

The Kraepelinian chair: a defining seat?

The chair as a piece of furniture has seemingly accompanied mankind almost from the beginning. The very first traces of the fabrication of three to four-legged chairs goes back to 7700–2000 B.C. Indeed, for millennia chairs have not only served as furniture for people to sit on while eating or reading but have also been items invested with functions related to state and dignity, used not only by commoners for ordinary usage but also by the wealthiest and most powerful. Chairs have played a key role in tradition and ceremony and therefore attracted considerable prestige and honour. In this day and age it is perhaps easy to forget that in the past not everyone possessed or had access to the humble chair.

The word ‘chair’ originally derives from the Latin word *cathedra*, hence the designation of a church that was the seat of a bishop as a cathedral. Thus, the symbolic meaning of the word chair developed concurrently from historic and etymologic sources. In Europe from the early 1600s as the bourgeoisie started to increase their use of chairs, and chairs became more available, they quickly became household items for daily use. Today, nearly everyone uses chairs in one form or another in all manner of contexts such as work and leisure for meetings, studying and sitting at a table or relaxation and enjoyment.

In academic circles the phrase ‘holding a chair’ refers to being the head of an institution or body of some sort. This symbolic application remains and is still widely used today in universities and other organisations to signify a position of seniority or responsibility. Figure 1 shows a photograph of a famous chair in psychiatry. This chair that belonged to Emil Kraepelin is currently located in the fully restored library of the University of



Fig. 1. Kraepelin's chair in the library of the University of Munich.

Munich Department of Psychiatry. Since 1904 it is unchanged from its original state (1), and it is on this chair that Emil Kraepelin held his morning conferences with all his co-workers and directed his clinic.

Interestingly, all the other chairs in the library are exactly the same in appearance and it is not the chair itself, by design or difference, that indicated its role or insinuated any power, but rather the position in which it was placed or stood. Kraepelin's chair was positioned at the head of a large table with all others flanking it from alongside. This strategic positioning symbolised the authority of its occupant and to this day, so as not to part with tradition, this chair is reserved for the Head of the Department. It is interesting to

speculate that perhaps some of Kraepelin's defining ideas (2) took form whilst occupying this chair? Whether this is the case and whether his ideas undergo revision and are completely reformulated in light of new research and better understanding of psychiatric disorders remains to be seen. Either way, it is clear that his hypotheses have provided a useful structure for the field to examine and that akin to his clinical positioning by virtue of his chair his insights placed him at the forefront of psychiatric thinking.

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