

Frackman, Kyle. "Richard von Krafft-Ebing." *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Love, Courtship, and Sexuality through History: The Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 5. Ed. Susan Mumm. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008. 130-32. Print.

### **Krafft-Ebing, Richard von (1840-1902)**

One of the most important precursors of psychiatrist Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theories of sexuality, Richard von Krafft-Ebing contributed to the classification of "normal," "abnormal," and "perverse" sexual behaviors as determining factors in bourgeois respectability and morality. A German-Austrian psychiatrist and one of the unknowing founders of modern sexology, Krafft-Ebing has been blamed by some for the "confusion" still connected to sexuality and sexual variations today (Oosterhuis 1, 7). The system of classification that Krafft-Ebing developed in his most influential work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886, first edition), became a widely-known and comprehensive explanation of the cataloging of sexual "abnormalities." He shared many of the beliefs of other medical professionals of his time, like his belief that masturbation played an important role in sexual pathology, but he asserted that sexual abnormalities were generated in specific parts of the brain (Oosterhuis 59).

Born in Mannheim, Germany, and educated in Prague, Austro-Hungary, Krafft-Ebing studied medicine and psychiatry at the University of Heidelberg (Germany). After earning his medical degree in 1863, he completed a training period in an asylum and then set up his own private practice as a psychiatrist. Using his medical training in a different way, he also treated soldiers during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). In 1872, he accepted a position as an adjunct professor of psychiatry at the University of Strassburg, though he left the next

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year for a longer stay as an adjunct professor of psychiatry at the University of Graz (1873-1889). While in Graz, Krafft-Ebing worked at a mental asylum (Feldhof) where he also became superintendent and supervised medical students' clinical experiences with psychiatric patients. During this time, he was critical of the administration of public asylums and advocated a new form of mental hospital that would allow for the instruction of students of psychiatry as part of the proper treatment of psychiatric patients. In 1889 he moved on to the University of Vienna, where he held two different chairs in psychiatry. He continued to criticize the (lack of) psychiatric training with which most contemporary physicians were allowed to practice medicine.

Though he later changed his perspective on the various shades of "normality," Krafft-Ebing made early distinctions in his work among "perversion," "perversity," and "abnormality." He understood "perversion" as a "permanent constitutional disorder—be it inborn or acquired—that affected the whole personality." "Perversity" was "passing immoral conduct of normal persons." "Abnormal" sexual behavior was that which did not have the goal of coitus. Within his classification of perversions, Krafft-Ebing saw four main categories: "sadism, masochism, fetishism, and contrary sexual feeling" (Oosterhuis 47). Indeed, the first three categories are terms which Krafft-Ebing coined. Among other groups created by Krafft-Ebing in his taxonomy are "zoophilia erotica," "zooerasty," "stercoracism," and "pedophilia erotica." In his

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later work, he departed from these processes of individualized categorization and pathologization, preferring a "graded scale of health and illness, normal and abnormal" (Oosterhuis 75).

An essential component of Krafft-Ebing's practice of psychiatry was the theory of degeneration. Becoming one of central Europe's greatest proponents of degeneration theory, he believed that family relations played a considerable role in the development of psychiatric pathologies. Neuroses and psychological conditions per se could not be attributed to heredity, but the presence of mental instability in a patient's family could indicate a predisposition to psychological abnormality. Mental and physical degeneration could also have visible indications such as brain lesions. In the end, degeneration would lead to a lesser ability or an inability to make morally sound judgments.

As with many other societal fears at the *fin de siècle*, increasing industrialization and urbanization in Europe were thought to cause or encourage sexual excess. Thus, there was a perceived threat that humans, whose sexuality was viewed completely differently from that of animals, could fall into the trap of their "base" sexuality. Indeed, Krafft-Ebing was of the opinion that human decency and morality had only been achieved through Christianity's long struggle with inhuman impulses (Oosterhuis 56). Nonetheless, his view of human sexuality was largely rooted in biology and has often been seen as a contrast to Freud's psychologically based theories (Oosterhuis 59).

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Same-sex eroticism was seen by Krafft-Ebing and many of his contemporaries as an "inversion" of gender and sexual identity. That is, masculinity and femininity were inappropriately and incorrectly blended to form individuals who were sexually attracted to members of their own sex. In his opinion, individuals could be predisposed to same-sex attraction without exhibiting it. Therefore, he did believe that homosexuality could be prevented. Indeed, "[he] advanced that hereditarily tainted boys and girls must not be admitted to boarding schools and warned against private tutors" and single-sex facilities like prisons and military schools (Oosterhuis 245). He assigned his (mostly male) patients with same-sex affections to the broad category of "contrary sexual feeling." Within that category, he granted that it was possible for individuals to have a "normal" gender identity and still be attracted to members of their own sex. Somewhat unusually, he placed same-sex love on the same level as different-sex love, acknowledging it to be morally valid (Oosterhuis 251).

Krafft-Ebing defined "heterosexuality" as an individual's sexual attraction for someone of another sex, although this classification was also utilized in his explanations of "perversions" (Oosterhuis 50). As noted above, his idea of sexual normality depended on the goal of the sexual activity; coitus and procreation was the "normal" objective. Krafft-Ebing's first "heterosexuals" were practitioners of fetishes who exhibited a "total indifference" toward coitus and hence qualified as perverse (Oosterhuis 50).

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Krafft-Ebing believed that individuals with psychological conditions that inhibited their moral judgment should not be convicted of crimes, but rather should receive medical treatment. He felt that, as a result of the insufficient training that physicians had received to prepare them to handle psychiatric patients, many people who actually needed psychiatric care were delivered to the criminal justice system. Krafft-Ebing was part of the developing psychiatric field, which advocated medical diagnoses and treatment in the place of what would have previously been purely legal solutions (e.g., prison sentences).

Krafft-Ebing was a prolific author, writing hundreds of articles and nearly one hundred books. He published work on psychiatric subjects, medical research, forensic topics, and social commentary. Possessing an international reputation as an accomplished clinical and forensic psychiatrist, Krafft-Ebing also served as editor and contributor to a variety of scholarly journals like the *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie* (General Journal for Psychiatry), the *Jahrbücher für Psychiatrie und Neurologie* (Yearbooks for Psychiatry and Neurology), the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook for Sexual Intermediates), and *Friedreichs Blätter für gerichtliche Medizin* (Friedreich's Pages for Forensic Medicine). Krafft-Ebing's other published works include his most famous study *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886, first edition), *Lehrbuch der gerichtlichen Psychopathologie mit Berücksichtigung der Gesetzgebung von Österreich, Deutschland und Frankreich* (Textbook of Forensic Psychopathology with

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*Consideration of Legislation of Austria, Germany and France*; 1875), and *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie auf klinischer Grundlage für practische Ärzte und Studierende* (*Textbook of Psychiatry with Clinical Foundation for Practical Physicians and Students*; 3 vols.; 1879-1880).

Though they have been at least partly eclipsed by the popularity of Freud's findings and work, Krafft-Ebing's writings and research have had a lasting effect on the practice of psychiatry. Several of his theories, such as his work with "transvestites" and individuals who would later be called "transgendered," preceded later categorizations and diagnoses of the twentieth century. Several everyday words in our sexual vocabularies can be traced to his work (e.g., "sadism" and "masochism"). Additionally, although Krafft-Ebing contrasted sexual variants with the drive toward reproduction, his work highlighted the many kinds of alternatives that still shape present-day views of sexuality.

### **Suggested Reading**

Oosterhuis, Harry. *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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