

**Reading Assignment-- Book review**  
***Ethical Issues on Methodology of***  
***Laud Humphreys' "Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places" (1975)***

Insights from the reading:

Humphreys' methodological approach was consistent with the principles for feminist research today, and implied underlying ideals for research that challenges the oppressive structures of society.

Who & Setting:

- ◆ A graduate student in sociology at Washington University (not UW!) and the first gay sociologist (to come out of the closet).
- ◆ A Episcopal priest during the Vietnam era → Humphreys was arrested for activities on several fronts of political activism before publishing his controversial work.
- ◆ He took part in civil rights, anti-war, and gay rights protests--where he was labeled as a "nigger and a Commie lover." He was jailed for leading a march into a Selective Service Office and destroying a portrait of Richard Nixon.
- ◆ A somewhat "unconventional" topic: To study the gay community in St Louis for his dissertation from 1966-1968.
- ◆ He was influenced by Erving Goffman's dramaturgy, William Simon's sexuality studies, & Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology/Evelyn Hooker's ethnographies.

The Book Ideas:

- ◆ Main Inquiry: What does constitute "public" and "private" sexual behavior?
- ◆ Findings: Concept of "breastplate of righteousness" (the majority using the tearooms were married men who went "to great lengths to maintain exemplary marriages" and to appear as model citizens in their community) to ward off social disapproval.

The Book Methodology:

- ◆ Participant observation to intimately explore the intersectionalities of sexual lives and social worlds.
- ◆ A "watch queen" (#someone who serves as lookout in the tearoom) and a participant to study a demonized group engaged in highly stigmatized behavior mostly in public restrooms.
- ◆ Recorded license plates of 134 men he encountered in tearoom sex in order to track them down for a face-to-face interview in their homes.
- ◆ Assured the respondents of their complete anonymity, kept info in a safe deposit box, and destroyed the list eventually to protect the names.
- ◆ The study was not a representative random sample due to difficulty to obtain responses from working-class men.
- ◆ Negative consequence while doing fieldwork: Humphreys was himself arrested while acting as a voyeur and chose not to identify himself as someone doing research. He was booked and locked in a cell as "an arrest statistic."

Ethical Issues For Humphreys' Methodological Dilemmas:

- ◆ The book fueled an extended debate in sociology about privacy rights and deception in fieldwork--a somewhat uncritical assumption of "subjects' protection" in sociology.
- ◆ His method was condemned and Humphreys' status placed as ethics outlaw. The controversy was nearly resulted in the revocation of Humphreys' doctorate by the Chancellor of Washington Univ.
- ◆ The critics distorted his work, including even the charge that he followed "subjects' to their homes and published findings without consent.
- ◆ Recent dissertation (Brown, 2003) that focused on public sex use by self-identified gay and bisexual men challenged Humphrey's focus on public sex sites as impersonal.

Humphreys' Contributions (Beyond His Controversial Data-Gathering Stage)

- ◆ A controversial choice for the C. Wright Mills Award of the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1970.
- ◆ A pioneering book (1) pushing for new deviance theories and symbolic interactionism (Becker, E Hughes, J. Kitsuse) in the mid century regarding social framework of sexuality/sexual categories; (2) becoming an important forerunner to the study of identity politics and social movements; and (3) advocating for modern queer theory.
- ◆ A testimony to an important phase in the history of sociology when politics and sociology may have been more closely associated than they are today → being a sociologist was more than a vocation.
- ◆ The issue of "private" sexual behavior is still with us today.
- ◆ The book = "one hit wonder" on the perspectives of the oppressed with phenomenal sales

Discussion Questions:

- ◆ When is careful too careful? How to think about the best possible methods without harm to the participants to answer a question about human organization and behavior? Which way to go--a justification for a subject-centered approach versus a substantive innovation to research methods?