

# CONSTITUTIONAL TYPE

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## CONSTITUTIONAL TYPE

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Psychology, Anthropology, History of Medicine, Criminology

### 1. Core Definition

The concept of the **constitutional type** represents a systematic approach within psychology, anthropology, and medicine aimed at the categorization of human beings based upon the fundamental premise that specific physical features, biological traits, or overall morphological structure are intrinsically linked to fixed psychological characteristics, temperaments, or behavioral predispositions. This model posits a fundamental and often deterministic union between the body (soma) and the mind (psyche), suggesting that inherited biological makeup is the primary driver of personality, health, and psychopathology. Constitutional typologies attempt to move beyond simple descriptive physical classification by asserting predictive power regarding an individual's psychological trajectory and susceptibility to specific mental disorders or criminal behaviors.

Unlike modern trait theories, which view personality as a continuum of measurable dimensions, constitutional theories often rely on discrete, fixed categories derived from physical observation or biological indices. The appeal of this approach historically lay in its promise of providing a straightforward, empirically observable basis for understanding complex mental phenomena. The core assertion remains that individuals belonging to a particular physical type--whether defined by body fat distribution, skeletal structure, or muscle development--will share a common psychological profile, termed a temperament or disposition. This categorization aims to establish a causal relationship where morphology is the independent variable determining psychological outcomes.

While the term encompasses various historical systems, the underlying mechanism involves either direct measurement of physical features (such as height, weight, specific body ratios, or skeletal breadth) or the assessment of broader biological traits (like endocrine function or genetic inheritance) to assign an individual to a type. The resulting typology then serves as a framework for predicting temperament (e.g., excitability, emotional stability, sociability) or for identifying individuals at risk for certain conditions, such as the supposed connection between specific constitutional types and the development of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, as detailed in classic constitutional literature.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Foundations (Ancient Roots)

The philosophical and medical foundations of constitutional typology trace back to classical antiquity, primarily through the theories established by Hippocrates (c. 460-c. 370 BCE) and later formalized by Galen (c. 129-c. 216 CE). This foundational model, known as the **humoral theory**, asserted that the human body contained four primary fluids or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Health and personality were determined by the balance or imbalance of these

humors, linking internal biological composition directly to external behavior and temperament.

Galenic medicine refined this concept, establishing four primary **temperaments** derived from the dominant humor: **Sanguine** (characterized by excessive blood, leading to cheerfulness and activity), **Phlegmatic** (excessive phlegm, resulting in sluggishness and calmness), **Choleric** (excessive yellow bile, causing irritability and aggression), and **Melancholic** (excessive black bile, leading to brooding and sadness). This system was the prevailing framework for understanding individual differences in psychology and medicine for over 1,500 years, establishing a critical cultural and medical precedent: that internal biological composition, even if based on an archaic understanding of physiology, fundamentally determined the structure of personality.

Although humoral theory eventually dissolved under the scrutiny of modern science, its profound legacy lies in establishing the conceptual framework for subsequent constitutional theories in the modern era. The core idea--that observable physical or biological differences categorize individuals into discrete types with correlated psychological profiles--provided the intellectual scaffolding upon which 19th and 20th-century researchers, seeking empirical validation, would build more complex, anthropometrically-based typologies, moving the focus from internal fluids to external bodily measurements.

### 3. Early 20th Century Typologies (Kretschmer)

The modern scientific phase of constitutional psychology was profoundly influenced by German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (1888-1964). In his seminal 1921 work, *Physique and Character*, Kretschmer attempted to correlate specific body builds with specific mental illnesses, particularly schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness, thereby formalizing the idea of **Kretschmer's constitutional types**. His research involved meticulously measuring the bodies of hospital patients to establish correlations between physique and psychological disposition (or diathesis for psychopathology).

Kretschmer proposed three primary constitutional body types (or **Körperbau**): the **Asthenic**, characterized by a lean, narrow, and frail build with low weight and delicate bones; the **Pyknic**, characterized by a rounded, softer physique, broad face, large abdomen, and a tendency towards fat accumulation; and the **Athletic**, characterized by strong muscle development, broad shoulders, and powerful skeletal structure. He later added the Dysplastic type for individuals who did not fit neatly into the other three categories.

Crucially, Kretschmer linked these physiques to specific temperaments and psychopathological risks. The Asthenic type was associated with the **Schizothymic** temperament (introverted, sensitive, prone to abstraction) and a higher risk of developing schizophrenia. Conversely, the Pyknic type was associated with the **Cyclothymic** temperament (sociable, fluctuating mood, prone to practical thinking) and a higher risk of developing manic-depressive (bipolar) illness. The Athletic

type was linked to the **Viscous** temperament (energetic, aggressive, emotionally stable). Kretschmer's work, although highly deterministic and later criticized, provided the most significant framework for constitutional theory prior to the mid-20th century.

#### 4. American Somatotypes (Sheldon)

In the 1940s, American psychologist William H. Sheldon (1898-1977) introduced a refined and more quantitative constitutional system known as **somatotyping**, heavily influenced by Kretschmer but grounded in a biological theory of embryonic tissue layers. Sheldon theorized that differences in physique were the result of differential development of the three primary germ layers during embryonic development: the endoderm (digestive viscera), the mesoderm (muscle, bone, circulatory system), and the ectoderm (skin, nervous system).

Sheldon established three primary constitutional types, or **somatotypes**: **Endomorphy**, reflecting prominence of the endoderm (characterized by soft roundness, high fat storage, and large digestive viscera); **Mesomorphy**, reflecting prominence of the mesoderm (characterized by muscularity, bone strength, and athletic build); and **Ectomorphy**, reflecting prominence of the ectoderm (characterized by linearity, fragility, delicate bones, and low fat and muscle mass).

Unlike previous discrete categories, Sheldon quantified physique using a three-digit numerical rating (the **somatotype index**), where each component (Endomorphy, Mesomorphy, Ectomorphy) was scored on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being the maximum expression of that component. For example, a 7-1-1 rating indicated extreme Endomorphy, while a 1-7-1 indicated extreme Mesomorphy. Sheldon further correlated these physical types with specific psychological dispositions, or **temperaments**: Endomorphy with **Viscerotonia** (sociable, love of comfort); Mesomorphy with **Somatotonia** (assertive, aggressive, love of physical activity); and Ectomorphy with **Cerebrotonia** (inhibited, intellectual, sensitive). This systematic quantification gave Sheldon's model an initial appearance of scientific rigor superior to Kretschmer's qualitative descriptions.

#### 5. Methodological Frameworks and Measurements

The methodology employed by constitutional psychologists was central to their claim of scientific validity, relying heavily on anthropometric measurements and standardized observation. Kretschmer primarily used standardized anthropological indices--measuring limb length, head circumference, torso ratios, and skeletal breadth--to classify his patients. The goal was to establish objective ratios that defined the "pure" constitutional types (Asthenic, Pyknic, Athletic) and provided a basis for determining intermediate types. These measurements were painstaking and required specialized training, reflecting a strong emphasis on observable physical data as the ultimate determinant of psychological categorization.

Sheldon, seeking to overcome the subjectivity inherent in Kretschmer's methods, developed a

rigorous protocol for **somatotyping**. This method relied on standardized, nude photography (usually three views: frontal, side, and dorsal) of the subject. A panel of trained raters would then visually assess and score the relative contribution of Endomorphy, Mesomorphy, and Ectomorphy on the 1-7 scale. While the use of standardized photography and numerical indices aimed for objectivity, the process still involved significant subjective judgment by the raters regarding the morphological components, leading critics to question the true reliability and freedom from bias in the resulting somatotype scores.

Despite the inherent difficulties in standardizing the relationship between internal biology and external appearance, the methodology of constitutional typing highlighted a significant historical attempt to bridge the gap between biological determinism and psychological outcome. These measurement systems sought to provide a biological 'map' of the individual, believing that the quantitative documentation of the body could serve as an accurate proxy for quantifying personality and predicting vulnerability to mental illness.

## 6. Applications in Criminology and Psychopathology

One of the most controversial and impactful applications of constitutional typing occurred in the fields of criminology and psychopathology. Kretschmer's initial hypothesis linked specific body types to tendencies toward certain mental illnesses, suggesting a constitutional vulnerability (diathesis) for schizophrenia in asthenic types and affective disorders in pyknic types. This was a significant early attempt to find a biological basis for psychiatric diagnosis and prognosis, although its validity was later refuted by broader epidemiological studies.

Sheldon's model found wide application in criminology through the influential 1950s work of Sheldon and his colleagues, notably the extensive study documented in *Varieties of Delinquent Youth*. This research controversially suggested a strong correlation between the **Mesomorph somatotype** (athletic, aggressive, energetic) and delinquency. The finding that delinquent boys exhibited a disproportionately high degree of mesomorphy, associated with the Somatonia temperament, fueled theories of biological determinism in criminal behavior for decades, suggesting that certain physical structures predispose individuals toward risk-taking and aggression.

These applications had profound societal consequences, potentially leading to stereotyping and differential treatment based on physical appearance, particularly within penal and psychiatric institutions. While subsequent research showed that environmental factors, socioeconomic status, and cultural pressures far outweighed the predictive power of somatotype, the historical influence of constitutional criminology demonstrated the potent desire to identify pre-programmed biological markers for antisocial behavior.

## 7. Significance and Impact

Although constitutional typologies are largely relegated to the history of psychology and medicine today, their significance lies in their role as intellectual precursors to modern biological psychology and personality theory. They formalized the enduring psychological question regarding the nature-nurture interplay and provided early, albeit flawed, methodologies for attempting to measure the biological contribution to human individuality. These systems forced researchers to consider the relationship between physical health, somatic development, and mental health outcomes, paving the way for more sophisticated inquiries into genetics, neurobiology, and temperament.

The work of Kretschmer and Sheldon particularly influenced the structure of early personality assessment and provided the impetus for comparative studies that sought to validate or refute their findings. Their typologies were among the first comprehensive frameworks that attempted to link morphological characteristics to behavioral traits in a systematic, quantifiable manner. This emphasis on biological structure laid the groundwork for contemporary biological models of personality, such as those that examine brain structure, neurotransmitter function, and genetically influenced temperamental dimensions.

Furthermore, the constitutional approach spurred decades of debate regarding scientific reductionism and determinism. While ultimately failing to prove a direct causal link between physique and complex psychological states, the theories solidified the historical importance of the individual difference approach in psychological science, moving away from purely philosophical explanations of behavior towards biological observation, even if those observations were scientifically limited at the time.

## 8. Debates and Criticisms

Constitutional typologies faced widespread and sustained criticism that ultimately led to their marginalization within mainstream psychology after the mid-20th century. One of the primary criticisms focused on **methodological flaws**, particularly the subjectivity inherent in defining and measuring the types. Despite Sheldon's numerical scaling, the initial assessment relied on visual judgment, raising questions about inter-rater reliability and potential rater bias. Furthermore, critics argued that the samples used were often restricted (e.g., Kretschmer using primarily institutionalized patients; Sheldon studying college students and delinquent youth), limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population.

A more fundamental critique centered on the issue of **correlation versus causation**. While researchers might observe a statistical correlation between, for instance, mesomorphy and certain aggressive behaviors, this correlation does not prove that the body type causes the behavior. Alternative explanations, such as social factors (Mesomorphs might be encouraged towards competitive sports and aggression), economic status, or environmental conditioning, were often

ignored or downplayed in favor of biological determinism. The theories were frequently accused of **reductionism**, simplifying the immensely complex variables governing personality and behavior down to mere physical structure.

Finally, ethical and sociological concerns were significant. Constitutional theories risk perpetuating **stereotyping**, where individuals are judged or treated based on their appearance rather than individual merit or character. The application of these theories in criminology, suggesting that individuals are biologically predestined for criminal activity based on their physique, was seen as scientifically irresponsible and socially dangerous, contributing to the historical association of physical characteristics with undesirable moral or psychological outcomes.

## 9. Further Reading

[Constitutional psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Somatotype and constitutional psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Rise and Fall of Constitutional Psychology: William Sheldon and the Somatotype](#)

[Somatotype \(Britannica\)](#)