



Diverse perspectives on health and illness

Holism: the whole truth

Presenter

Reflecting on whole lives, diverse perspectives on health and illness – Holism: The Whole Truth.

Nancy Bancroft

It means having the energy and the capacity to do what I want to do.

Shirley Harrold

It means coping with things and peace of mind really. and that means that, not only am I happy, but, family acquaintances and everybody else is.

Eileen Paul

If you're physically well you're mentally well, it goes together I think.

Maureen Wren

It gives you a completely new life. If you're healthy, I mean otherwise you haven't got any type of life. If you've got your health, you've got a full life.

Risa De la Paz

These personal definitions of health cover physical fitness, but also mental and spiritual wellbeing. The idea of a healthy life is one which is full and varied. Your own definitions of health probably share some of these ideas. The notion of health as being a complex interaction of factors, holism, has alternated with a model of the human body as a collection of parts, some of which become diseased or disordered, a reductionist approach to humans. Chris Lawrence, from the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

Chris Lawrence

One can look at the history of thinking about the body in terms of parts and wholes over a very long period. Arguably, the Greeks and the European west up until about 1600, had a very holistic idea about the body. From about 1600 onwards, we get a quite marked reductionist term in western thought, in thinking about the body. The body is thought of in terms of clocks levers pulleys and so forth, that the body's parts are reduced to pieces of machinery, and this is a trend in western medicine, that continues from 1600 until quite late in the nineteenth century.

Risa De La Paz

The power of the reductionist approach persists today. On the practical front, with the availability of organ transplants, and on the conceptual front, with the fragmentation of medicine into different disciplines, and with advances in understanding the smallest components of human biology, cells and molecules. Lynda Birke from Warwick University.

Lynda Birke

Biological research, has become increasingly dominated by work that is very molecular and very reductionist, and perhaps the classic instance of that is in genetics, where there are more and more attempts to isolate particular genes for particular diseases. and so the whole way of thinking has become very, very reductionist. But it's been enormously successful. It's tied into a history of mechanisms, seeing the universe, including our bodies, mechanistically. It's about experimental control which has been part of scientific methods since the scientific revolution in the Seventeenth Century, and it's precisely because of controlling variables in experiments, that we tend to end up with reductionist explanations.

But what that does do is enable us to make predictions. It enables us often to pinpoint, a particular gene say which can cause in our children, very nasty diseases, and if we then choose to try and seek ways of doing something about that gene, then that is certainly a possibility. The disadvantages however, are often that, disease is much more multi-factorial, it can be caused by lots of different things, and while we may point to particular genes for say causing high blood pressure, there are also many other reasons that could cause high blood pressure in our over-stressed lives.

Risa De La Paz

It's the failure of reductionist approaches in human biology to address this range of factors, that has led to demands for a more holistic vision. Clinical medicine and the science of human biology were, and sometimes still are, seen as inseparable. Holism challenges the supremacy of that alliance to explain all aspects of human health. David Armstrong, a social scientist and GP from Guys Hospital Medical School in London.

David Armstrong

Things started to change in my view about forty years ago, that alliance between biology and clinical medicine begins to fragment, they begin to pull apart. And for the first time people begin to see illness as something that isn't necessarily entirely biological. So people can have illnesses, which aren't reduced to a biological lesion inside of themselves. And to my mind, that fragmentation that fissure that's now opened up between human biology and clinical medicine, has been given the label of holism. That people come along and say we're now offering a more holistic view of the body, than did the alliance between human biology and clinical medicine.

Risa De La Paz

We tend to think of holistic approaches, as a complementary movement to establish medical practice, and a relatively recent one at that. But the pressure for holistic approaches in medicine is by no means new. Chris Lawrence.

Chris Lawrence

Holistic responses in modern medicine start to appear, I think, in the 1880's and 90's, and there were in many ways worries about reductionism, but worries about larger things, such as the growth of an industrialised fragmented society, and after the first world war, which is a source of great anxiety, holistic ideas proliferate in western medicine. There are ideas which are associated with the notion of the importance of the healing power of nature – and think about ideas about healing after the first world war that nations, that Europe should in some way, be healed. And it's very largely forgotten, in histories that talk about, the discovery of insulin, the rise of immunology, and so forth that, holistic ideas, are tremendously important in western orthodox medicine.

Risa De La Paz

One of the main challenges to the reductionist approach to human health has come from the social sciences.

David Armstrong

I think what we've seen in recent years, is that clinical medicine and its biological base, has been increasingly sympathetic to the social sciences, and wishes to incorporate them, within clinical medicine, within a sort of a wider framework. Social scientists want to come along with their own explanations of illness, which are often at variance with those of the biologists, for example around the area of mental illness. Social scientists would want to stress more psychosocial events, whereas the biologist perhaps would look for chemicals in the brain.

Risa De La Paz

But the concern about limited biological explanations, isn't confined to social scientists. Lynda Birke.

Lynda Birke

I like a number of other biologists, would like to see much more emphasis being placed on, what might be called more holistic approaches. Take for example, the power of genetics,

which now has most of us thinking that, our genes are a blueprint of what we will become. and so one kind of explanation that has become lost in all that is an explanation that rests on, seeing a human embryo, as itself partaking in its own development. And we are much less able than we should be at being able to envisage for example, a developing embryo creating its own environment, and that kind of much more holistic approach to early embryology, to how we become who we are in the world, I think is very important, but has become very much of a distant voice, in the way that genetics is being discussed. So there is a very much a kind of language around, which sees us as being, the product only of genes.

Risa De La Paz

Lynda Birke is particularly interested in how a feminist perspective can inform our understanding of human biology and health.

Lynda Birke

Feminism has always been very critical of reductionist views, which reduce us to our hormones or something, and I'm sorry but I think I'm more than my hormones! So that's one partial answer. Another part is that feminism alerts us to the power of gender as a category. By that I mean not just the anatomy that we have that defines us as male or female at birth, I mean the social processes by which we learn to become women and men in this culture. And those social processes affect a great deal about how we learn to move in the world, about how we experience our bodies, and there's certainly a lot of evidence from feminist research, that for instance, your feelings about your body, will influence how you experience the menopause or the menstrual cycle.

A third area in which feminism has a great deal to contribute, is to remind us that, in certain areas of medical enquiry, the way in which the human body is conceptualised, is very biased indeed. So we take, for example, work in occupational health. Now most of the criteria that are used, what they consider to be normal human function, is defined by the average white male. So, women or, men from other ethnic groups, may well fall outside of this particular norm, and their ill health, will therefore become treated in ways that are totally inappropriate.

Risa De La Paz

A more fruitful way forward, relies on being able to integrate the perspectives of a variety of disciplines.

Lynda Birke

I think part of the problem of reductionism, has to do with the ways in which professionally, all academics defend their disciplinary boundaries, that's how we're trained, and it becomes very very difficult for sociologists, for feminists or whatever, to be taken seriously, by scientists. And often for scientific claims to be taken seriously elsewhere, and it's that failure to listen to each other, to think more divergently, to think more creatively, that I think feeds into reductionism, and interdisciplinarity while given a great deal of lip service, actually is very hard to do, but I think it may be the only way that we're ever going to break out, of those very rigid disciplinary boundaries, that keep us locked into this process of endlessly reproducing reductionist ways of thought.

David Armstrong

Science is beginning to lose some of its privilege. It is not now seen as as good as it was in the past, and also I think there is this sort of swing towards the importance of the individual, and their experiences as being paramount. So if an individual does experience something, then that's increasingly seen as having validity, irrespective of what the scientists say. And I can think of a series of books now, about for example the experience of illness, the experience of diabetes, the experience of multiple sclerosis, the experience of asthma, a whole lot of experiences of people, which are now seen to be valid knowledge. So what we have in the twentieth century is that science becomes de-privileged, it is not so much better than other forms of knowledge, and at the same time, we have this privileging of personal experience. And so what individuals think, and believe and feel, now becomes very very important.

Risa De La Paz

But he sounds a cautionary note. The term holism can be used as a catch all and somewhat trendy phrase, that can cover a range of practises.

David Armstrong

The word 'holism' is simply a label, one is applying to a certain grouping of knowledge, to say that I'm going to take into consideration, as a clinical practitioner, all aspects of the human person, all parts of their human biology, parts of their identity, their feelings their make up their cognitions and so on, will all be part of what I will examine, when I think about their health care. I've heard surgeons, who just operate on the human hands talk about themselves being holistic. I hear acupuncturist who might just stick a needle into a couple of points on the human body, describe themselves as holistic. I've heard homeopaths who might give sort of tiny amount of something to someone describe themselves as holistic. These people are competing to claim the label of holism, because that is a political fashionable thing to have.

Risa De La Paz

Many health professionals have always seen their work in a holistic way. Eric Blackman is a psychiatric nurse for the elderly with the Milton Keynes community NHS trust. he and his colleagues support patients and their carers, within the resource constraints of the modern NHS.

Eric Blackman

Although it has been seen as a new concept of nursing, and people have to go and do specialist courses for it, holistic health care has been around forever and a day. Caring means looking at, the medical side the social side the spiritual side, of every aspect of care, that a person needed. And by going in and doing a specific course on holism, people feel that they are doing something specific and new and worthwhile. Whereas it's just emphasising what good basic nursing care is all about.

Risa De La Paz

For Blackman and his colleagues, providing a range of support services for patients and their carers within a limited budget is a challenge.

Eric Blackman

Care of the elderly is a Cinderella service. Care of the elderly with a mental health problem, is even more of a Cinderella service. So you have the Cinderellas within the Cinderella services. Now, trying to budget care for the elderly, that has been passed onto social services, who are having to work within a limited financial budget. We look at the needs which have to be met, the support within the family setting, because we don't want undue strain on the family which would in turn put added strain on the services, i.e. the GPs social workers etc, therefore limiting even more, the resources for our elderly patients.

Risa De La Paz

Those trying to provide holistic health care, can often feel frustrated, when needs are identified that can't be met because of resource constraints and care priorities. This is often felt by health practitioners at the sharp end of the care, as the gap between the theory and practise of holistic health care. Compromises have to be made in the real world.

Eric Blackman

We'll pick up illness if you like, earlier than we otherwise would, and it means that we can deal with it better and more effectively. But then there are other people whose needs probably exceed the resources that we have. One has got to make priorities and, and choices. Sometimes we don't always get it right but, that is the situation. We've got pressures from our professional organisations, who tell us how we should do things. We've got pressures from our employer as well, and it's very difficult match at times, it can be very stressful at times, but one tries to aim for the best, within the time and other constraints placed on one.

Risa De La Paz

Despite the practical constraints and difficulties, holistic practise has spread from the mental health field, into many other parts of orthodox medicine, and has changed the whole concept of what it means to be healthy or ill.

David Armstrong

As the notion of disease and illness has begun to open up, we've also rethought about what the nature of illness is. And I think it can be summarised in the discovery in the 1950's, of the status of being at risk. So nowadays people are not either ill or healthy, but we're all 'at risk'. Now as soon as you take the idea that people are at risk all the time, then they can too, can become consumers of health services. Although they might be healthy now, they can become healthier in the future. So I think part of the thing about holism, is it embraces this new notion of attending to human health, as well as human disease.

Risa De La Paz

So holism is the current challenge to the medical model of health, and its ideas have begun to shift the way in which individuals care for their health, and expect to be treated by the health care system. Perhaps from this challenge will come a more integrated and humane approach to health. David Armstrong.

David Armstrong

To think of our bodies as composed of cells, tissues and organs, these are just ideas that are two hundred years old, and why should they survive another two hundred years? Maybe we are beginning to see the end of the reign of this particular way of seeing the human body and illness, as these new terms like holism, these new ideas come into being, which tend to challenge and threaten the old order, which was based on a biologically based clinical medicine.

Risa De La Paz

But by trying to embrace the whole of a person's psychological and social life in their care, do medical practitioners run the risk of controlling every aspect of a person's experience?

David Armstrong

If you get a holistic medical practitioner, who intervenes, not only with a biological basis of the person, but also with their psychological and social and environmental worlds, then one could say that the control is that much tighter. So I can't sleep, I can't have a mood change, I can't have any lifestyle changes, I can't do what I want, without somehow getting advice from the medical profession. Holism is merely a camouflage for a much more repressive and controlling perspective from medicine.

Risa De La Paz

Lynda Birke argues differently.

Lynda Birke

To some extent yes it's true, that it brings more of our lives under the scrutiny of, medicalisation, medical practitioners, but on the other hand, it opens us up to the possibility that, there is so much more of our lives that falls outside of simply consulting with a doctor. And that there are other issues that we need to think about if we're going to look after our health.

Risa De La Paz

Today, we're seeing just another reappraisal of what it means to be human.

David Armstrong

If you'd asked somebody, perhaps a thousand years ago what is a human being, they would have come up, perhaps with a religious explanation. Fifty years ago, if you said to someone, what is a human being, they would have reduced it down, to a sort of biological whole, to cells and tissues and organs. And now if you say to somebody, what is a human being, it becomes much more complicated, there are a lot of psychological and social dimensions in there as well. So holism, is the late twentieth century word, to reflect this new identity we see in each other, and therefore, one of the key functions if you like of holism over the last few decades,

has actually been to fashion, to create, the whole identity that we now recognise. So every epoch defines what a human being is differently. We define a human being differently, and we're constantly changing how we define what a human being is.