historians, anthropologists possess the Holy Grail of holism? Unfortunately, as with so many precious gifts of the intellect, anthropologists do not agree on what holism is. There seem to be not one, but several different kinds of holistic approaches available to the social sciences. I can readily identify four of them: methodological holism, functionalist holism, laundry-list holism, and processual holism. I have already discussed the first of these in relation to methodological individualism and the existence of supraindividual sociocultural entities (chapter 3). The conclusion reached was that both individual entities and distinctively supraindividual entities have physical reality and thus a claim on our attention. I turn now to a discussion of the three remaining varieties of holism.

FUNCTIONALIST HOLISM

In the words of Webster’s Third, holism is “the organic or functional relation between parts and wholes.” If we change this slightly to read “between
parts and parts, and parts and wholes,” we get a definition of holism that has enjoyed considerable popularity among anthropologists for many years. Borofsky (1994:13) identifies this genre of holism as seeing cultural elements “as interrelated and interdependent.” According to textbook authors Beals and Hoijer (1971:110), holism means that “the various aspects of culture are interrelated . . . they form systems whose parts or activities are directly or indirectly related to and affect one another.” A similar definition of holism appears in William Haviland’s (1993:13) introductory textbook:

Only by discovering how all cultural institutions—social, political, economic, religious—relate to one another can the ethnographer begin to understand the cultural system. Anthropologists refer to this as the holistic perspective.

If we suppose that “relate to one another” includes “affect each other,” then Haviland’s definition of holism is very close to that of Beals and Hoijer. (There are additional ingredients in Haviland’s and Beals and Hoijer’s definitions that I will discuss in a moment.)

Functional holism does not require us to accept any of the dubious metaphysical propositions that characterize methodological holism. The whole is not greater than the sum of its parts; the whole does not determine the nature of its parts more than the nature of its parts determines the whole; and neither the parts nor the whole can be understood in isolation from each other. Best of all, one does not have to abandon the logical and empirical foundations of science in order to conduct research concerned with sociocultural phenomena. The problem with functional holism lies elsewhere. The organismic analogy on which it depends biases functional holism against evolutionary perspectives. It provides a kind of synchronic physiology of the social animal in which all the organs and cells work together harmoniously to maintain themselves without changing or evolving, but even small-scale band and village societies consist of parts—genders, families, age grades—whose conflicting interests are a source of dynamic tension that often leads to new social and cultural arrangements.
LAUNDRY-LIST HOLISM

This variety of holism refers to the breadth of topics (aspects, subjects) that anthropologists study. Logically, functional and laundry-list are not mutually exclusive; in fact, many anthropologists apparently see functional holism as the source of the uniquely wide breadth of holistic anthropology. As noted by Beals and Hoijer,

In contrast to more specialized disciplines they [anthropologists] stress the study of the whole society. This position is possible because the various aspects of culture are interrelated.

Similarly, Haviland’s functionalist definition quoted above refers to holism as a matter of paying attention to how “all cultural institutions . . . relate to each other” (emphasis added). In a sidebar definition, Haviland (1993:14) defines holistic perspective in laundry-list terms, but minus the reference to “all cultural institutions.” Instead, he says holistic perspective is the “principle that things must be viewed in the broadest possible context.”

Haviland is the author of a popular four-field text, so it is somewhat surprising that, in defining holism in terms of topical coverage, he omits any appeal to the archaeological, biological, and linguistic contexts that have traditionally added topical breadth to the teaching of anthropology. Perhaps the explanation for this omission lies in the conceptual priority bestowed on sociocultural systems by the social sciences. Functional analyses traditionally lie in the domains of institutions; the inertia of this position makes it difficult to reconcile functional holism with a topical holism in a manner that does justice to archaeological, linguistic, psychocultural, and biocultural studies.

A perusal of additional introductory texts suggests that laundry-list definitions of anthropological holism are gaining ground at the expense of definitions that focus on sociocultural integration. Nanda’s (1991:5) “holistic approach” for example, includes the interaction of biology and
culture, health and illness in the human body, speeches, and everyday conversation. For Howard and Dunaif-Hattis (1992:4), holism involves all aspects of the human condition, including a society's physical environment and its past as well as its present. Ember and Ember's (1990:3) holistic approach includes the physical characteristics of our prehistoric ancestors and the biological effects of the environment on a human population, while Kottak defines the thrust of anthropological holism as:


Note that Kottak here comes close to defining anthropological holism as the famous “four field” approach. True, the word archaeology gets slighted, but one can easily interpret “historical” and the “past” as indicative of an archaeological component.

The troubling aspect of laundry-list definitions of holism is that they lack any internal or external logic suitable for explaining why one item is on the list and another is not. In the case of the four fields, for example, we know that we are dealing with a convention that reflects the outcome of various battles over academic turf at the beginning of the century, but the absence of psychology, ecology, and demography seems especially egregious in speaking of the “whole human condition.” Furthermore, there is the question of the allocation of time and space to the various components. Haviland writes that we need to provide a broad view of culture “without emphasizing one of its parts to the detriment of another.” But is this even theoretically possible, given the different professional experiences and paradigmatic commitments of authors and teachers? True, most popular textbooks cover a similar range of topics (allowing for the distinction between cultural and general versions), and they even display a considerable amount of similarity in emphasis. This similarity alone, however, is not a vindication of the laundry-list definition of holism; rather, it merely
signifies that one of the first things that textbook publishers do is to make sure that all the topics that are prominent in the most popular texts are included in their own authors' works.

**Processual Holism**

The escape from laundry lists lies through the relation between holism and holistic processes. Anthropology does not seek holistic perspectives as an end in itself. Rather, anthropologists use that perspective because it has been found to be crucial for solving some of the major riddles of human existence. In broadest terms, these riddles have to do with the following:

- The origins and spread of the hominids.
- The origins and spread of *Homo sapiens*.
- The causes and effects of human biological polymorphisms.
- The origin of human linguistic capacity and the origin and spread of human languages.
- The emergence of human consciousness; the origin of human society and culture.
- The causes of the divergent and convergent evolution of specific human societies and cultures.

In addition to its concern with the grand theory of human and cultural evolution, and its open-ended multidisciplinary scope, processual holism implies a commitment to a definite set of epistemological and methodological options:

**Mental/Behavioral**

Activity, defined as body-part motions with environmental effects, as well as thoughts, or internal cognitive events, are domains encompassed by the data sets of processual holism. Anthropological paradigms that opt for restricting the field of cultural studies to mental events (e.g., Robarchek
1989; Geertz 1973) fall outside of all definitions of holism, not merely outside of the definition of processual holism.

**Emic/Etic**

Both stances are requisite to processual holism. Given the current ascendency of paradigms that define culture in purely mental and emic terms, it seems likely that the commitment to processual holism is in decline. Paradigms that confine culture to emic and mental components cannot be regarded as holistic.

**Globally Comparative**

Processual holism requires the use of the comparative method to test causal hypotheses about general processes. Samples drawn from global databases such as the Human Relations Area Files are a regular feature of the development of globally-applicable holistic theory.

**Diachronic/Synchronic**

Processes unfold through time, giving rise to convergent and divergent biocultural and sociocultural systems. The latter can therefore be viewed in a slice-of-time, as well as a developmental, perspective. Processual holism requires the use of both diachronic and synchronic methods. In the synchronic mode we have ethnography, human biology, medical anthropology, and descriptive linguistics; while in the diachronic mode we encounter archaeology and prehistory, history, paleodemography, paleontology, historical linguistics, and many other time-oriented approaches.

Much of the appeal of anthropology to its practitioners and students formerly derived from the traditional image of anthropology as a holistic
discipline. As we have seen, however, what the textbooks and the teachers mean by holism is not necessarily holistic, nor is it distinctive of anthropology. In fact, some constructions of holism deliberately exclude major aspects of anthropological knowledge (such as the four fields or etics). Processual holism is more inclusive than the alternatives and certainly has never been popular outside of anthropology. It remains to be seen, however, if anthropologists are ready to broaden their commitment to the methods and goals of truly holistic paradigms.

Anthropologists who are committed to holism must come to terms with the risks of making mistakes. In this connection, warning students that the findings of science are provisional and subject to various distortions and biases may help to relieve some of the angst associated with holistic perspectives. Another point to be kept in mind is that the misinformation transmitted through a holistic text or introductory class is not likely to be as remote from current expert opinion as the usual non-academic sources of knowledge about biocultural evolution, such as creationism and New Age necromancy. Bear in mind that only a very small percentage of students take introductory courses in anthropology in order to prepare for graduate school; the great majority are only passing through, and one anthropology course is all they will ever take. Indeed, that one anthropology course may be the only course in the social sciences they will ever take. Given the facts that anthropology has so much to say, that its knowledge is vital for our ability to live as informed and responsible citizens of the world, and that there is so little time and space in which to say it, our students deserve to have us try to give them the most holistic view possible.