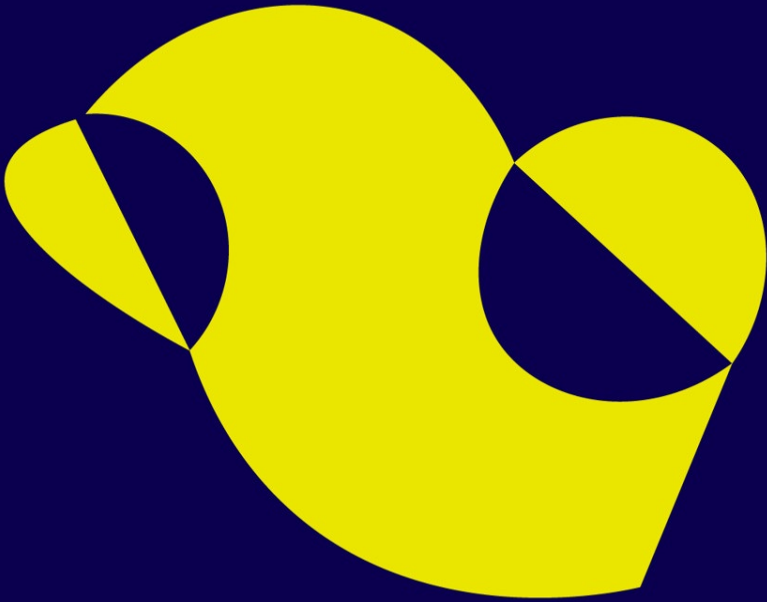


Psychotherapy Guidebook

# SOMATOLOGY



Thomas Hanna

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## Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

# Somatology

*Thomas Hanna*

## DEFINITION

Somatology is a theoretical science of somatic process; as such, it is a science of living bodies as they change and adapt during the course of time. Somatology seeks to determine the consistent functional-structural patterns displayed by an organism as it adapts itself to the environment and the environment to itself.

The word “soma,” designates any living organism, whether plant, animal or man, whether a single cell or a multicellular individual. The Greek word soma refers to the living body seen in its wholeness. Thus, the soma is not simply a “body” but is the unitive functioning of “mind”, “body”, and “emotions.” In all instances the phenomenon of life exists uniquely in the form of the soma, i.e., as a whole, embodied process whose combined elements relate, first of all, to themselves and secondarily to the environment.

Somatology understands that the full nature of the soma (i.e., the life process) can be observed only in vivo. Because the soma is a stabilized process of constant change, its center and periphery are always indefinite;

however, the presence of a functional centrum within a surrounding membrane is a somatic constant.

The functions and structures of somas have evolved as direct reflections of the electrical, chemical, gravitational, and mechanical laws of the physical universe. Each species of soma has evolved its own specific reflex mechanisms and fixed motor patterns reflecting these universal laws.

More generally and informally, somatology may refer to the living functions and structures of human somas, i.e., to the self-regulatory and balancing mechanisms that guarantee the homeostatic integrity of human life. As a human science somatology seeks to provide a common theoretical ground for the integration of such fields as psychology, physiology, anthropology, and others. This integration becomes possible because somatology's holistic, process-oriented viewpoint transcends the mind-body metaphysics that has been a traditional part of these sciences.

## HISTORY

The word "somatology" was first employed as early as the late sixteenth century by O. Casmann to refer to a general science of living bodies, as contrasted to physics, the general science of matter. For well over two centuries the word was used to designate the anatomical and physiological properties of living bodies.

Somatology, as the science of bodily functions as well as structures, was born in 1872 when Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Although Darwin did not then use the term somatology, *The Expression* provided the conceptual framework for a century of research by biologists, geneticists, ethologists, anthropologists, biochemists, neurophysiologists, linguists, and psychologists.

The contemporary sense in which the word somatology is now used was spelled out by Thomas Hanna in *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking* (1970). Here it referred to a general scientific field toward which many of the above-mentioned sciences were converging: the study of the complex of genetically based functions that each species, including the human, has at its disposal. Some of these functions are phylogenetic, others are ontogenetic. Integrating these two aspects into a systematic account of the functional repertory of each species has been the general concern of Somatology from its Darwinian origins to the present.

## TECHNIQUE

Although it is not a technique, as a theoretical science Somatology serves as a theoretical guide for certain applied techniques. In general, Somatology recognizes two areas where techniques can be applied for changing somatic process: techniques that directly intervene in the soma's

individual process or indirect techniques that intervene in the environment of the soma. The former techniques are clinical and educational, the latter are social and environmental.

Since its major concern is for the self-regulating and self-balancing mechanisms of the living being, Somatology provides a common ground for interventionary techniques that make use of these mechanisms. Any authentically somatic technique — whether clinical, educational, or other — seeks to enhance and facilitate the functional efficiency of the living being by means of operations on the self-regulatory mechanisms of that soma.

Because it is focused on the embodied process of individual life, Somatology is the common ground for all interventionary techniques that deal with the individual in vivo — never in the abstract. Each individual somatic process is unique, and thus somatic education or therapy is authentic if and only if it intends to improve the given individual process. Therefore, somatic techniques are unique for each individual.

## APPLICATIONS

Although the distinction between clinical and educational techniques may not always be clear, we can designate the following traditions of contemporary therapy and training as somatic: The organismic therapy of Wilhelm Reich and Alexander Lowen, the Functional Integration of Moshe



Feldenkrais, the Sensory Integration of Jean Ayres, the neuromotor education developed by Carl H. Delacato, Robert J. Doman, et al, the Alexander Technique of F. Matthias Alexander, the Structural Integration of Ida P. Rolf, the Sensory Awareness of Charlotte Selver, biofeedback training and the Client-Centered Therapy of Carl Rogers, whose “nondirective” techniques assume certain self-correcting mechanisms in the individual.

The most general characteristic of all these somatic techniques is that the changes evoked are systemic and holistic, typically showing effects that are simultaneously physiological, psychological, and emotional.