

Krafft-Ebing, Richard Freiherr von (1840–1902)

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As the author of *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) and several other works on sexual pathology, Richard von Krafft-Ebing was one of the founding fathers of medical sexology. By naming and classifying all non-procreative sexuality, he synthesized medical knowledge of what in the late nineteenth century was labeled as “perversion.” Several taxonomies of sexual “deviance” were developed in psychiatry at the time, but the one devised by Krafft-Ebing eventually set the tone. Before Sigmund Freud had expressed similar views, he also made a substantial contribution to the shaping of the modern notion of sexuality. In his approach sexuality emerged as a complex of reflexes, bodily sensations, behaviors, feelings, desires, fantasies, and dreams. The physical dimension of sexuality affected the inner self and its psychological dimension affected the body. This interaction might explain why sexuality has become such a meaningful and sensitive experience in modern culture.

As a professor at the Universities of Strasbourg (1871–1872), Graz (1872–1889), and Vienna (1889–1902), and working in many fields of psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing was one of the most prominent psychiatrists in Central Europe. He started his career working in mental asylums, but the desire to escape the constraints of institutional psychiatry drove him to broaden his professional territory. Moving from the public asylum to the university clinic, and founding a sanatorium and a private practice, he tried to enlarge psychiatry’s domain as well as to attract a new clientele, in particular middle- and upper-class patients suffering from disorders like nervousness, neurasthenia, and sexual “perversion.”

Krafft-Ebing’s interest in sexual “deviance” was linked to forensic psychiatry in which he was a leading expert. *Psychopathia sexualis* was

written in the first instance for lawyers and doctors discussing sexual crimes in court. His main thrust was that in many cases sexual “deviance” should no longer be regarded as simply sin and crime, but as pathological. Since mental and nervous disorders often diminished responsibility, he pointed out, most sex offenders should not be punished, but treated as patients. Like other psychiatrists in the late nineteenth century, Krafft-Ebing shifted the focus from immoral acts, a temporary deviation of the norm, to an innate morbid condition. Influenced by the natural-scientific approach in medicine as well as by degeneration theory, he explained “perversions” as inborn instincts, as deviations of biological evolution. At the same time Krafft-Ebing adopted a psychological understanding of sexuality.

As his work progressed, Krafft-Ebing’s approach shifted from a forensic perspective in which deviant sexuality was explained as an episodic symptom of a more fundamental mental disorder, to a consideration of “perversion” as an integral part of an autonomous sexual instinct. Sexual “deviance” was no longer perceived as a more or less temporal digression, but as a continuous feature of one’s inner being. Not so much physical characteristics nor actual behavior were decisive in his diagnosis of “perversion,” but inner feelings and personal history. Krafft-Ebing’s work indicated and provoked a growing preoccupation with sexual identity. His move from a predominantly forensic focus and a physiological explanation to the broader goal of addressing general psychological issues of sexuality also entailed that it was more and more disconnected from reproduction and that its relational dimension as well as the satisfaction of desire came to the fore.

Krafft-Ebing revised *Psychopathia sexualis* by adding further case histories and new sexual categories. Between 1886 and 1903 Krafft-Ebing published eleven editions of this work and after his death new editions as well as several translations appeared. The most recent U.S. edition has been edited by Brian King (1999). Although he also paid attention to voyeurism, exhibitionism,

pedophilia, bestiality, and several other varieties in sexual life, Krafft-Ebing distinguished four fundamental forms of perversion: (1) contrary sexual feeling or inversion, including various physical and psychological mixtures of manliness and femininity that in the twentieth century would gradually be differentiated into homosexuality, bisexuality, androgyny, transvestitism and transsexuality; (2) fetishism, the erotic obsession with certain parts of the body or objects; (3) sadism; and (4) masochism, terms actually coined by him. He increasingly employed the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, which had been introduced earlier, but which were not current in the late nineteenth century.

Like other doctors, Krafft-Ebing surrounded sexual “deviance” with an aura of pathology. However, there were many ambiguities in his work which his contemporaries read in different ways. Because Krafft-Ebing distinguished himself as an objective and humanitarian expert and because he made a stand against traditional moral-religious and legal denunciations of sexual “deviance,” individuals approached him to find understanding, acceptance, and support. Several of them suggested that Krafft-Ebing’s publications did not only gratify one’s curiosity about sexuality and make sexual variance imaginable, but individuals concerned also recognized themselves in the case histories and viewed them as an endorsement of their desires and behavior. The (auto)biographical accounts and intimate confessions about sexual experiences revealed to them that they were not unique. The medical model was employed by many of them, homosexuals in particular, for their own purposes to mitigate feelings of guilt, to give “perversion” the stamp of naturalness, and to justify themselves. They went to Krafft-Ebing, not so much seeking a cure, but to develop a dialogue about their nature and situation. In this way Krafft-Ebing’s work was the impetus to self-awareness and self-expression.

Krafft-Ebing relied on life stories as a crucial empirical basis of his work. He offered

the “stepchildren of nature,” as he characterized sexually “deviant” individuals, a forum to speak for themselves and he responded to them. Even if they criticized medical thinking and the social suppression of their sexual desires, he still published their letters uncensored and remarked that these strikingly illustrated their feelings and suffering. In this way he enabled voices to be heard that were usually silenced and he also acknowledged that some of them had influenced him. In Krafft-Ebing’s work medical explanations and lay views of sexuality overlapped. His approach fluctuated between the explanation of “perversions” as illness and the recognition of a variety of sexual desires. It was a first step towards sexual emancipation.

SEE ALSO: Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939); Marquis de Sade, Donatien Alphonse François (1740–1814)

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FURTHER READINGS

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