

# Sexology: A European science

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## Abstract

The word *sexology* is attested in English from the 1860s but took on its modern meaning as the science of sexuality only in the 1900s, initially in German (*Sexualwissenschaft*) and Dutch (*seksuologie*), and later in French, Spanish (*sexología*), and Italian (*sessuologia*). This interdisciplinary science drew on numerous medical specializations, the humanities and social sciences, and activist movements. It seeks to understand human sexuality and its development by distinguishing the “normal” from the pathological, and also deals with questions linked to reproduction and sexual health. A number of phases can be distinguished. The last third of the nineteenth century was that of “sexual psychopathology.” In the wake of sexual reform and eugenics, sexology underwent a new turning point during the interwar period. The discipline reinvented itself under American influence after the Second World War and entered into a handful of universities.

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## Article

### Psychopathology and sexual hygiene

Beginning in the 1840s, biological and medical discoveries fuelled questions regarding sexual hygiene. The discovery of “spontaneous ovulation” and of agenesis during the menstrual cycle—by the Frenchmen Pouget, Raciborski, and Duvernay and the German Bischoff—was behind the method of “periodic abstinence.” In 1844, the German anatomist Georg Ludwig Kobelt published an essay on the “voluptuous organs,” paving the way for a physiology of coital pleasure. Numerous conjugal manuals subsequently emerged, especially to prompt husbands to sexually satisfy their wives.

Sexual psychopathology focuses on the codification of “sexual perversions.” During the late nineteenth century, it sustained an abundant medical literature throughout Europe, that was regularly expanded by alienists, psychiatrists, neurologists, forensic doctors, and criminologists. Numerous neologisms were coined in an effort to define paraphilia (sexual deviation) as well as possible: we owe the term necrophilia to the Belgian alienist Joseph Guislain (1797-1860); exhibitionism (1871) to the French doctor Charles Lasègue (1816-1883); fetishism (1887) to the psychologist Alfred Binet (1857-1911); sexual inversion (homosexuality)—which is the Italian and French translation of *conträre Sexualempfindung* (“contrary sexual feeling”)—to the German neurologist Carl Westphal (1833-1890); and sadism and masochism to the Austro-Hungarian

psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), in reference to the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) and the Galician novelist Sacher Masoch (1836-1895). Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* fuelled the research of European colleagues and quickly became a bestseller. Between 1886 and 1903 it went through fourteen editions and quadrupled in volume, expanded by sexual autobiographies that bore witness to "perversion," primarily by male homosexuals who were keen to contribute to the rise of science and to understand their "anomalies." The epicentre of this blossoming was in Germanic countries, France, and Italy, where the ephemeral journal *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali* was founded in 1896 by Pasquale Penta (1859-1904). Studies of sexual psychopathology in Great Britain and Belgium, which were threatened by censorship, were fewer and much more discreet.

At the turn of the century psychiatrists and psychologists dismissed the theory of degeneration in favour of a sexual psychology that traced the genesis of sexual preference back to experiences from early childhood. Alfred Binet and Charles Féré (1852-1907) in France, Pasquale Penta in Italy, Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) in England, Auguste Forel (1848-1931) in Switzerland, and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862-1929) in Germany more or less adopted this vision. The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) developed. This surge in writing surpassed specialist circles and sparked a popularizing erotic-medical literature. Mobile and temporary publishing offices as well as pseudo-doctors produced dozens of volumes, in which all manner of sexual turpitude was unveiled in detail, under the cover of pathology.

Therapy still relied on a traditional range: fasting, a balanced diet, hydrotherapy, hypnosis and electrotherapy dominated in the late nineteenth century, while endocrinology flourished during the interwar period. Later, psychoanalysis became highly influential.

## Sexology, social movements, and sexual reform

During the 1910s, a new generation of doctors distanced themselves from *fin de siècle* psychopathology and put the division between the normal and pathological into perspective. It was at this point that the term sexology took hold. A number of movements developed within this nascent discipline. Neo-Malthusians and later birth control led to eugenics and the reduction of births among the working class. The feminist movement mobilized to abolish regulated prostitution, the archetype of the sexual double standard that tolerated male deviations but harshly punished female adulterers. The German Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), who in 1897 founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (the first organization for the protection of homosexual rights), created the Medical Society for Sexology and Eugenics (1913), which took the name of the Institute of Sexology in 1919. He worked towards internationalizing, uniting and institutionalizing the circles favourable to sexual reform. This program sought to secularize sexual morals, as well as to promote gender equality, eugenics, sexual education and tolerance towards homosexuals. The World League for Sexual Reform (WLSR) was officially created in Copenhagen in June 1928. At its height in 1932, the WLSR counted

190,000 members, with affiliated national branches active in publishing: *Sexueele Hervorming* in the Netherlands, *Sexus* in Spain, and *Le problème sexuel* in France.

During the 1930s, sexology took on a more medical and normative turn. The rise of endocrinology made possible hormone treatments, operations on gonads (grafts and ligatures), and irradiation of organs supposed to restore the balance of virility and femininity, a guarantor of healthy heterosexuality. Psychoanalysis became more conservative. A Catholic sexology also appeared, based on the encyclical *Casti Connubii* ("chaste union," 1930) and the Ogino-Knaus method, which perfected periodic abstinence.

## The Postwar Period: Professionalization and American influence

In the aftermath of the Second World War, American sexology exerted growing influence within Europe. The Kinsey Reports on male (1948) and female (1953) sexuality prompted intense polemics. They were very quickly translated into a dozen European languages and provoked the hostility of conservatives on both the right and the left and psychoanalysts, but met with support from many homosexuals, feminists, and people in favour of greater sexual freedom. In addition, they provided an occasion to contrast European (and even Latin) culture with American mores.

From the 1960s, sexology developed in a few European universities, beginning with l'Université catholique de Louvain, where progressive Catholics, theologians, moralists and doctors founded l'Institut des sciences familiales et sexologiques in 1961. In Switzerland, sexology instruction was provided in the medical schools of Lausanne and Geneva beginning in 1968 and 1969. After these precursors, other European universities opened up to sexology as a discipline at the intersection of the social and medical sciences. The research of William Masters (1915-2001), Virginia Johnson (1925-2013), and Helen Kaplan (1929-1995) promoted sexual therapies. Since then, sexology has become democratized amongst the general public. It expanded significantly during the 1970s and 1980s, with an increase in national and transnational centres, congresses, and education, albeit with some conflict. Sexologists, who are well established, have highly varied professional and therapeutic practices, although they share a relational vision of sexuality. The feminist and homosexual movements, and later the LGBTQI movement, have proven highly critical of sexologists and psychoanalysts, whom they all consider to be "heterocops." These movements refuse experts and encourage people to experience sexual liberation without norms or restrictions. Feminist, gay, and lesbian studies that are diffused in universities deconstruct the naturalist vision of gender, instead affirming the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality.

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