

“The Breastplate of Righteousness”:
Twenty-Five Years
After Laud Humphreys’ *Tearoom Trade*:
Impersonal Sex in Public Places

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ABSTRACT. Twenty-five years ago, in January 1970, Laud Humphreys’ *Tearoom Trade* was published. It generated much controversy, yet went on to win the C. Wright Mills Award of the Society for the Study of Social Problems. Today, many remember and debate its methodology and ethical issues while often overlooking its important findings and its early contributions to the emerging field of gay studies. Humphreys’ findings are reviewed and commemorated and his work is assessed in light of recent studies on sex in public places.

The January 1970 issue of *Transaction* published the first paper from Laud Humphreys’ soon-to-be notorious research and book on “impersonal sex in public places.” The publication of that article and the book, *Tearoom Trade* (1970, expanded edition 1975), generated a storm of debate about the ethics of research that continues 25 years later in many introductory sociology and methods text-

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books. What has been overlooked, however, is the importance of this research, not only as one of the first major studies of homosexuality in America, but also as one of the only studies ever done on the more hidden forms of human sexuality.

This article reviews the major contributions of Humphreys' landmark work on public sex and connects these findings with research on public sex today. In a more tolerant and relatively more accepting cultural climate, homosexual sexual acts nevertheless continue in some public places, far from the safer sex information and gay-related discourse of contemporary urban society. The implications of Humphreys' research and his conceptualization of a "defensive shield" of righteousness to ward off social disapproval are discussed in light of today's social and political climate.

IN THE CITY OF NIGHT

Thirty years ago, John Rechy wrote that he "would think of America as one vast City of Night stretching gaudily from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard" (1963, p. 9). One of the first writers to describe the nature of public sex, Rechy creatively captured the danger, excitement, and social interactions that later would be studied academically by Humphreys:

now I'm in Echo Park, where a queen, camping by the head, calls out, "Hi babe-welcome to Jenny's tearoom-and, you understand, I'm Jenny, and this is my tearoom"-indicating the head (across the street from Aimee Semple McPherson's Temple of appropriately Brotherly Love); going on: "I come here, oh, every day," brazenly, "And I run away all those other hungry nelly queens first so I can have my pick of the cute tricks-and so, sweetie-love, if you've got A Mind To, would you join me in my tearoom for a few happy Wholesome moments?" (Rechy, 1963, p. 181)

In the years before Stonewall-before gay liberation, before lesbian and gay sports clubs, gay churches, gay bookstores, and gay professional organizations-encounters in bars, stores, YMCAs, military bases, public parks, and bathrooms provided some of the only ways

men could meet other men for sex and a moment of shared identity (cf. Nardi, Sanders, & Marmor, 1994). Again, Rechy dramatically describes the tone and feelings of that era and those encounters:

I remember living next to the Y in Los Angeles, where I sunbathed on the roof of that apartment building, and by signals from the residents of the Y, I would meet them later on the street. . . . I remember Griffith Park—the hill where you could make it hidden by trees. . . . I remember the police, the many roustings, fingerprintings, interrogations: the cops, the rival gang—the enemy: the world. . . . Laguna Beach, the sand drifting into the bar. Lance . . . poised on a cliff. . . . Remembering on the Boulevard who picked me up, who paid me to tell him what the others I had been with had done; and as he listened, he tried to conceal the fact that he was pulling off. (Rechy, 1963, pp. 375-376)

But what Rechy did artistically doesn't always satisfy the curiosity of the academic. Who are these men who find each other in public places and engage in impersonal sex despite the risks of arrest? What are the dynamics of the encounters and what do we learn about human behavior from them? These were the questions that provoked Humphreys to do his research into tearooms.

TEAROOM ENCOUNTERS

Humphreys (1975, p. 14) was interested in learning about “the social structure of impersonal sex, the mechanisms that make it possible.” To do so, he wanted to study locations that were private, yet identifiable and accessible. He focused on a set of public restrooms (“tearooms”) in the parks of St. Louis. While others had studied hustlers (Reiss, 1961), described one-night stands in bars (Hooker, 1965), and discussed a public scandal involving male prostitution in Boise (Gerassi, 1966), no one had systematically analyzed the participants of public sexual acts.

So, Humphreys, for two years beginning in the spring of 1966, served as a “watch queen” (a voyeur-lookout) in the tearooms and systematically recorded field notes about the interactions. He also recorded the license plate numbers of 134 participants' cars. Using

public records to find their home addresses and names, and then posing a year later as a survey interviewer for a study on mental health, Humphreys was able to complete 50 interviews and gather information about the participants.

Humphreys' research design has generated numerous articles, chapters, and essays—not to mention a call to revoke Humphreys' degree by the Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis on the grounds that he committed a felony by observing and facilitating fellatio. Ethical questions about the privacy rights of non-consenting participants were (and continue to be) raised as a result of the methods he used to track down respondents through license plates and the way he “disguised himself and visited these men under the color of doing a different, more innocuous door-to-door survey” (as Nicholas von Hoffman critically wrote in his *Washington Post* column on Jan. 30, 1970 [reprinted in Humphreys, 1975, p. 178]). What some have described as an ingenious way to uncover difficult-to-study forms of hidden behavior, others have attacked as immoral and a violation of people's basic human rights (see the 55-page “Retrospect” section added to the 1975 edition of the book).

However, this is not the place to debate the ethical and methodological issues. Rather, I want to reclaim what has been lost over the years, namely the important findings about the participants and what the research has taught us about same-sex sexual encounters in public places and the need for information control by those involved in the interactions.

Although Humphreys' study in no way was meant to be a representative random sample of all tearoom participants—in fact, due to attrition and refusals, a disproportionately larger number of working-class men (especially truck drivers) did not make up the final sample—several fascinating patterns emerged which have important implications in today's cultural and health climate.

THE SILENCE AND STRUCTURE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

The maintenance of privacy in public settings, Humphreys found, depends heavily on the silence of the interaction and on a special ritual that must be both noncoercive and noncommittal. In

what some have described as a “how-to” manual for tearoom encounters, Humphreys described in Chapter 4 (“Patterns of Collective Action”) the complex set of collective actions involved in this “focused gathering”: positioning, signaling, maneuvering, contracting, foreplay, and the payoff. Making analogies to Erving Goffman’s work on games, he analyzed the encounters in terms of the flexible roles and standard rules that characterize a game and that regulated the collective actions of a sexual interaction. As Lee Rainwater wrote in the Foreword (Humphreys, 1975, p. ix):

Analysis of the highly structured patterns that arise in this particular situation increases our understanding of the more general rules of interaction by which people in routine encounters of all kinds manage their identities, create impressions, move toward their goals, and control information about themselves, minimizing the costs and risks in concerted action with others. . . . [Humphreys] shows us how the tearoom encounter is structured as a positive sum game for the participants and how a normative structure develops in these encounters to insure that the outcome of the game is positive rather than zero or negative.

But because of this elaborate social structure, being propositioned against one’s will or recruited into homosexuality in public restrooms is an unlikely occurrence. There were many opportunities to assess whether someone was equally interested in a sexual encounter by observing and being attentive to the signals and glances given, how and where one was positioned in the tearoom, and whether consent was acknowledged by certain maneuverings and other bodily movements:

No one will be “groped” or otherwise involved in the directly sexual play of the tearooms unless he displays [an erection]. . . . This touches on the rule of not forcing one’s intention on another. . . . I doubt the veracity of any person (detective or otherwise) who claims to have been “molested” in such a setting without first having “given his consent” by showing an erection. (1975, p. 64)

THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Understanding the dynamics and structure of tearoom encounters was a major contribution to the sociological study of human behavior. But no finding was perhaps as interesting and as salient as what Humphreys discussed in Chapter 7 (“The Breastplate of Righteousness”). Seeking to learn more about who participates in these encounters, Humphreys analyzed the interview data he collected from a social health survey of the men he surreptitiously contacted a year after the tearoom observations.

Of the 50 tearoom participants he interviewed, 54% were currently married and 8% were divorced or separated. Only 14% could be classified as typical of someone involved in the gay subculture and another 24% were single but closeted and marginal to any gay community. Furthermore, of those who were currently or formerly married or were closet cases, about 42% were Roman Catholics, many came from predominantly lower socio-economic statuses, and about 12% were Black. An estimated 10% of all the participants were current military personnel (the nearest base was 25 miles away) and 60% were veterans. And, most interestingly, the “closet queens” and married men were politically and socially conservative, based on scores on a liberalism scale (where the gay participants scored 26.5 out of 37, marrieds scored 12.1, and closeted men scored 14.5).

What did Humphreys make of these fascinating findings? Given his familiarity with Scripture (he was an ordained Episcopal priest who ran several parishes before returning later in life to get a sociology degree [see Goodwin, Horowitz, & Nardi, 1991]), he appropriated a passage from Ephesians 6:14 about donning the “breastplate of righteousness”: a protective shield of superpropriety with a shining quality—a refulgence—blinding the audience to certain of the wearer’s practices, as Humphreys (1975, p. 135) phrased it. In other words, the participants in tearoom sexual encounters—and in particular, those who are married or are closeted single men—engaged in various forms of minimizing revelations about themselves through a strategy of information control designed to detract from their behaviors.

Through a sort of misdirection, they took on a “defensive shield to ward off social disapproval” and created a social image and

presentation of self-respectability to a fault (1975, p. 134). Humphreys noted that they lived in the neatest homes, drove the newest and cleanest cars, were the most well groomed and wore the best clothes, saw devoting time to homes and families as their top priority, and were more involved in authoritarian-oriented religions, such as Catholicism. It got to the point that Humphreys (1975, p. 146) gained “the impression that ‘the Bible on the table and the flag upon the wall’ may be signs of secret deviance more than of ‘right thinking.’”

Fear of exposure and stigmatization and a decrease in the ability to control information, ironically, led the married and closeted single participants to advocate more moral crusades, even endorsing items on the questionnaire that called for additional vice squad activities. Thus, Humphreys hypothesized, “As anticipated sanctions increase and autonomy decreases, the more elaborate and encompassing will be the breastplate of righteousness the deviant assumes for his overt performances in life” (1975, pp. 146-147).

Why, then, would people participate in such public sexual encounters when they could risk losing their reputation and moral images and possibly even contract an infection from a venereal disease that could be spread to their wives? As Humphreys found, for many, the risk-taking is a psychological charge and a game of chance with a winning payoff. The availability, the invisibility, the variety, and the impersonality also contribute to “the aphrodisiacal effect of danger” (1975, pp. 151-152). And since so few engaged in anal intercourse (only observed twice), the threat of venereal disease transmission is reduced.

But the real harmful effects of these encounters, in Humphreys’ opinion, result from police action: blackmail, payoffs, and destroyed reputations. His recommendation for social policy remains a salient one for today:

In order to alleviate the damaging side effects of covert homosexual activity in tearooms, ease up on it. Every means by which these men are helped to think better of themselves and to relate to others in the homosexual subculture will lessen any threat they may constitute for the society at large. (1975, p. 166)

IN THE CITY OF NIGHT TODAY

Humphreys' insights about the kind of men who participated in tearoom sex have many important implications for today. In a world where there are many more options for men to meet other men for sexual adventures and when AIDS adds an additional risk, do such impersonal sexual encounters continue to attract people who are marginal to the gay communities and to safer sex information? Several studies suggest that Humphreys' research findings are not limited to a pre-Stonewall era.

Desroches (1990) analyzed Canadian police case materials and interviewed law enforcement personnel about arrests in shopping mall washrooms. The encounters were similar to what Humphreys found (although the role of the "watch-queen" was not present): they were impersonal and silent interactions, not coercive, no children were involved, and no anal sex occurred. Most interestingly, of those arrested, 58% of the participants were married, about 6% were divorced or separated, and 29% were single. Desroches (1990, p. 50) concluded: "the 'breastplate of righteousness' concept accurately portrays the lifestyle, dress, and appearance of the majority of tearoom participants [the detectives] encountered."

In 1992, the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Police Advisory Task Force, in cooperation with the Los Angeles Police Department, conducted a survey of men arrested and jailed for lewd conduct in Griffith Park. Unfortunately, only 25% (61) agreed to participate. According to the unpublished informal report, it was estimated that around half of the arrestees were heterosexually married men, although only 24% of those completing the survey said they were married. Most (56%) said they were gay and single. Like Humphreys' (1975) and Desroches's (1990) studies, few engaged in anal sex (8%), most participated in mutual masturbation (82%) and oral sex (30%). Over half (55%) claimed they used condoms while engaging in these activities in the park and 5% said they were HIV-positive (53% were negative and 42% didn't know their HIV status). Sixty percent of those completing the survey were white, 18% Latino, 12% Asian/Pacific, and 10% African American. And 28% said they had been arrested before for this type of activity; 32% had sex in restrooms during the past year, 60% in a public park

or alley, 12% in a sex club or bar, 8% in an adult bookstore, and 12% in a movie theater.

Although there was no measure of religiosity or other variables indicating a “breastplate of righteousness,” of the 20 suggestions for how to solve the issue of lewd conduct in Griffith Park, half (10) are what might be considered more conservative answers, including “more police,” “police in park all the time,” “prayer,” “join sexual compulsives anonymous,” “continue to patrol park,” “just do what you are doing,” and “be more visible.”

CONCLUSIONS

In the 25 years since its publication, *Tearoom Trade* (which won the prestigious C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1970) remains an important study for its sociological theories, analysis, and data about men who engage in impersonal sex in public places. As we continue to hear about the secret lives of the publicly righteous, such as televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker, or even the allegations against Michael Jackson whose image of innocence and concern for children are another kind of breastplate, we marvel at the saliency of Humphreys’ insights.

And as we read about periodic raids and arrests for “lewd behavior” in public places and the strident cries from those who believe their children will be molested and given AIDS by perverts in parks, we must recall Humphreys’ descriptions of the ritualized and highly structured encounters and remember how unlikely it is that the unwilling could be seduced. These are the strengths and importance of *Tearoom Trade* that need to be reclaimed from the endless debates about the ethics of its methodology.

Laud was my colleague at Pitzer College for 13 years and he often indicated his pride about the book’s notoriety yet how disappointed he was in the way his important findings often got second billing. This 25th anniversary review is dedicated to his memory (he died in 1988 from smoking-related lung cancer) and to say that many of us will remember *Tearoom Trade*’s true historical importance by continuing to do research in the sociology of human sexual behavior in its many diverse forms.

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