

Sheldons somatotype  
theory and its  
application  
psychology essay



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Sheldon believed that by analyzing the somatotypes of humans he could predict personality traits and body physique. He aspired to predict the genetic outcome of humans to the point of predictability thus allowing humans to breed desired qualities into their offspring. Sheldon's research was flawed in that he utilized poor research and techniques. The outcome of Sheldon's work was not the predictability of humans through somatotyping, but genetics.

William H. Sheldon is best known for pioneering the study of somatotypes. Sheldon believed that the biological foundations of humans were related to psychological development. Sheldon applied physiology and psychology when he created a classification system grouping the human body into three categories; endomorphs, mesomorphs, and ectomorphs (Sheldon, 2010). Later on, Sheldon applied his research to explore and explain delinquent behavior.

Nicole Rafter, author of *Somatotyping, Antimodernism, and the Production of Criminological*, published in the journal of *Criminology* (2007) contributed tremendously to this paper. The understanding of somatotyping Rafter demonstrated clearly illustrated her knowledge upon this subject such that I consider her a subject matter expert and well versed in the field of somatotyping. Rafter's publication compared to other scholarly journals and writings are above reproach.

United States Code, *Cook v. Rhode Island*, and the Americans with Disabilities Act were examined for references on somatotyping and legal precedent referring to Sheldon's research. The law, while vast in references

pertaining to body shape, was in the form civil cases against employers. Employees typically claimed obesity as a cause or factor of discrimination as in the case of Cook v. Rhode Island.

Cantor (1936) inspired Sheldon as they both had a commonality for bread dogs. Cantor conducted preliminary research on somatotypes that Sheldon expanded upon during his research. Hooton (n. d.) worked with Sheldon on somatotypes coining the term that Sheldon would utilize throughout his studies. Sheldon's work would not be without scrutiny. Sutherland (1951) and other researchers stated Sheldon's work lacked professional and ethical testing and results.

Finally, supplemental databases and theories, such as Dumas & Teste (2006) research into Criminal Facial Stereotypes, various case law, and government publications were examined to determine if Sheldon's theories were utilized in criminal trials.

### History of Body Categorizing

The study of bodily associations can be traced back to the Greek physician Hippocrates (ca. 450-380 BCE) where he identified the correlation between bodily fluids to health and disease (Rafter, 2007). It would not be until Ernst Kretschmer, a German psychiatrist, published a book in 1921 called *Physique and Character* that detailed the relativity of body development to mental attributes.

Kretschmer found that weak (asthenic) and muscular (athletic) body physiques were frequent characteristics of schizophrenic patients, while

short and overweight (pyknic) body physiques were often found to be manic-depressive patients (personality, 2010). Furthermore, Kretschmer wrote that in all people, slim and delicate physiques are associated with introversion, while those with rounded heavier and shorter bodies tend to be cyclothymic, that is, moody but often extroverted and jovial (personality, 2010, p. 1).

During the Nazi occupation, German psychiatrists forged ‘Aryan criminology’ (Cantor, 1936) that biologized lawbreaking, insisted upon an inherited nature to crime. At approximately the same time, American psychologists pursued the link between the physical framework of subjects’ physique to intelligence, mental disabilities or diseases, and behavioral distinctions (Rafter, 2007).

### William H. Sheldon

Born in November 19, 1898, Sheldon was an American psychologist and physician became best known for his morphological (body type) research into physique, personality, and delinquency (Sheldon, 2010). Sheldon obtained a Ph. D. in psychology from the University of Chicago in 1926 and an M. D. in 1933 (Sheldon, 2010). Working at various universities, Sheldon became the director of research at the Biological Humanics Foundation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and joined the University of Oregon Medical School in 1951 where he became a distinguished professor of medicine and director of the constitution (one’s physical makeup) clinic (Sheldon, 2010). There he examined diseases and their correlations to physical characteristics, retiring from the University of Oregon in 1970.

Growing up Sheldon observed his father breed poultry and dogs competitively. Observing the correlation of genetics combined with his family's ideology of breeding a better species contributed to his lifelong study of eugenics-inspired his research of morphologies (Rafter, 2007). Sheldon observed through breeding dogs, what he later termed a thoroughbred factor in human physical makeup, or constitution, to be a quality appearing aesthetically pleasing (Rafter, 2007). Sheldon understood there was a connection and relationship between genetics, eventually setting out to classify body type characteristics of personality and psychiatric makeup through the study of morphology.

William James, a pragmatist and American philosopher and psychologist, who was a naturalist and studied animals influenced Sheldon to create his classification system (Sheldon, 2010). Sheldon associated physiology with psychology in his writing of *The Varieties of Human Physique* (1940) and *The Varieties of Temperament* (1942). Sheldon classified people into three categories: endomorphs, mesomorphs, and ectomorphs, where he described the behavioral tendencies of these groups and later developed and explained delinquent behavior categories within them (Sheldon, 2010).

### Sheldon's Research

Sheldon produced four books on the physical structure of personalities: *The Varieties of Human Physique* (1940), *The Varieties of Temperament* (1942), *Varieties of Delinquent Youth* (1949), and *Atlas of Men* (1954). Somatotyping was introduced and related to three basic male physiques in his first book. Next, somatotyping was tied to three basic temperaments. Thirdly, Sheldon

applied somatotyping to male delinquents, with the last book presenting a categorization of 88 male somatotypes identified by Sheldon (Rafter, 2007).

In *The Varieties of Human Physique* (1940), Sheldon utilized borrowed databases from various physical education departments obtaining three-way photographs of 4,000 college men to categorize (Rafter, 2007). This research produced Sheldon's classifications of endomorphs (soft and round), mesomorphs (muscular and compact), and ectomorphs (linear, fragile, and intelligent). Rafter (2007) stated this research was, 'little more than Kretschmer's taxonomy relabeled and reapplied; even the term somatotyping seems not to have originated with Sheldon but to have been coined by Earnest Hooton, the Harvard anthropologist with whom Sheldon was working [with] at the time' (p. 811)(Hooton, n. d.).

Sheldon's innovations were two-fold in this book. One, he created the endomorphy, mesomorphy, and ectomorphy classifications of a man's physique. Two, he created a scoring system to evaluate a person's somatotype by assigning a three number system to body types ranging from one to seven. An example of Sheldon's numbering system would show an extreme endomorph, an obese man with almost no muscularity or fragility, to be a 7-1-1 (Rafter, 2007), an extreme ectomorph would be a 1-1-7, and an average person would be 4-4-4 (personality, 2010). Sheldon believed in the hereditary nature of one's body type to include envisioning the ability to predict and breed better people, as he had done with dogs. The predictability of engineering humans, Sheldon hypothesized, could be accomplished to the point of predicting one's clothing style, home location, and life partner (Rafter, 2007).

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In *The Varieties of Temperament* (1942), Sheldon attempted to determine attitudes, beliefs, and motivations biologically. Sheldon concluded with a threefold classification of temperaments: 'viscerotonia (the relaxed, sociable, gluttonous temperament), somatonia (dominated by muscular activity and a drive toward action and power), and cerebrotonia (restrained, asocial, dominated by the cerebrum)' (Rafter, 1997). While this book presented data logically, Rafter (1997) stated that Sheldon jumped from one topic to another, posing unanswerable rhetorical questions, concluding with the discovery of temperaments derived empirically and imposed it onto his data. Sheldon concluded this book suggesting that the study of humans' physical makeup could eventually eradicate diseases and, 'strengthen the mental and spiritual fiber of the race' (Sheldon, 1942, p. 437).

*Varieties of Delinquent Youth* (1949) was mostly devoted to the details of case histories examined; Rafter (1997) reported this book was a 'field report on constitutional psychology in action' (p. 812). Sheldon compared 200 males, some from troubled backgrounds or with a history of delinquency, against his research of 4,000 college males conducted in *The Varieties of Human Physique* (1940). To measure delinquency, Sheldon devised the rating system below:

1. Mental insufficiency
2. Medical insufficiency
3. Psychiatric insufficiency
4. Persistent behavior but not necessarily criminal behavior

(Rafter, 1997)

Sheldon also scored subjects by somatotype, intelligence percentage, and an Indexed by Disappointingness scores according to the above criteria (Rafter, 1997). Sheldon also utilized what he named a PPPP score for poor protoplasm poorly put together, stereotyping black males as throwbacks to society and indolent (Rafter, 1997). Sheldon stated in the conclusion of this book that society was devolving due to poor breeding and biological devolution.

The final book of Sheldon's, *Atlas of Men*, was devoted to, ' biological humanics' and ' science of man resting on biological descriptions and procedures' (Sheldon, 1954, p. xiii) where he analyzed 1, 175 hospital patients. Sheldon observed diseases such as diabetes and thyroid disorders. It provided him with, ' basic structural taxonomy of human beings' (Sheldon, 1954, p. xiii).

Sheldon provided examples of his 88 male somatotypes and associated them to creature. For example, a 1-1-7 was nicknamed a ' Walking Stick,' 1-2-6 were called ' Wasps' slight, delicate fellows, crushed by your lightest step. Yet they can sting' with Bloodhounds, Elephants, and Porpoises at the end of the scale (Rafter, 1997).

#### Application of Somatotypes to Law

Searches of online resources such as Google and Westlaw legal database produced negative results of Sheldon's somatotype theory utilized as a



criminal defense. Legal precedent, however, does exist in civil proceedings where defendants claimed their obesity caused discrimination by employers.

In the case of *Bonnie Cook v. the State of Rhode Island, Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals (MHRH)*(1993), Cook claimed discrimination based on obesity as a handicap as defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1973 ' 504 (Rehabilitation Act). The court had to rule upon obesity as a handicap within the definition of 29 U. S. C. ' 794 (Nondiscrimination under Federal grants and programs).

MHRH's physicians denied Cook reemployment, stating that she was accepted contingent upon the reduction of her weight to less than 300 pounds. Cook was five feet two inches tall weighing 320 pounds at the time of application. Cook subsequently was denied employment upon failure to satisfy hiring requirements.

Cook applied for a clerical position that she previously preformed for the company. The company argued her employment could jeopardize emergency evacuations and that Cook could develop future medical ailments leading to lapses of work and possible workers' compensation claims (Federal Publications Congressional Research Service Reports and Issue Briefs, 2007).

The District Court of Rhode Island found:

Denying an applicant even a single job that requires no unique physical skills, due solely to the perception that the applicant suffers from a physical limitations that would keep her from qualifying for a broad spectrum of jobs,

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can constitute treating an applicant as if her condition substantially limited a major life activity, viz., working. This is such a case (*Cook v. Rhode Island*, 1993).

Morbid obesity as a civil defense in the case of *Cook v. Rhode Island*, found that she was qualified for her job as an obese person. This case, however, did not define obesity as a disability. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (2009) defined disability as, ' a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual' (p. 7). Clarification of major life activities, impairment, and disability are found in section 12102 parts two, three, and four. Contributing factors introduced into Cook's case ultimately attributed to a winning strategy, the case did not stand alone on obesity as the defending point and would have been lost if physically demanding characteristic were required of Cook.

As of the date of this publication, limited legal precedent existed for individuals claiming morbid obesity as a criminal or civil defense. With the overwhelming number of overweight Americans reaching staggering proportions, obesity as a civil rights violation may eventually occur.

The possibility of somatotyping, assuming Sheldon's research could be perfected, would be viable in law enforcement applications such as security screening at airports or events. Screening of somatotypes has real world application and could be computerized. This technology combined with facial reorganization technology or other studies in research such as *The Influence of Criminal Facial Stereotypes on Juridic Judgments* (Dumas & Teste, 2006) could allow for greater accuracy than somatotyping alone.

Currently the Transportation Security Administration (2010) utilizes Behavioral Detection Officers whom 'detect individuals exhibiting behaviors that indicate they may be a threat to aviation and/or transportation security' (p. 1). Sheldon's research into somatotyping may still bare validity in this area of the law, but not as a criminal defense.

Currently law enforcement officers rely on intuition and experience in determining if criminal activity is afoot. An officer evaluates a conglomeration or totality of circumstances when approaching subjects or situations. The complexity of analytical processes may eventually be reproduced in a study, but currently is too sophisticated to be analyzed and categorized into creditable and repeatable research.

## Conclusion

Sheldon's work was controversial and increase public concern upon his gathering of thousands of photographs of naked men. Researchers such as Edwin Sutherland (1951) found Sheldon's work as invalid due to his analysis utilizing college men and not a random sampling of subjects. Other researchers found categorization and computational errors of Sheldon's work and allegations of misrepresenting data (Rafter, 2007).

Sheldon's goal was to provide proof that delinquents carried poorly constructed genetics through analysis of somatotyping. Instead, what he found was a link within genetics not related to somatotypes where biology was the 'chief determinant of character and behavior' (Rafter, 2007, p. 814).

The utilization of Sheldon's theory as a criminal defense in court does not apply. Modern terminology for such defenses is profiling, discrimination, or stereotyping. Utilization of obesity as a defense of discrimination is typically unviable as there is usually an underlying condition of termination or ineligible of a person to perform said employment due to their weight; this is a civil case, not criminal. To this researcher's knowledge, somatotyping has not been used in defense of a criminal trial.