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Wide-Stance Sociology

By Scott McLemee

Rarely does a political scandal inspire anyone to discuss sociological research done 40 years earlier. But whatever else Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) may have contributed to public life, he certainly deserves credit for renewing interest in *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, by Laud Humphreys, first published in 1970.

Humphreys, who was for many years a professor of sociology at Pitzer College, in Claremont, California, died in 1988. But his analysis of the protocols of anonymous encounters in men's rooms — "tearooms," in gay slang — has been cited quite a bit in recent weeks. In particular, reporters have been interested in his findings about the demographics of the cruising scene at the public restrooms he studied. (This research took place at a public park in St. Louis, Missouri during the mid-1960s.) Most patrons visiting the facilities for sexual activity tended to be married, middle-class suburbanites; they often professed strongly conservative social and political views.

So you can see where the book might prove topical. But the rediscovery of Humphrey's work is not just a product of the power of Google combined with the force of the news cycle. It is an echo of the discussions that his work once stirred up in the classroom.

Tearoom Trade was, in its day, among the more prominent monographs in the social sciences – an interesting and unusual example of ethnographic practice that was featured in many textbooks, at least for a while. I recall reading a chapter from Humphreys in an introductory social-science anthology in the early 1980s and thinking that every single subculture in the world would eventually have a sociologist standing in the corner, taking notes.

The book was also widely discussed because of the ethical questions raised by Humphreys's methodology. It would be an overstatement to call *Tearoom Trade* the main catalyst for the creation of institutional review boards, but debates over the book certainly played their part.

At issue was not the sexual activity itself but how the sociologist (then a graduate student) investigated it. Posing as a voyeur, and never revealing that he was there for research, Humphreys was accepted as "watchqueen" by the social circle hanging out at the restroom. He was entrusted with giving a signal if the police came around. He took notes on the activity taking place – including the license plates numbers of men who came around for fellatio. Through a contact in the police department, he was able to get their home addresses.

After a year, and having disguised himself to some degree, he visited them under the pretense of doing a survey for an insurance company to gather more data about their circumstances and opinions. Humphreys states that he was never recognized during these interviews. He kept all the documents generated during this research in a lockbox and destroyed them after his dissertation was accepted by Washington University in St. Louis.

He received his Ph.D. that June 1968 – exactly one year before the patrons of the Stonewall, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, got tired of being harassed by the police and decided to fight back. So when the dissertation appeared as a book in 1970 (issued by a social-science press called Aldine, now an imprint of Transaction Publishers, which keeps it in print) the timing was excellent. The main public-policy implication of Humphreys's work was that police could just as well ignore the restroom shenanigans: the activity that Humphrey reported was consensual and low-risk for spreading sexually-transmitted disease, and it did not involve "luring" minors. The book won that year's C. Wright Mills Award for the outstanding book on a critical social issue.

But concerns about how the data had been collected were expressed by Humphreys's colleagues almost as soon as he received his degree, and the debate continued into the 1970s. (When the book was reprinted in 1975, it included a postscript covering some of the discussion.)

The whole design of the project was about as far from "informed consent" as you could get. The subjects of his research had been deceived about why Humphreys was observing and interviewing them. And there was also some question of whether Humphreys had put his subjects at risk: The distinction between the sociologist's field notes and the blackmailer's dossier was not exactly drawn with a bright line, in this case. The fact that a policeman was involved with the work bothered some critics on the left, while those on the right were unhappy that a scholar was, in effect, aiding and abetting criminal sexual activity.

A reviewer for the journal *Issues in Criminology* said that Humphreys's work resembled "medical experimentation carried out in Nazi Germany." Writing in the Washington Post, the columnist Nicholas von Hoffman compared it to J. Edgar Hoover's phone-tapping – a more subdued analogy, and one that seems, all things considered, unintentionally apropos.

While the rancor of the debate eventually cooled down, *Tearoom Trade* is still occasionally cited in textbooks as an example of research methodology that violates professional ethics. The sociologist had his supporters, too, who pointed to the difficulties of ethnographic fieldwork and the possible social benefits of gathering observations on stigmatized behavior otherwise hidden from view. Humphreys himself, while defending his project, did later concede that he should have identified himself as a researcher.

In 2004, a compact study of his career appeared under the title *Laud Humphreys: Prophet of Homosexuality and Sociology*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press. The title page bore the names of three authors – John F. Galliher, Wayne H.

Brekhus, and David P. Keys. (The first two belong to the sociology department at Humphreys's alma mater in Missouri, while the third teaches sociology and criminal justice at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh.) And there might well have been room for more, since the book also contains the writing of various FBI agents: an appendix contains a facsimile reproduction of Humphreys's file, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

It is an interesting book, but a sad one. Apart from reading the textbook extract from *Tearoom Trade* long ago and having a vague awareness of the ethical controversy, my only sense of Humphreys's life involved what sounded like a legend. His research had so angered a prominent sociologist – it was said – that the man beat Humphreys up. That story turns out to be half true. But it's not even the most unhappy thing about what turned out to be a short and difficult life.

Laud Humphreys was born in Oklahoma in 1930. His father was a state legislator whose claims to fame were that "he sponsored legislation making the show tune *Oklahoma* the official state song" and helping to establish "a law school in the attic of the State Capitol so that blacks would not have to be admitted to the University." By contrast, Laud, who was ordained in the Episcopal church in 1955, went on to become an activist in the Civil Rights movement. The earliest document in his FBI dossier is a complaint he filed in 1965 about the refusal of a restaurant in Tennessee to serve his colleague, an African-American minister.

He married in 1960 and entered the Ph.D. program in sociology at Washington University five years later. He made rapid progress as a student (starting fieldwork for his dissertation in 1966 and writing it within two years) but seems to have developed an antagonistic relationship with Alvin Gouldner, a prominent social theorist then in his department.

Humphreys may have been the author of a sarcastic poster that portrayed Gouldner as an example of the species "*Inter Alios Platonicus*, or Silver-Tongued High-Priestly Bird." (Everyone in the department would have caught the reference to Gouldner's recent book *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory*.) Reproduced as an appendix to the biography, the poster is satirical if not exactly witty: "Given to nesting in high places, this raptorial bird may soar to great heights before diving to feed on carrion.... He chews on thoughts only when personalities are not available. While devouring his prey, his song is said to be quite eloquent."

The target of this caricature was not amused. Gouldner tracked Humphreys down in the graduate student offices, punched him in the face, then kicked him when he fell down. The matter came to national attention in a *New York Times* article headlined "Sociology Professor Accused of Beating Student."

The incident had nothing to do with the research Humphreys was doing for Tearoom Trade, but it certainly did not hurt in cultivating a certain notoriety. A few years later, as an associate professor of criminal justice at SUNY-Albany, Humphreys was arrested

during a protest at a draft center, during which (according to interminable reports in the FBI file) he smashed a framed picture of President Nixon. And following the excitement over his first book, he wrote a timely and sympathetic account of the gay rights movement, *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation*, which Prentice-Hall published in 1972.

But this pioneering role had its costs. Some gay activists told Humphreys that they found *Tearoom Trade* embarrassing. He was under suspicion of being a straight researcher "slumming" in the underworld. During a heated exchange at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1974, he was denounced as an example of those mainstream scholars "urging others to make great sacrifices," as one participant in the discussion put it, while "their own lives are untainted by the behavior that they so courageously defend (in others)."

To this, Humphreys responded: "I want to be perfectly honest with you and I want you to know that I am gay. I have done my research and written [*Tearoom Trade*] as a gay person, closeted, trying to come out of that closet, dealing with my own personal pain."

Well, that sort of thing didn't happen every day – not at the ASA, in any case – and the effect must have been dramatic. There were tears, and a standing ovation; and then, a bit later, a divorce, and a new start on life.

This might sound like a moment of liberation and transcendence, such being the form of narrative we expect in a culture of remission. But that is not really the kind of story that the biographers have to tell.

By 1975, Humphreys was a full professor in the sociology department at Pitzer College and a professor of criminal justice at the Claremont Graduate School. But his productivity as a scholar decreased rapidly. Within a few years, he was being reprimanded for substandard performance in the classroom, failure to keep office hours, and neglect of committee work. He suffered from insomnia and struggled with alcoholism. Humphreys also smoked compulsively, which led to the cancer that killed him at the age of 59.

His biographers give a detailed account of the manuscript Humphreys worked on during his final years but never finished. It was to be a book revisiting one of the themes in *Tearoom Trade* – the idea he called "the breastplate of righteousness." That phrase was borrowed from an epistle by St. Paul, while the argument owed a lot to the Frankfurt School's analysis in *The Authoritarian Personality*.

Men he had observed having anonymous sex in a public place often turned out to be ardent champions of law and order. Unable to control themselves in that part of their lives, they put on the defensive "breastplate," redoubling their efforts elsewhere: "Motivated largely by his own awareness of the discreditable nature of his secret behavior," wrote Humphreys in his dissertation, "the covert deviant develops a presentation of self that is respectable to a fault. His whole lifestyle becomes an incarnation of what is proper and orthodox."

Revising this argument in his later years, Humphreys wrote about how hypocrisy, self-loathing, and aggression fueled one another. The work-in-progress, which he wanted to call “Immoral Crusaders,” sounds like a real mess. His biographers call the manuscript “rambling” and of “far from publishable quality, at least by any scholarly journal or university press.” The report Humphreys received from an editor for a major trade publisher was equally dismissive.

So a lost masterpiece it is not. But it sounds like an attempt to understand the force that drove and tortured him – not desire, but self-hatred.

“There is no doubt,” wrote his biographers in 2004, “that had Laud Humphreys not shortened his life by smoking cigarettes, Americans would be hearing from him today.” As it turns out, we still are, and not just because of his description of a particular behavior. He wrote about the frontier between concealment and humiliation. This is a space occupied by demons — not all of which, as Laud Humphreys learned, could be exorcised by the rules of sociological method.

Scott McLemee writes Intellectual Affairs each week. Suggestions and ideas for future columns are welcome.

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