Guided Questions on the Ethical Issues on Methodology of Laud Humphreys’
“Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places” (1975)

In the 1960’s, it seemed there was a large problem plaguing our nation, and that problem was
males being caught in the act of oral sex in public restrooms. Most of the homosexual arrests,
in a time where homosexuality was a crime itself, let alone engaging in sexual acts in a public
place, were made for this reason. The belief was that homosexuals were perverted, dirty, low
life, seedy, sex junkies, and this practice had to be stopped as this deviant behavior was likely to
be seen by those who would be disgusted by it, by children, and even straight males who had to
use the public facilities for their intended purpose may find themselves harassed by gay men
looking for sex.

A Sociology Ph.D. candidate at Washington University in St. Louis, MO, named Laud
Humphrey’s, had a different take on this act, however, and for his dissertation, decided to
pursue a study of this behavior. "Tearoom trade: A Study of Homosexual Encounters in Public
Places" was the result of this study. "Tearoom sex," as fellatio in public restrooms is called,
accounted for the majority of homosexual arrests in the United States. Humphreys decided that
it would be of considerable social importance for society to gain more objective understanding
of who these men were and what motivated them to seek quick, impersonal sexual
gratification. The study is an analysis of homosexual acts taking place in public toilets.
Humphreys asserted that the men participating in such activity came from diverse social
backgrounds, had differing personal motives for seeking homosexual contact in such venues,
and variously self-perceived as "straight," "bisexual," or "gay." His study called into question
some of the stereotypes associated with the anonymous male-male sexual encounters in public
places, demonstrating that many of the participants lived otherwise conventional lives as family
men and respected members of their communities, and that their activities posed no danger
of harassment to straight males. He recognized that the public and the law-enforcement
authorities held highly simplistic stereotyped beliefs about men who commit impersonal sexual
acts with one another in public restrooms.

For his Ph.D. dissertation at Washington University, Humphreys set out to answer this question
by means of participant observation and structured interview. Humphreys was able to observe
and describe various social cues (body language, hand language, etc.) developed and used by
participants in those places. He stationed himself in "tearooms" and offered to serve as
"watchqueen" - the individual who keeps watch and coughs when a police car stops nearby or
as a stranger approaches. He played that role faithfully while observing hundreds of acts of
fellatio. He was able to gain the confidence of some of the men he observed, disclose his role as
scientist, and persuade them to tell him about the rest of their lives and about their motives.
Those who were willing to talk openly with him tended to be among the better-educated
members of the "tearoom trade." To avoid bias, Humphreys secretly followed some of the
other men he observed and recorded the license numbers of their cars. Posing as a market
analyst, he was able to convince the police department to provide him with addresses based on
these license plate numbers. A year later and carefully disguised, Humphreys appeared at their homes claiming to be a health-service interviewer and interviewed them about their marital status, race, job, and so on.

Throughout all of this, he kept the participants names private, storing them in a confidential safety deposit box at a local bank. On one occasion he was even arrested, and rather divulge any information that might expose the unbeknownst participants in his study, did not reveal himself as a researcher, but rather went through the criminal process, and became himself a “statistic.” Humphreys revealed his role to some of those he observed, but he noted that those who tended to talk with him openly were better educated; as he continued his research, he decided to conceal his identity in order to avoid response bias. Humphreys' rationale was that because of public stigma associated with the homosexual activities in question, and his subjects' desires to keep their activities secret, many were unlikely to allow him an opportunity for observation and follow-up interview were he to reveal himself as a researcher.

Humphreys' findings destroy many stereotypes. Fifty-four percent of his subjects were married and living with their wives, and superficial analysis would suggest that they were exemplary citizens who had exemplary marriages. Thirty-eight percent of Humphreys' subjects clearly were neither bisexual nor homosexual. They were men whose marriages were marked with tension; most of the 38 percent were Catholic or their wives were, and since the birth of their last child conjugal relations had been rare. Their alternative source of sex had to be quick, inexpensive, and impersonal. It could not entail any kind of involvement that would threaten their already shaky marriage and jeopardize their most important asset - their standing as father of their children. They wanted only some form of orgasm-producing action that was less lonely than masturbation and less involving than a love relationship. Of the other 62 percent of Humphreys' subjects, 24 percent were clearly bisexual, happily married, well educated, economically quite successful, and exemplary members of their community. Another 24 percent were single and were covert homosexuals. Only 14 percent of Humphreys' subjects corresponded to society's stereotype of homosexuality. That is, only 14 percent were members of the gay community and were interested in primarily homosexual relationships (Humphreys, 1970).

Because Humphreys was able to confirm that 54% of his subjects were outwardly heterosexual men with unsuspecting wives at home, an important thesis of "Tearoom Trade" is the incongruity between the private self and the social self for many of the men engaging in this form of homosexual activity. Specifically, they put on a "breastplate of righteousness" (social and political conservatism) in an effort to conceal their deviation from social norms.

Humphreys also concluded that such encounters were harmless, and posed no danger of harassment to straight men. His research has convinced many police departments that such encounters resulted in victimless crime; hence they were able to focus on other problems.
Humphreys would later come out as a gay man himself, and there is some speculation based on records and interviews that far from being just an observer, he may have actually participated in some of this activity.
Summary of Ethical Issues on Methodology of Laud Humphreys’
“Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places” (1975)

- 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).
  - An 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, antiwar, 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 to 1968.

- 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.”
Guided Questions on Ethical Issues on Methodology of Laud Humphreys’
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1. What was the public conception of “Tea Room” activity?
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2. What was Dr. Humphrey’s hypothesis in his research?
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3. How did Dr. Humphreys design his research?
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4. How did Dr. Humphrey’s attempt to maintain objectivity in his study?
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5. What quantitative findings did Dr. Humphrey discover?
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6. What qualitative findings did Dr. Humphrey’s discover?
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7. What were Dr. Humphrey’s conclusions in his study?
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8. What impact has Dr. Humphrey’s study had on society, if any?
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9. Does Dr. Humphry’s study meet any of the definition of “science” as established by Karl Popper, or is it useless political propaganda?
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10. What elements of triangulation did Dr. Humphry use in his study?
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11. What aspects of interpretivism can you find in Dr. Humphry’s study?
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12. Did Dr. Humphry’s behavior, the fact that he later came out as a gay man, or his possible participation affect the results or conclusion of his study in any way, in your opinion? Explain.

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13. What ethical issues did this study present?

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14. How would you have overcome these ethical considerations?

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15. In your opinion, should Sociology be considered a science?

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16. If Sociology is a science, what kind of science is it, and why?

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