

# Sex on the brain

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## ORIGINS OF PHRENOLOGY

In the early 19th century a revolution in medical understanding swept across Europe. It was called phrenology and it claimed that a person's character could be read by a trained doctor feeling the bumps and dips on the patient's skull. The concept was developed by Franz Joseph Gall in 1796 during his time in Vienna, Austria. Gall promoted the idea that the brain was made up of 27 individual organs (some advocates claimed it comprised 42 sections), of which 19 could be found in other animals with the remaining eight located exclusively in the human brain. This concept was not founded in the fields of alternative medicine but was accepted as scientific fact within many branches of medicine and by some leading intellectuals of the time such as Charles Darwin. The theory was not, however, well received by certain religious communities, who accused the proponents of being atheists and of taking away the principle of freedom of choice from humanity.

Franz Gall eventually committed his ideas to print in 1809 when he published what many consider to be his masterpiece entitled *The Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System in General, and the Brain in Particular with Observations Upon the Possibility of Ascertaining the Several Intellectual and Moral Dispositions of Man and Animal, by the Configuration of Their Heads*. Perhaps unsurprisingly this publication wasn't a big seller. Later, however, cheap and plentiful pamphlets on the principles of phrenology sold very well indeed, with one publication selling almost 200 000 copies, which gives an indication of the level of public interest in the subject. Even Queen Victoria and Prince Albert invited an English phrenologist to visit the royal palace and 'read' the heads of the royal children.

## CRIMINAL TENDENCIES

There was one very important feature about the concept of phrenology that appealed greatly to the general public

and prison social reformers such as Charles Dickens, namely that this new 'science' claimed to be able to accurately detect behaviour that was believed to be preordained if an individual was born with a dominantly large brain organ out of the complement of 27 organs, that forced an individual to behave in a particular way. This meant that if someone had criminal leanings towards violence or theft this could be detected before the trait began to manifest itself in reality. People could be warned of the need to be vigilant, and in some cases advised to channel their urges in a positive direction. There are records of two people who were warned that they had murderous propensities and so were advised to pick an appropriate profession; one became a butcher and the other an army chaplain, so that he could witness people being executed. It seems likely that some of these diagnoses could easily become self-fulfilling prophecies for the individuals unfortunate enough to be told that they had murderous tendencies. Quite a number of early experiments were carried out on prisoners who were repeat offenders guilty of the same crime, and doctors who believed in phrenology claimed to witness the same enlargements of the skull in the same place in individuals who were thieves or sex offenders.

## SEXUAL CONNOTATIONS

Sexual behaviour in extreme forms such as nymphomania was of great interest to phrenologists, as were other conditions that at the time were viewed as being criminal. The fashionable middle classes of the 19th century would attend scientific lectures covering a broad range of subjects and considered these lectures to be a form of entertainment. One can imagine how very popular a lecture on phrenology and nymphomania would be, as respectable members of the public could attend purely out of scientific interest, naturally.

At such lectures case notes were presented of women who could not sit near

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a man without inviting him to have sex with her and be utterly insatiable during the act of sexual intercourse. One phrenologist claimed that he could bring one of his patients to orgasm by massaging her scalp near the site of a previous skull injury. He claimed this pressure could directly affect the particular sex drive organ in the brain and he could see this organ pulsing during orgasm. The area of sex drive was said to be found towards the back of the skull, although this was a matter of argument amongst practitioners.

### END OF AN ERA

By the middle of the 19th century phrenology was starting to decline in popularity, and by the 1920s it had been marginalised from traditional medicine to the realms of pseudoscience along with another new craze, vegetarianism.

Despite the practice's fall from scientific favour, phrenologists still exist to this day, and indeed I came across one website recently that invites people to "come and have your love bumps felt" (<http://www.psychics.co.uk>).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain.

She holds an honorary degree for 'services to history'. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. She is also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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### FURTHER READING

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