Ethical Concerns of Laud Humphreys’ *Tearoom Trade*

Laud Humpreys’ *Tearoom Trade* is a PhD dissertation concerning the use of public restrooms for male homosexual encounters. In particular, Humphreys sought (and succeeded) to disprove stereotypes surrounding such behavior as the harassment of unsuspecting individuals. Critics declare the study as a textbook case of unethical social research practices. They point to how Humphreys acted without any consent of the subjects, disguised himself as a voyeur, recorded the license plates of the participants, lied to the police to get addresses, posed as a health researcher to enter the homes of the subjects.

Some of the proponents of Tearoom Trade cite that the information gained greatly outweighs the ethical concerns and that the research could not be done any other way. However, a simple search will find studies similar in every way but ethically, finding the same results. This is done by going through police reports of such incidents. (Desroches 1990)

A more interesting take describes how the harm Humphreys did to the subjects was far lower than the harm done by the professionals in Humphreys’ department. Humphreys took numerous precautions such as keeping the addresses in a safe, burning all sensitive information at the conclusion of the study, and holding the research secret until its conclusion. (Lenza 2004) The publicization caused multiple people in his department to get fired after a large public scandal.

Desroches, Frederick J. 1990. “Tearoom Trade: A Research Update.” *Qualitative Sociology* 13(1):39–61. doi: 10.1007/BF00988595.

Lenza, Michael. 2004. “Controversies Surrounding Laud Humphreys’ Tearoom Trade: An Unsettling Example of Politics and Power in Methodological Critiques.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 24(3/4/5):20–31. doi: 10.1108/01443330410790858.