

Newly Audible Voices: How Concepts of Queer Identity Changed in Weimar Germany

Nola Aycock

The new academic field of sexology emerged in Germany between 1870 and 1930, spanning radical changes in German government and society. Some of these researchers tried to understand the nature of homosexuality and other behaviors considered to be outside normal sexual parameters, mostly through the use of case studies. When Magnus Hirschfeld (pictured on the right below) collected a better set of data than his predecessors, concepts regarding homosexuality became more distinct. This, and the changing political culture of Germany following World War I, had an impact on the existing homosexual subculture and its associated rights movement.

Although medical science has not always held the same standard of rigor as it does today, it has maintained the same thirst for knowledge and understanding. In late Imperial and Weimar Germany, some researchers in the new field of sexology directed their desire for learning toward homosexuality and other things they considered to be outside normal sexual behavior. Although the nature of homosexuality likely did not change in that time period, scientists' views on homosexuality changed considerably. At the same time, these changing ideas impacted and were impacted by a surprisingly early homosexual rights movement. Although gender expression and sexual orientation were conflated by early and influential scholars, the concepts were separated when Hirschfeld conducted more rigorous research and were then applied and further discussed by the homosexual subculture of Weimar Germany's greater press freedom.

Part I: The Beginnings of the Field

The field of sexology was new at this time and consisted of medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others in similar fields. Most of them were in Germany, with notable others in England and countries neighboring Germany. According to the bibliographer Dynes, the psychiatric study of homosexuality as we know it started with Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal, who wrote a notable paper in 1869.¹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) was another of the earliest researchers and the most influential; his most important work was *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which was first published in 1886 and revised twelve times, with the final edition being published in 1903.² His focus was on sexual pathology, and he considered "normal" sexuality to be heterosexual and for the purpose of procreation. Notable other scholars (many of whom frequently cited Krafft-

¹ Wayne Dynes, *Homosexuality: a Research Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 17.

This is an annotated bibliography covering a wide range of material on homosexuality, not only historical sources and certainly not limited to Germany.

² Dynes, *Research Guide*, 13.

Ebing) included but were not limited to Albert Moll, Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, Karl Ulrichs, and Paul Näcke.³

These early sexologists⁴ engaged in several debates regarding homosexuality. They did not agree as to whether or not homosexuality was a benign difference or if it should be cured. Even those who believed homosexuality was detrimental sometimes admitted that existing cures did not work.⁵ Also up for debate was whether or not homosexuality was inborn or if it could be caused by something external later in life, such as exposure to homosexuals in person or through reading (with the latter belief being more common).⁶ That said, between 1870 and World War II, the academic consensus seems to have shifted toward viewing homosexuality as a naturally occurring difference which cannot be cured.

Krafft-Ebing, in particular, relied on case studies from a variety of sources. Most commonly, cases came from the researcher's own patients. Krafft-Ebing noted on some cases the advice that a patient was given at their consultation, implying that the patient was his own.⁷ Others came from other physicians and were cited accordingly.⁸ More creatively, sometimes Krafft-Ebing drew from legal sources, such as court records regarding crimes such as public indecency or certain violent crimes.⁹ Despite this documentation, the origin of many of Krafft-Ebing's cases is unclear.

The sources late nineteenth century sexologists used had serious flaws. Sexual behavior was (and still is today) difficult to study since it is typically conducted in private and not openly discussed. Direct observation being unavailable, sexologists were forced to rely on what people were willing to tell them about their sex lives or on what they could see from legal or literary sources.¹⁰ If a case study came from somewhere besides a researcher's own patient, they almost certainly did not have access to all of the details. In particular, homosexuality could easily be one's deepest secret, so for a homosexual person, opening up to a doctor (or anyone else) about one's sex life was stressful at best. The sample sizes used were also suspect. Westphal, for example, cites a mere two case studies. By the final edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing cites 238 case

³ Sigmund Freud could also be considered part of this early field of sexology, but the Freudian school of psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this paper as it quickly differs from sexology.

⁴ Due to the newness of this field, people studying sexuality may or may not have always described themselves as sexologists. However, they all studied sex and sexuality, and the term was commonly used by the 1920s.

⁵ Attempted cures included castration, hypnotic suggestion, simply attempting heterosexual intercourse (i.e. with a prostitute), and others; Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1915), 327-338, <http://books.google.com/books?id=8NoTAAAAIAAJ&oe=UTF-8>.

⁶ Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 44-5.

⁷ For example, Case 145: Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 12th ed., trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 247.

⁸ For example, Case 140 was borrowed from Albert Moll: *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹ He even cites Jack the Ripper as a case study, suggesting that he had a sexual motive; *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰ Sexual intercourse was not empirically studied in a lab until Masters & Johnson's studies in 1966. Even then, they were limited to studying physical sexual response as having sex in a lab is psychologically a highly unusual experience; Anna Katharina Schaffner, "Fiction as Evidence: On the Uses of Literature in Nineteenth-Century Sexological Discourse," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 2 (2011): 167.

studies, but he deals with a very wide range of topics, not just homosexuality.¹¹ Both were cited frequently by other sexologists. Still, early sexologists were mostly legitimate, mainstream professionals trying to learn what they could from limited sources.

This shortage of quality sources, led some sexologists to cite literary sources. Fiction was used as an example of fantasy, an important component of sexuality. Some authors were treated as case subjects themselves because their writing included sexual content, with Rousseau's *Confessions* being a popular subject of analysis.¹² Krafft-Ebing in particular liberally mixed literary references with factual case studies, treating them as equally valid.¹³

As an example of the link between literary and medical worlds, Ellis, in describing the rest of his field, mentions Karl Ulrichs, a writer, homosexual rights activist, and lawyer. Although Ellis claims that Ulrichs was "not a writer whose psychological views can carry much scientific weight," he also states that he partly inspired Westphal (an actual psychiatrist) to study homosexuality.¹⁴ Indeed, Ulrichs was cited frequently by those in medical fields, despite the fact that he was not a doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or any other type of medical professional. In particular, Ulrichs was in close association with Hirschfeld, who held an M.D. and was chair of the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee ("Scientific Humanitarian Committee," hereafter WhK), an activist group established in 1897 interested in using scientific arguments to further political goals.¹⁵ Ulrichs also coined several terms for different types of sexual orientation, derived from Plato's *Symposium*, a very literary and Greek source.¹⁶ Ulrichs was known to cite literary sources very frequently in his political arguments; therefore he constitutes a substantial link between the literary, subcultural, and medical worlds.¹⁷

Throughout this time, homosexuality was generally treated as contagious. Both experts and lay people commonly believed that exposure to homosexuals could lead to widespread homosexuality, ultimately eliminating heterosexuality and causing the downfall of Germany.¹⁸ This fear drove much of the censorship law in Germany; before 1918, writing on homosexuality was allowed only if it had scientific or literary merit and was meant for expert readers only.¹⁹ Even then, Krafft-Ebing often chose to use Latin terms to make his writing more obscure and less likely to corrupt.²⁰ It was also believed that spending time with homosexuals in person could also cause a person to become homosexual. All-male boarding schools, for example, were seen as hotbeds of

¹¹ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 409.

¹² Schaffner, "Fiction as Evidence," 171-2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁴ Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 67.

¹⁵ Particularly repealing Paragraph 175, the German law banning certain sex acts between men.

¹⁶ Hirschfeld, Magnus. *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*. Translated by Michael Lombardi-Nash. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, 38-9.

¹⁷ Dynes, *Research Guide*, 16.

¹⁸ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 43-5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, ix.

homosexuality.²¹ Even though some people believed homosexuality could be inborn, innate homosexuality was assumed to make up a small minority of cases. The belief in contagious homosexuality greatly overshadowed any belief in inborn homosexuality.

The terminology early sexologists used reflected their views on sex and sexuality. One of the earliest and most common terms in use to describe homosexuality was *konträre sexuellempfindung* (or “contrary sexual feeling” as it is usually rendered in English). This term was coined by Westphal in 1869 and was widely used by German sexologists, including Krafft-Ebing. The term “inversion” was also commonly used in English and meant approximately the same thing. This model treated sexual orientation as a gender trait: that is, normal men and women were exclusively attracted to the opposite sex, and homosexual behavior or feelings meant that the person did not conform to their gender.²² With that came the idea that homosexuals might not conform to their gender in other ways. They might be physically different, such as having abnormal sex organs, or an unusually high level of opposite-sex hormones. Alternatively (or in addition), they might behave differently, perhaps cross-dressing or preferring work associated with the opposite sex.

Part II: Important Changes from Hirschfeld

Hirschfeld wrote slightly later than Westphal, Krafft-Ebing, or Ulrichs, and his sources were significantly better than all of them. Hirschfeld gave his subjects a long questionnaire, an example of which was included in his monumental work *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*. Subjects answered over 100 questions about their medical histories, family relationships, and sexual activities.²³ Because Hirschfeld followed his subjects for several years, he was able to study individuals in more depth and developed closer relationships with at least some of them.²⁴ Subjects could take their time on the questionnaire, provide details, and think and communicate from the privacy of their homes, all of which enhanced the quality of Hirschfeld’s data. The alternative would be discussing what might be the subject’s deepest secret in front of an authority figure who expected a quick answer.²⁵ He also had a superior quantity of data; by the time he wrote *Homosexuality of Men and Women* in 1914, Hirschfeld had collected thousands of questionnaires over a period of eighteen years.²⁶

²¹ See Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 75-87. Note that Ellis was from England, where there was much discussion on homosexuality in boarding school.

²² Although I use the term “gender” for the sake of clarity, it was not used in this time period. Sex and gender were not yet distinct concepts. Sexologists consistently referred to “sex” where modern scholars might sometimes refer to “gender.”

²³ Hirschfeld, *Homosexuality*, 290-316.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²⁵ Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, 18-9.

²⁶ Hirschfeld, *Homosexuality*, 23 & 288.

Hirschfeld stated that all of his sources represent people who came to him, not the other way around.²⁷ It appears that many of these patients came to him specifically because he was known as an expert on homosexuality. Hirschfeld was also chair of the WhK and, therefore, active in the homosexual emancipation movement. Some patients may have found him in that way. There is also a high chance that Hirschfeld himself was homosexual, given that he lived with a male partner for a long period of time.²⁸ Although he did not advertise his orientation, he would have empathized with his patients, since he actually experienced some of what his patients described to him. In any case, it is clear that Hirschfeld was a reasonably approachable consultant for those trying to understand their own homosexuality and/or gender nonconformity. Dealing with him was private, safe, and mutually beneficial.

In 1910 Hirschfeld developed a new model of sexual intermediaries. In reviewing case after case, Hirschfeld noticed that not everyone fit the existing model of inversion set by Krafft-Ebing, Ulrichs, and Westphal. Many of the people he observed cross-dressed but were exclusively heterosexual.²⁹ Others might have been homosexual, but never cross-dressed nor showed interest in any other cross-gender behavior. His new model situated everyone on a continuum between totally masculine and totally feminine according to their primary and secondary sex characteristics, sexual behavior, and a few other features.³⁰ Published in *Transvestites* this new model accounted for both homosexuality and transvestism (as well as many other conditions) without conflating them.

In the same book, Hirschfeld also coined a new term: transvestite. In his day, “transvestism” had a broad meaning; the word was used to describe many people, from men who identified as husbands and fathers but enjoyed women’s clothing, to those who might today be described as transgender or transsexual, who were interested in living as another gender full-time and perhaps undergoing surgical and/or hormonal transition. Hirschfeld described what he saw as transvestism because cross-dressing was what these many people had in common.³¹ Other researchers applied other terms to describe cross-gender behavior and identity, such as “Eonism,” coined by Ellis in 1928 in response to Hirschfeld.³² Also in use was “trans-sensible,” which was coined in the transvestite subculture and did not appear in scientific literature.³³ Both terms moved away from Hirschfeld’s focus on clothing, but neither were ever used as commonly as “transvestism.” As elsewhere, terminology reveals much about what people thought. In fact, the word “homosexual” was often inappropriately used to describe a wide variety of deviancies, even

²⁷ Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, 18-9.

²⁸ Heike Bauer, “From Fragile Solidarities to Burnt Sexual Subjects: At the Institute of Sexual Science,” in *The Hirschfeld Archives* (Temple University Press, 2017), 81.

²⁹ Hirschfeld, *Transvestites*, 130.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 215-236.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³² Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Eonism* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1928), 12, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.200374/page/n5>.

³³ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 61.

in the 1920s, especially by lay people.³⁴ Despite describing a wide variety of people, the word “transvestism” still allowed for greater specificity.

Part III: Subcultural Discussion and Application Following WWI

After 1918, the ordinary homosexuals and transvestites who sexologists studied were able to have open discussions of their own. The Weimar government poorly enforced censorship laws, leading to a greater degree of press freedom than before.³⁵ Queer people used this opportunity to publish magazines, newspapers, and novels containing stories and news about people like themselves, including correspondence from readers, political commentary, practical advice (such as relationship advice), and fiction.³⁶

Although many people associate queer subculture with physical establishments such as bars, this media system was more important regarding the development of the subculture for several reasons. Literature was much more accessible than any club; clubs could only exist where there were enough people to financially support one, so they only existed in urban areas. Literature could be sold anywhere and was accessible outside of the major cities. Magazines, in particular, were also far cheaper than entering a club, an important point in post-war Germany.³⁷ Reading could also be private; a person could discreetly buy reading material, read it alone at home, and then hide it or throw it away when they were done if they so desired. Literature also directed interested people to the physical establishments that did exist, from permanent clubs to one-time parties.³⁸ Every significant homosexual rights organization that met in person also published periodicals and thus conducted important discussion in print.³⁹ People who were otherwise isolated were able to participate in the subculture, in much the same way as the internet connects queer people today.

After Hirschfeld coined the term transvestism in 1910, the word entered common use and people began identifying as transvestites. By adopting a common term, transvestism became easier to discuss. That discussion, like others, took place partly in the subcultural print media, with regular columns and supplements appearing in magazines catering to homosexual women.⁴⁰ In the 1920s, some people also began seeking – and actually obtaining – legal protection to make it easier to cross-dress in public. Without such protection, transvestites could be arrested as a public

³⁴ Bauer, “From Fragile Solidarities,” 91.

³⁵ During the war, censorship had been enforced by the military, but after 1918 was enforced by police forces; this change caused some confusion and resulted in greater press freedom. See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 32.

³⁶ Katie Sutton, “‘We Too Deserve a Place in the Sun’: The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany,” *German Studies Review* 35, no.2 (2012): 339-340.

³⁷ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 69.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-2.

⁴⁰ Sutton, “Place in the Sun,” 339.

nuisance.⁴¹ Obtaining such a permit was basically straightforward as long as the applicant had some sort of medical documentation suggesting that cross-dressing was necessary.⁴²

Face-to-face organizations also existed, but they were more useful as social groups, especially those for women. Sex acts between women were not criminalized like those between men, so homosexual women did not have a clear political issue to rally around. Social groups were therefore of greater importance.⁴³ Politically-oriented groups sometimes met in person, such as chapters of the German Friendship League, but they were still focused on publications and fighting the censorship of their publications.⁴⁴ Some groups (for any and all genders) were certainly exclusively for social reasons. Although different from the explicitly political groups, they were still important because they offered queer people the opportunity to relax and spend time with those of shared experience. Queer people faced pressure from the heterosexual world because they were considered different at best, sick or criminal at worst, and releases for that pressure are not to be discounted.⁴⁵ Regardless of the purpose of any group, magazines were again important because they directed readers toward social and political events.⁴⁶

Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Sciences, founded in 1919, presents a unique instance of a face-to-face aspect of the subculture. Several organizations met in the Institute, including the WhK, the Communist Party, and multiple transvestite organizations.⁴⁷ The Institute also housed a museum filled with pictures of the types of sexual intermediaries Hirschfeld studied.⁴⁸ Consistent with Hirschfeld's medical research, the Institute provided healthcare related to sex and sexuality, including such matters as eugenic counseling, birth control, and treatment of venereal disease. Because these were available to anyone regardless of sexual orientation, visiting the Institute did not advertise one's sexuality.⁴⁹ Queer people even lived in the building, including Hirschfeld and his partner.⁵⁰ Between this wide range of activities, the Institute presents an interesting intersection of subculture, science, and political activism.

Conclusion

The Institution for Sexual Sciences was destroyed by Nazis in 1933. They searched the building for books and burned them, along with an effigy of Hirschfeld.⁵¹ They recognized

⁴¹ Ibid., 337.

⁴² Ibid., 338.

⁴³ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 56-7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21 & 41.

⁴⁵ For more examples of the ways homosexual people interacted in person, see Hirschfeld, *Homosexuality*, 776-803. Hirschfeld described chaste gatherings, as well as customs regarding casual sex.

⁴⁶ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 53.

⁴⁷ The WhK is discussed in Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld*, 47. Communist Party meetings are mentioned in Bauer, "From Fragile Solidarities," 81. Transvestite groups are discussed at length in Sutton, "Place in the Sun," 339.

⁴⁸ Bauer, "From Fragile Solidarities," 88-91.

⁴⁹ Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld*, 100-101.

⁵⁰ Bauer, "From Fragile Solidarities," 81.

⁵¹ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 174.

Hirschfeld as an agent of change that they feared, and treated him accordingly. Nazis attempted to eradicate homosexuality from Germany, including academic research produced by Hirschfeld and his colleagues. They did not succeed. Hirschfeld's research, as well as the Weimar homosexual rights movement, influenced modern concepts of sexual orientation and gender. Each of the thousands of case studies Hirschfeld collected represents a unique voice; between their speaking and Hirschfeld listening, together, they were able to create better understanding, which still exists today.