



Humphreys, Laud (1930-1988)

by Stephen O. Murray

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A founder of the Sociologists' Gay Caucus and a pioneer researcher in the study of homosexual behavior, Laud Humphreys combined academic study with political activism of all kinds.

Born on October 16, 1930, he was christened Robert Allan Humphreys by his father, a wire chief for Southwestern Bell, who was later elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives. Ira Humphreys died in 1953, having been predeceased by his wife Stella in 1945. After Ira's death, his son learned that his politically reactionary father made regular trips to New Orleans to have sex with men, providing an example of secret homosexuals donning what he would later label the "breastplate of righteousness."

The son graduated from Chickasha High School in Oklahoma in 1948, Colorado College in 1952, and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois in 1955. He took the name of "Laud" from William Laud, a seventeenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, and as "Laud" was ordained an Episcopalian priest in 1955. He worked in several Oklahoma parishes and in Wichita, Kansas, riling powerful members of each of the congregations with "radical" attacks on privilege, including racial privilege.

In 1960 Humphreys married Nancy Wallace, from a prominent Tulsa, Oklahoma family.

After being dismissed from the Wichita post, Humphreys undertook graduate work in sociology in 1965 at Washington University in Saint Louis. Lee Rainwater supervised his 1968 Ph.D. dissertation on male-male sex in St. Louis-area public restrooms, known in gay slang as "tearooms."

The research outraged the chancellor of the university, who sought to have Humphreys's degree revoked on the grounds that the observations of sexual felonies were also felonies. The chancellor also held up a major National Institute of Mental Health grant to Rainwater, demanding that Humphreys not be employed by the university.

Humphreys's dissertation research was published as *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* to much controversy in 1970. The book won the C. Wright Mills Award of the Society for the Study of Social Problems but was frequently denounced as covert research and condemned for its invasion of the privacy of those having sex in a public place.

Humphreys moved on to teach at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. On May 5, 1970 he led an antiwar demonstration that invaded a draft board office, where he destroyed a picture of President Richard Nixon. He was subsequently convicted of destroying government property. In accordance with a plea bargain, he served three months of a one-year prison sentence in the summer of 1972. While in jail he was hired by Pitzer College, one of the Claremont Colleges in southern California, where he became a full professor of sociology in 1975.

In 1972, Humphreys published *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation*, one of the first scholarly accounts of the emerging gay liberation movement.

At a session on "labeling" during the 1974 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Montreal, within a wider critique of "essentializing the homosexual," Edward Sagarin (who earlier had published homophile advocacy under the pseudonym Donald Webster Cory) criticized sociologists for "hiding behind" the safety of wives and children while advocating that lesbians and gay men "come out of the closet."

Humphreys had dedicated *Tearoom Trade* (though not *Out of the Closets*) to his wife and children, and may have been an instance that Sagarin had in mind. Humphreys certainly felt that he was being accused of hypocrisy and duplicity, and very publicly avowed a gay identity in his response as a formal discussant for the session.

Outrage at Sagarin's presentation, and at how the session was organized (contrary to ASA rules), led to the formation of the Sociologists' Gay Caucus (later Sociologists' Gay and Lesbian Caucus and Sociologists' Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucus). Humphreys was active in founding the organization and served on its first steering committee. In this capacity and through his publications, he helped legitimize gay and lesbian studies within the American Sociology Association, and helped challenge the conceptualization of homosexuality as deviance.

In 1980 Humphreys left his wife and two children to live with his protégé, Brian Miller, who was a graduate student at the University of Alberta. Humphreys earned California certification as a psychotherapist in 1980 and established a private counseling practice. He largely abandoned research to focus on counseling.

In his final years, Humphreys also served as a consultant to police forces and frequently provided expert testimony in court cases. He retained his position at Pitzer College through 1986, though he was disengaged from teaching and amassed a number of student complaints.

In the early 1980s Humphreys and Miller coauthored articles on proliferating gay subcultures and on victims of homophobic violence.

Humphreys died from complications of lung cancer on August 23, 1988.

Although his study of early gay organizing in the Midwest, *Out of the Closets*, has been largely ignored, Humphreys's research on straight-identified and gay-identified males who have sex with males in secluded "public places" is of continuing relevance. Especially interesting are his findings about the generally reactionary politics and hyperconformity in politics and other aspects of their lives by the married men who were the subjects of *Tearoom Trade*.

The criticisms of *Tearoom Trade* frequently expressed moralistic disgust for the kinds of sex Humphreys observed, but some critics also raised more relevant questions about his fieldwork ethics. The most serious of these questions regard the false pretenses and implicit coercion under which he interviewed men he had observed *in flagrante delicto* and traced through automobile license plate numbers. Humphreys addressed some of these concerns in the revised edition, which includes a retrospective on ethical issues.

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About the Author

Stephen O. Murray earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Toronto. Since completing a postdoctoral stint in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, he has worked in public health. His books include *American Gay*, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, and *Homosexualities*.