SHELDON'S CONSTITUTIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

by Roger Pierce

Jack Sprat could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no lean;
And so between the two of them
They licked the platter clean.

With the publication of The Varieties of Human Physique in 1940, William H. Sheldon presented a system for classifying man according to body build. Sheldon claimed not only that an individual's body structure was unchanging through his life but that a predictable temperamental makeup was associated with a particular body type. The idea of classifying according to build was not new — in fact something similar to Sheldon's scheme has been associated with medicine at least since Hippocrates' division of man into the phthistic (vertical and tubercular) and apoplectic (squat and given to complications of the vascular system leading to apoplexy), and there was much excitement in the early 20th century about the observed tendency for forms of insanity to be associated with body build. Sheldon took a long step forward by positing not a set of categories or groups into which all individuals must (but never did) fall, but rather three *components* of structure, all of which are present in all individuals. The balance of strength or weakness in each of the three components gives a three-dimensional scale in which an individual can be placed and compared with others.

According to Sheldon's scheme the three components of structure derive from the three embryological layers, the endoderm (gut system), the mesoderm (support, motor and supply systems) and the ectoderm (skin and nervous system). That is to say, an individual persons invests his biological energy more or less strongly in each of the three components and the balance resulting determines his basic build or *somatotype.* Strength in the first component, or endomorphy, results in development of the digestive viscera and consequently a tendency to put on fat in a silhouette which tends

to be massive towards the center. Mesomorphy develops as muscularity and a squarer shape. The ectomorph is linear: his investment is in the exteroceptors and the cerebrum and his body tends to be thin and delicate. "Endomorphs and mesomorphs appear to be biological conservatives, the former investing faith in superior assimilative power or digestive ability, the latter in superior resistive substance and striking power. Ectomorphs seem to depart from both of these biological insurances and to embark on an exteroceptive adventure" (Atlas of Men p. 337). Sheldon has identified some 88 somatotypes, i.e. distinguishable combinations of the three components; some, of course, are extremes in one of the three, others, much more common, are closer to balancing the components in equal measure.

In The Varieties of Temperament (1942) Sheldon explores at length the much more controversial temperamental dimension of constitutional psychology, associating with each of the three physical components a complex of psychological traits. *Viscerotonia*, the endomorphic component on the behavioral level, is characterized by relaxation, complaisancy, love of food and comfort and company. *Somatotonia*, associated with the mesomorph, is characterized by bodily assertiveness and a love of power and danger. *Cerebrotonia* is characterized by inhibition of both viscerotonic and somatotonic expression, by secretiveness and a love of privacy.

As a prospective rolfer I was originally interested in Sheldon's work as a possible means for learning to see body structure more accurately. The Atlas of Men has proved to be particularly valuable for this purpose. It contains thousands of frontal, profile and rear photographs, classified according to somatotype with comments on associated temperamental and other characteristics. The pictures are valuable first of all simply as an extensive gallery of postural aberrations: all the variations on lordosis, rotations, knock knees and slump are here in profusion. If one needs graphic proof of the general need for Structural Integration, this book provides it.

As for seeing somatotypes, although accurate professional scanning evidently takes several months of training, one quickly begins to develop an eye for the balance of components in a given body. Obviously experienced rolfers have acquired a skill like this by practice. The last Bulletin (III/4, pp. 21-22), for example, reports that Julian Silverman's research at Agnew State Hospital produced, by cluster analysis, three distinct groups according to physiological and biochemical data, groups which Emmet Hutchins identified by scanning photographs as "tight-sleeve," "rigid-core" and "open" body types. I don't know whether Emmett's three categories correspond to strength in each of Sheldon's categories, but the same kind of relationship between structure and behavior (between genotype and response to the environment) is assumed here as with Sheldon, and it would seem Sheldon's categories might provide a useful framework for the observation of change in rolfing.

The Atlas designates for each individual photographed not only the overall

somatotype but the separate somatotype of each of 5 different segments of the body, so that judgments can also be made regarding *dysplasia*, "the extent to which an individual presents different somatotypes in different bodily regions." Petersen's Atlas for Somatotyping Children (1967) is even more useful in studying dysplasia because he gives a brief description of the aberrations shown in most of the photographs. Anyone who has studied with Dr. Rolf will recall her comments on this aspect of structure and its importance to rolfing — not to mention the difficulty, for the beginner, of seeing the problem in a live body.

Beyond these immediate practical concerns Sheldon gives much food for thought about the relationship between structure and behavior. If Sheldon is to be taken at all seriously the range of structural variation as a determinant of behavior variation is much greater than we are accustomed to think. The fundamental and unchangeable motivation of an extreme mesomorph is so different from that of an extreme ectomorph that one can understand the other only by a leap of imagination (not the kind of mental broad jump, incidentally, that the extreme mesomorph can make) comparable to that by which we understand our cats and parakeets, and a single ethical system that can cross all three bridges, between the extremes of the components must be very broad indeed.

This aspect of Sheldon's work has, I believe, more than anything else rendered it suspect amongst psychologists (whereas somatotyping seems to be routine work for physical anthropologists). My impression is that psychologists have not so much refuted as ignored Sheldon because he violates an unwritten axiom that behavior variations arise almost completely from environmental variations, hence that there *is* a basic human nature and aberrations from it can be corrected by manipulation of stimuli. If Sheldon is right, health, mental and otherwise, is not a single standard to which everyone may be held.

W.H. Sheldon, S.S. Stevens and W.B. Tucker, The Varieties of Human Physique (Harper, 1940)

W.H. Sheldon and S.S. Stevens The Varieties of Temperament (Harper, 1942)

W.H. Sheldon, C.W. Dupertuis and E. McDermott, Atlas of Men (Harper, 1954)

G. Petersen, Atlas for Somatotyping Children (Thomas, 1967) (Includes bibliography)