

Research Ethics Case Study  
*Tearoom Trade*, by Laud Humphreys (1970)

In the 1960s, the sociologist Laud Humphreys conducted a study of sex in public restrooms. The title derives from his finding that public restrooms used for anonymous sexual encounters were known as “tearooms,” and that men who seek out such sex with other men but do not embrace a gay identity were known as “trade.” In this period, more than half of all arrests for homosexual conduct resulted from sexual encounters in tearooms, so Humphreys believed it was an important behavior and setting to study. He set out to discover exactly what these tearoom encounters involved and to learn something about the men who participated.

The subject matter of Humphreys’ study was behavior that was highly stigmatized as well as illegal. The researcher felt that the best way to produce credible knowledge about this subject was to immerse himself in the setting and directly observe the behavior. He conducted observation in men’s rooms in several city parks. He did not identify himself as a researcher. He often took the role of the “watch queen,” keeping a lookout for police or other intruders while men engaged in sex in the restroom. In this role, he was able to observe the sexual encounters without arousing suspicion. Out of the hundreds of sex acts he observed, he produced detailed written descriptions of 50 sexual encounters (mostly oral sex). He observed some clear patterns in these encounters. For example, they usually involved minimal or no conversation between the participants, and the roles assumed in sexual encounters were usually age-dependent.

To supplement these direct observations, Humphreys also interviewed some of the participants who were tearoom regulars and seemed most approachable. He revealed his researcher role to a dozen of these men (his “cooperating respondents”) and spent many hours interviewing them in depth. He knew these men were not representative of tearoom participants as a whole, because they were more outgoing and better educated. To get more information on the rest of the tearoom population, he copied down the license plate numbers of other tearoom participants and used the plate information to get the names and addresses of 100 men (he obtained this information by telling the police he was conducting “market research”). About a year later, Humphreys was working as an interviewer on a health survey and gained permission to add 50 of these men to his interview list. He changed his appearance to avoid being recognized and interviewed these men in their homes, sometimes with their wives present. He gathered basic data about their background and current life situation, but did not ask any questions related to their tearoom activities. He then compared these 50 men to a matched sample of non-tearoom participants in the health survey, and concluded that they were remarkably similar on most measures. This finding helped to dispel the notion that men who had sex in public restrooms were socially marginal or dramatically different from the general population. More generally, Humphreys used his research findings to argue that tearoom sex is a victimless crime and that police should stop arresting men for this behavior and focus crime-fighting efforts elsewhere.

1. What are the advantages of the covert research approach used by Humphreys?
2. What ethical issues are raised by his research methods?
3. Do the advantages of this study outweigh the ethical concerns, or should this study never have been conducted?

[modified from a handout by Kathleen Hull, University of Minnesota Dept. of Sociology]