Laude Humphreys: A Pioneer in the Practice of Social Science

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The life and work of Laude Humphreys is reviewed in an attempt to assess their effect on American sociology. We focus on the intersections between biography and professional contributions as they emerged from Humphreys' graduate work at Washington University, St. Louis through his years at Pitzer College. The commentary is couched in the theoretical traditions of C. Wright Mills, the sociology of knowledge, and the sociology of sociology.

Introduction

Laude Humphreys died on August 23, 1988 after a lengthy battle with lung cancer. This essay, authored by three who knew him well, is devoted to examining the life of Laude Humphreys and his effect on colleagues and on various aspects of American sociology. While some of the material is based on personal recollection and thus subject to the always precarious vagaries of memory, we have attempted to portray as accurately as possible Laude's biography and work and the intersections between both. Thus, we accomplish here the central task and promise of our collective sociological imagination as articulated by Mills (1961, p. 6): "... to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society." In addition, we attempt to remain true to the tradition of the sociology of knowledge whereby it is defined as the discipline concerned with the social and existential origins of thought (Wirth 1968; Hartung 1970) and, along the way, to proffer a sociology of sociology.

Born in Chickasha, Oklahoma, Robert Allan (Laude) Humphreys graduated from Colorado College, Colorado Springs in 1952. He received his Master of Divinity degree from Seabury Western Theological Seminary,
Evanston, Illinois in 1955 and that same year was ordained in the Episcopal priesthood in the Diocese of Oklahoma. He went on to serve churches in Oklahoma, Colorado and Kansas prior to entering graduate school. Laud Humphreys later earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology and criminology from Washington University, St. Louis in 1957 and 1968, respectively. Prior to joining the faculty at Pitzer College and Claremont Graduate School in 1972, Laud was on the faculty at Southern Illinois University and the School of Criminal Justice at S.U.N.Y., Albany. Upon becoming a California Licensed Psychotherapist in 1980, Laud developed a private counseling practice in Los Angeles.

The Early Years: Washington University

Laud arrived at Washington University in 1965 dressed in the gray and white garb of the Episcopal Church—nothing unusual since Washington University had begun to attract a substantial number of theology students from nearby St. Louis University. These students' interests in social science were kindled by the excitement generated at Washington University in particular and the field of sociology as it was practiced in the mid-1960s. It is worthwhile noting that the cross-over of theology and sociology, hardly unique in the history of sociology, was especially fruitful at a time when moral concerns and empirical investigations cross-fertilized with such fierce potency. In this sense, the form of such cross-fertilization was quite different from the turn of the century, when the interest in sociology was essentially a concern for social work, a way of helping good-bad boys and bad-good girls keep out of institutions for the indigent and the delinquent. This new in-migration was a flintier group of religious students and a “tougher” period in sociological history. In short, Laud was clearly part of a social force, and not simply an individual who randomly dropped out of the sky.

During his first term at Washington University Laud enrolled in Horowitz’ seminar on sociological theory. The course was essentially classical, oriented to the historical problems and figures, covering Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and a less typical emphasis on Sorel, Pareto, Michels, and Mosca. Laud was an apt pupil, indeed excellent in his grasp of materials, though it was evident that his love of sociology was rooted in ethnographic encounters rather than theoretical disputation. It was the works of Becker, Goffman, Garfinkel and Rainwater that clearly gripped Laud’s interests. But it was a measure of his worth that Laud constantly related their work to the classical tradition; his class presentations and term paper reflected this sense of sociological continuity. Even the chapters of Humphreys’ dissertation, Teatoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places, reflect as much; the chapter on “The Public Settings of ‘Private’ Encounters” was clearly a play on the familiar Mills’ theme and the chapter on “Patterns of Collective Action” owed as much to Durkheim and Simmel as to Erving Goffman or Marvin Scott.

Tearoom Trade was Laud’s most significant book and in view of the fact that it has become as much a part of the folklore of sociology as it is central to the literature of the discipline, it serves us well here to recall aspects of its genesis and development. The dissertation evolved out of a pre-doctoral research assistantship provided by NIMH and was allied to the work in central St. Louis to which Lee Rainwater and David Pittman were especially linked. Horowitz’ involvement with the dissertation was as a “second-in-command”; Rainwater was clearly the principal advisor, and the “Chicago” characteristics of the dissertation were amplified by Howard S. Becker's support for this research effort from start to finish. Horowitz' role essentially came into play when the first draft of the dissertation was complete, after the data had been collected.

In reviewing the data it became increasingly and painfully evident that homosexual men in the mid-1960s were touched by a variety of emotions, fear and doubt no less than joy and pleasure. Now it should be remembered that prior to the contemporary development of gay studies and before the rapid growth in scholarly research on gay issues, there were few scholarly publications about gay people written by gay people, and the psychoanalytic literature had done much to perpetuate negative and harmful analyses of homosexuality. Humphreys’ data challenged these taken for granted assumptions, making it evident that the sources of the sentiments experienced by gay men were rooted much more in stratification than in psychosis.

In his dissertation Humphreys had created a profound sample of social stratification of homosexual participants and this effort went far beyond the canons of psychoanalytical doctrine which sought to explain behavior but rarely investigated structures. The “Tearoom” participants were drawn from a wide network of people, more often than not married, more often than not middle class, more often than not church-goers, and most intriguingly, more often than not conservative in political persuasions and voting practices. On close inspection, the totalistic models of the inherited literature on deviance had little value; the religious imagery of a homosexual fallen from grace into a life of sin had even less relevance. Thus, Laud began to appreciate with a life-long insight that deviance was not an ambiguous “blob” or thing, but a carefully filtered and self-selective process. It was this insight into “deviant” behavior and its investigation that motivated Laud (1975, p. 166) to later write:

Sociologists engage in the study of deviant behavior because man reveals himself best in his back alleys. It is there that we may see the raw undergirding of the social structure—and, perhaps, observe our own weaknesses reflected in the behavior we fear and berate the most.
What emerged in this ground-breaking research was a sociological portrait of conservative and tormented lives: married men, family men, conservative men, business men, whose personal proclivities and preferences were powerful enough, institutionally grounded enough, to break through the conventions of social life. And Laud was careful not to confuse the fundamental with the accidental; he simply took as the given in any situation the complexities of social or public life as it intertwined with the private life and, in doing so, unobtrusively exemplified Mills’ (1961, p. 187) classic declaration that “It is the . . . task of the social scientist—as of any liberal educator—continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals.” This aspect of Laud’s work well exemplified the sort of fusion of social stratification and social psychology that characterized a considerable body of work being done at the time in the Washington University sociology department.

Processing the dissertation became something of a minor scandal unto itself. It was bitterly opposed by Alvin Gouldner on the grounds of Humphreys’ presumed violations of fundamental canons of ethical research, including the use of disguises, active participant observation in deviant, criminal behavior, and the use of police information to track down participants for study at a later date. This is not the place to review these charges, nor the rebuttals, which for Laud included the immense wealth of information gleaned about homosexual communities, the positive views to which such information could be put in the gay communities, and the inability to do research at macroscopic levels in any other feasible way. Suffice it to only repeat here what Horowitz and Rainwater (1975, p. 190) wrote in a “Retrospct” added to a later edition of *Teatoom Trade*:

Laud Humphreys has gone beyond the existing literature in sexual behavior and has proven once again . . . that ethnographic research is a powerful tool for social understanding and policymaking. And these are the criteria by which the research should finally be evaluated professionally.

At this late stage, as we enter the decade of the 1990s, a quarter century removed from the scene of the initial moral battles over the research techniques Laud employed, it is helpful to offer commentary on the deep well of belief in the discipline engendered by both sides of the debate and by Washington University’s sociologists.

Horowitz was on sabbatical leave at Stanford during the time of the much heralded encounter between Gouldner and Humphreys in January, 1968. But whether their fight was fair or foul, occasioned by remarks made by Gouldner or Humphreys, or by personal fears and concerns of either party, is now of little moment. The key factor is that two strong-willed people felt the issues were such as to merit physical combat. For people to risk careers, or at least ridicule by their peers in physical combat, suggests that the work, the discipline, means a great deal. The intensity of emotions over this dissertation, the issues raised by Laud in such a vivid, descriptive manner, the need to rethink fundamental moral premises about the way in which useful social research takes place, and finally, the risks one runs to do such research gave a characteristic special imprint to the department at Washington University.

More serious than the altercation was the attempt at suppression of Humphreys’ work; a university administration all too willing to void the decision of a department to grant the degree to Laud for *Teatoom Trade*, a desire to keep the dissertation under lock and key once the decision to cancel a departmentally approved dissertation became impossible, and finally, a tacit agreement to withhold publication of the dissertation for at least a two-year period on the degree and right of interested researchers to read the results were granted. For here, a basic issue of science and not just social science was at stake: the right, even the obligation of scholars to read and review the results of a dissertation. The attacks leveled at Laud’s work by Nicholas von Hoffman (1970, pp. 4–10) and others were answered (Horowitz and Rainwater 1970, pp. 4–10; Humphreys 1971, pp. 38–46). The issues were summed up nicely by Humphreys in the 1975 edition of *Teatoom Trade*:

“What began as a relatively uncomplicated ethnography of the gay community grew in complexity as the logic of the research took hold, and ended as much in a quest for justice as for knowledge alone” (p. 232). Twenty years may not be long enough to solve problems, but it does cool passions. It is fair to say that issues of such far-reaching consequence are not readily resolved by a single example.

To his credit, Humphreys never shied away from the implications of his work. Yet, it is correct to say there was something of the Alfred Dreyfuss about Laud. He did not seem at the time entirely aware of the moral implications of his work, though the brief four page question of ethics in the published version of the text did make some effort to come to grips with the issues swirling around the dissertation itself. But it was perhaps too soon after the fact for Laud to come to grips with the intellectual issues this work raised and the way in which his work was introduced into the sociological literature.

The Later Years: Beyond Graduate School and Pitzer College

In 1970, the Aldine Publishing Company published Laud’s revised dissertation, *Teatoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, and in that same year the *Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP)* announced the book won the coveted C. Wright Mills award. It was shortly after the SSSP announcement...
in 1971, while Laud was on the faculty at S.U.N.Y., Albany, that Humphreys was first approached about joining the faculty at Pitzer College.

The story of the negotiating and signing of Laud's contract with Pitzer College is itself a comment on the turbulent early 1970s and on the prevailing weltanschauung of sociology at that time. Always the civil rights activist, never really being able to escape the Oklahoma populism that seemed almost generic to him, Laud arrived at Pitzer fresh from serving a three month jail term for a draft board demonstration. Laud negotiated his contract with Pitzer's Dean of Faculty (also a sociologist) from a prison pay phone and his wife, Nancy, smuggled the contract into the prison for his signature. It was his ground breaking research accomplishments, coupled with Laud's sense of courage in standing fast for principles he believed in and his clerical sense of decency and kindness toward colleagues, students and friends, that the College found so attractive in Laud. The sociology faculty, at that time well aware of and subscribing to Mannheim's (1968, p. 250) dictum that all sociological inquiry is "... best bound up with social existence" and that "... all thought processes themselves are influenced by the participation of the thinker in the life of society" (Wirth 1968, p. xxix), found Laud's professional accomplishments and involvement in civil rights causes very appealing. It was to be a marriage that for the most part would be happy and mutually fulfilling.

_Tearoom Trade_ continued to stir up much controversy in the 1970s about its findings concerning a form of behavior rarely acknowledged and because of its unique methodology. Indeed, to this day textbooks in introductory sociology and in research methods continue to debate the ethics of the methods Laud utilized. What is often lost in these discussions is the importance of _Tearoom Trade_ to the early years of gay studies. Although Laud demonstrated that impersonal public sex was often engaged in by heterosexuals and married men, the research opened the doors in the 1970s for others to begin studying marginal groups, especially gay men and lesbians. With the publication in 1972 of Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation, the study of gay subcultures was advanced, though it must be said in all candor that the tententiousness and partisanship in a follow-up work like Out of the Closets worked less well than the cool analytical properties of the dissertation. It did appear, however, that sociologists and other social scientists could now legitimately research the visibly growing gay movement and sexuality in general, and the continuing research efforts initiated by Laud in the 1970s helped to proliferate the positive aspects of coming out of the closets. His later work would establish empirically, for example, that the "movement of homosexual marginals into openly gay lifestyles appears to decrease their vulnerability to violent crime" (Miller and Humphreys 1980, p. 182).

C. Wright Mills (1961, p. 195) wrote that "... the most admirable thinkers in the scholarly community ... do not split their work from their lives ... they ... take both too seriously to allow such dissociation ..." Nowhere in his life and work did Laud personify Mills' words more dramatically than in 1974 at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association in Montreal. Laud stood up at a crowded session and accused Edward Sagarin of homophobia and revealed Sagarin's identity as Donald Webster Cory, author of the 1951 book _The Homosexual in America_. This controversial and contentious interaction continues to be seen as one of the episodes marking the beginning of the Sociologists' Gay and Lesbian Caucus and, equally important for the matter at hand, Laud's personal acknowledgement of his own gay identity. Mills (1963, p. 606), in discussing the relationship between knowledge and power, tells us: "What knowledge does to a man (in clarifying what he is, and setting it free)—that is the personal ideal of knowledge." It was at that session in Montreal, as Laud later confided, that he defined who he was and set himself "free." To use the Biblical phrase (Ephesians 6:14) that Laud had borrowed and developed in _Tearoom Trade_, the "breastplate of righteousness" had been torn from sociology and from Humphreys' own life.

While Laud's pronouncement signalled a quality of personal liberation, becoming involved in gay research was still stigmatizing; structures are required to fully implement the fruits of such liberation. Accordingly, in 1974 at the ASA meetings several sociologists, including Laud, formed the Sociologists' Gay Caucus (SGC) to provide a forum for those studying gay issues, to lobby ASA and SSSP to include more sessions on gay themes, and to bring gay sociologists together to form a social network and professional support group. From that time, Laud, married and with two children, began to open his life and explore his gay identity, exemplifying once again in his life and work a classical insight of the sociology of knowledge: the recognition that "... we are not merely conditioned by the events that go on in our world but are at the same time instruments for shaping them" (Wirth 1968, p. xxiv).

The 1970s marked a period of rapid growth for the gay liberation movement. By the mid-1970s certain neighborhoods in several large cities, notably New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, emerged as social, economic, and political enclaves of openly gay and lesbian people. During this time, Laud, who in 1972 had arrived at Pitzer College in Claremont, increasingly became involved in the life of the developing Los Angeles gay communities. His political and religious commitments, continuing research on violence and marginal men in homosexual lifestyles, and his own personal growth as an openly gay man are nicely summarized in a line from an article he co-authored at that time: "Evidence indicates that personal happiness and social adjustment increase in a social context of which one may be proud" (Humphreys and Miller 1980, p. 154).
It is clear that this social context has been strengthened because of Laud’s involvement. His early research and the risks he took doing it have opened the way to almost all sociological research on gay topics that followed. His contributions to the founding of the Sociologists’ Lesbian and Gay Caucus have helped make it a visible and active force in our professional associations. Laud’s participation in Los Angeles’ gay communities during the late 1970s and 1980s clearly left its mark on many gay political, social, and health care organizations. Seventeen years ago Laud Humphreys (1972, p. 171) predicted that “... gay liberation will not leave untouched the society that brought it into being.” In a very real sense his own life and work helped make this prediction a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Although Laud’s research contributions to the sociology of gay subculture waned after 1981, he remained an active participant in counseling gay people, working with gay alcoholics and drug abusers, and, in his final years, returned to the Episcopal ministry, performing services for those who died from AIDS. Humphreys was present at the beginning of the gay movement, grew with it during the 1970s, and continued to serve the gay community even while personally combatting the ravages of lung cancer. Mills (1961, p. 13) suggested that “it is now the social scientist’s foremost political and intellectual task—for here the two coincide—to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference”; the life and work of Laud Humphreys presents a vivid exemplar of such.

REFERENCES


