



Krafft-Ebing, Richard von (1840-1902)

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Richard von Krafft-Ebing
with his wife Marie Luise.

Before Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung monopolized the spotlight as the world's most preeminent psychiatrists in the early twentieth century, Richard von Krafft-Ebing filled the role in the latter part of the nineteenth century. His carefully detailed work involving hundreds of case studies shed light on the sexual habits of a wide spectrum of men and women. Although he personally abhorred homosexuality, his non-judgmental and open-minded analyses of these cases helped support the earliest organized movements for the decriminalization of homosexuality in Germany.

Born in Baden, Germany on August 4, 1840 to a family of minor nobility, Krafft-Ebing eagerly followed his grandfather's prodding to study medicine. From the outset he inclined towards a specialization in psychiatry, even though the field did not enjoy wide respect and acceptance as a legitimate area of concentration.

After completing his studies at the University of Heidelberg, Krafft-Ebing held positions at various asylums for the mentally disturbed, but concluded that these institutions merely served to isolate and separate the patients from society at large without providing much treatment or hope of cure. Therefore, he resolved to focus on education.

Early on, he taught at Strasbourg, which had just come into German hands as a result of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. However, the Germans insisted on the school's being a showpiece of German learning to the special detriment and exclusion of all things French. Krafft-Ebing found such artificial restrictions on the paths of learning objectionable and accepted a position at Graz, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Still later, he taught in Vienna, where he also served as a leading psychiatric-forensics expert.

Krafft-Ebing published his first major book, *A Textbook of Insanity*, in 1879. In this work he provided extensive systems for categorizing and classifying mental disorders. His goal was to offer ways by which those coming into contact with people who may be mentally ill could identify the nature of the problem and respond appropriately.

In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, first published in 1886, he continued his taxonomic trend, this time concentrating on sexual disorders. Although Krafft-Ebing always insisted that *Psychopathia Sexualis* was written for those in the medical and legal professions, he nevertheless accepted that the book's popularity extended far beyond his intended audience.

Based as his work was on prodigious numbers of case studies, Krafft-Ebing found himself inundated with responses from people who, for the first time, discovered that there were others who shared their proclivities, that they were not entirely alone and without recourse.

While his work discussed masochism, fetishism, sadism (all terms that he introduced), and a variety of other sexual issues, homosexuality clearly dominated his work. Although he tried to present consistent and unified explanations for same-sex sexual feelings, he never managed to establish a single, clear-cut cause.

Early on, he stated that homosexuality stemmed from hereditary degeneracy, but he also asserted that masturbation, prepubescent sexuality, and/or debauchery could trigger the condition as well. In addition, he was strongly influenced by Karl Ulrichs and his "urnings" theory, which was a form of "man trapped in a woman's body" or mental hermaphroditism explanation.

As his book reached ever wider circles of readers, men who theretofore had little or no outlet to discuss their inner feelings contacted Krafft-Ebing and voluntarily served as subjects for his case studies. He discovered that, contrary to his original beliefs that these men were moral degenerates, inferior specimens of humanity, and sufferers of mental affliction, most of the subjects exhibited characteristics of moral, physical, and mental health every bit as robust as "normal" men.

Indeed, he observed that what mental suffering they did manifest stemmed from the constant societal and cultural disapprobation they experienced. In other words, their homosexuality was not caused by mental illness; rather, their mental illness was caused by the harsh treatment or subterfuge they endured because of their homosexuality.

In the final edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* published before his death, Krafft-Ebing amended his earlier position and asserted that the homosexual condition was merely one of many possible manifestations of sexual desire and not, in and of itself, indicative of mental disease.

Furthermore, he had lent his signature and support to Magnus Hirschfeld's efforts to repeal Paragraph 175 of the German constitution, which prohibited homosexual acts. Pragmatically, he did not participate in similar efforts to overturn Austria-Hungary's prohibitive law.

Three main concepts became more fully developed because of Krafft-Ebing's work. First, homosexual desire became recognized as a category of sexual desire. In other words, the sex act itself was independent of the orientation. The desire for same-sex sexual activity preceded and/or caused the activity, rather than the other way around, as had previously been thought. Secondly, the love and affection experienced between same-sex partners carries equal moral value to that experienced between men and women. Finally, homosexual men need not be excessively effeminate or otherwise physically recognizable.

Interestingly enough, Krafft-Ebing used the term "heterosexual," which he coined, as a category of perversion equivalent to, but distinct from, "homosexual." The moral argument against homosexuality rested upon its being an act of sex without possibility of reproduction and therefore contrary to nature. Krafft-Ebing applied the term heterosexual to refer to instances of men and women engaging in sex when, due to contraception, age, or other conditions, there was little or no chance of reproduction and therefore contrary to nature.

Krafft-Ebing retired from teaching at the age of sixty-one. However, he continued a full regimen of writing and editing, as well as seeing patients privately. He died within a year of his retirement, on December 22, 1902.

Although Freud was influenced by Krafft-Ebing's work, the Freudian model of homosexuality reverted to the view that it was a disease, an aberration to be treated. Freud's concept shaped the views of twentieth-century psychiatry far more than Krafft-Ebing's. It was not until the latter half of the century that Krafft-Ebing's theories regained general acceptance among the medico-psychiatric community.

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About the Author

Alex Hunnicutt received a B.A. in English in 1991 and an M.A. in History in 2003, both from the University of Texas, Arlington. He is currently a doctoral candidate in the transatlantic History program at U.T.A., focusing on the status of executioners in England, France, and America. In addition, he is actively researching aspects of gay and lesbian history in modern Europe and America.