Tearoom Trade: A Research Update

Frederick J. Desroches

INTRODUCTION

From 1985 to 1988, the arrests of large numbers of men involved in impersonal sex in public toilets became a major Canadian news story. Sparked by the publication in local newspapers of the accused persons' names, a nationwide debate took place in the media through radio talk shows, letters to the editor, and television interviews. Never before had this covert sexual activity been so publically exposed. Many citizens were shocked by the detailed descriptions of the behavior, the characteristics of the men involved, police investigative techniques, and the resulting destruction of families, careers, and the death by suicide of one of the accused. The present study examines this deviant activity using information generated by police surveillance of seven public washrooms in five Canadian communities.

This paper attempts to replicate Laud Humphreys' famous study, Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places. Originally published in 1970, his award winning book describes the activities of men who frequent public washrooms (tearooms) in search of quick anonymous sex. Based on surreptitious observations of sexual encounters as a voyeur-lookout ("watchqueen"), in-depth interviews with selected players, and disguised interviews with others, Humphreys' research is a detailed sociological analysis of a seldom studied form of deviance common to urban areas. Despite limiting his systematic observations to one city, Humphreys contends that "the basic rules of the game—and the profile of the players—are applicable to any place in the United States" (1970:21). The present research aims to test this assertion by comparing data on tearoom activities—gathered two decades later, using different methodologies, and in a different country—with the behaviors described by Humphreys in his innovative research.

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A discussion of the data and research methodology of each study is followed by an analysis and comparison of the following: the location of tearooms, how tearooms are discovered, characteristics of participants, and tearoom behavior. The paper concludes with a sociological analysis of participant motivation. Despite some differences, the overall patterns observed in Canadian communities are remarkably the same.

THE DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Humphreys' Study

Although the origin of the term “tearoom” is unknown, Humphreys explains that it is generally used in homosexual argot to refer to locales or facilities that are frequented by men for sexual encounters. Public toilets favored for these purposes are isolated structures, infrequently used by other persons, yet easily accessible by car (1970:7).

From April 1966 to April 1967, Humphreys observed 120 sexual acts in 19 different men’s washrooms, located in five parks in a city of two million people. In order to gain as representative a sample as possible, he ignored tearooms that because of location attracted specific occupational groups and focused instead on the more accessible and “democratic” restrooms of public parks—i.e., facilities likely to attract a wider cross section of the population (1970:13 & 19). He also distributed observations throughout different time periods, parks, and seasons of the year.

Humphreys discovered that the fear and suspicion encountered by tearoom participants produced a lookout role, whereby one man would situate himself at a door or window and alert participants of anyone approaching. By serving as voyeur.lookout (“watchqueen”)—"a role superbly suited for sociologists and the only lookout role that is not overtly sexual" (1970:28)—Humphreys was able to observe the action without alarming or disrupting participants.

In addition, Humphreys initiated conversations with several participants outside the toilet and eventually gained the trust and cooperation of twelve men for his research project. He also recorded the license plate numbers of numerous participants whom he identified and visited in their homes a year later. In disguise, Humphreys interviewed a sample of 50 men under the pretense of conducting a social health survey. His varied but controversial (Von Hoffman, 1970) research strategies provided him with detailed, intimate, and comprehensive data on the behavior, lifestyles, and social characteristics of tearoom participants.
Table 1. Police Surveillance and Tearoom Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number arrested</th>
<th>Surveillance technique</th>
<th>Tearoom location</th>
<th>Duration of investigation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community #1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Public park</td>
<td>6 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community #2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Basement of town theatre</td>
<td>18 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community #3</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Direct surveilance</td>
<td>Three shopping centers</td>
<td>8 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community #4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Direct surveilance</td>
<td>Department store in shopping mall</td>
<td>6 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community #5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>Basement of shopping mall</td>
<td>6 Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Present Study

This paper examines tearoom activity using data gathered from police case materials and through interviews with law enforcement personnel in five Canadian urban areas ranging in size from 24,000 to 600,000. Based on direct observations of sexual behavior in seven public toilets, police in these communities arrested 190 men charging them with Committing an Indecent act (Section 173 of the Canadian Criminal Code) or Gross Indecency (Section 157 C.C. - repealed January 1988). Table #1 shows that the washrooms under surveillance comprise the following: (1) a park washroom, (2) a washroom in the basement of a town theatre, (3) three washrooms located in shopping malls, (4) a washroom in a large department store located in a shopping center, and (5) a restaurant washroom located in the basement of a shopping mall. Surveillance was maintained from six days to eight weeks with 190 men arrested and charged. Police in communities #1, #2, and #5 gathered evidence with the use of a video camera, whereas police in communities #3 and #4 made direct observations through air vents installed in the ceiling and wall. Because surveillance was maintained continuously, the sample of men in communities #1, #2, & #5 represent all tearoom participants—except for one man who escaped arrest—using the washroom facilities for sexual purposes during each period of observation. Police in all communities arrested men engaged in sexual encounters including those who masturbated in front of another. Men who visited the facility to watch were either ignored or cautioned since their behavior did not constitute a criminal offence. Video surveillance in communities #1, #2, and #5 indicates that players visited the tearoom for sexual encounters on average 2.3 times over a six day period.

The research began when a former student, and Superintendent of Special Forces, informed me that the Morality Squad in his Police Department (Com-
munity #3) had begun arresting men for sexual offenses committed in mall washrooms. Permission was granted to interview detectives and examine case materials throughout the ongoing investigation. Detectives were frequently questioned immediately following an arrest and although I was often present when offenders were brought into the office to be issued a summons, no attempt was made to interview tearoom participants.

The data from the remaining four police forces were gathered at the completion of each investigation and were also based upon interviews and case materials. A total of 15 detectives were interviewed, most at least twice. The initial focus of the study was on the police response to this behavior (see Desroches, 1991). Very quickly, however, the descriptions of the tearoom behavior alerted me to the serendipitous possibility of replicating Humphreys’ research with police generated data. I carefully re-read his study and began questioning detectives in detail. The interviews and case materials provided in-depth descriptions of the behavior as well as offender characteristics such as age, marital status, place of residence, occupation and previous criminal record. Police investigators in community #5 were particularly conscientious and recorded numerous details as they viewed the action on video. Each participant was assigned a number, in sequence, to label their file and record information. Repeat offenders were identified by the same number with each separate occurrence recorded by date and alphabetical order. For example, offender #3 was observed in illegal acts on three separate occasions and his actions were recorded as follows: 3a Dec. 13, performed fellatio on 4A; 3b Dec. 14, performed fellatio on 12a; 3c Dec. 16, performed fellatio on 9b. Police notes and reports also describe the behavior and position(s) of the offenders, their appearance, the length of time observed, and other details. Because the data provided sufficient information with which to assess Humphreys’ work, an offer by one police force to view the videos was declined.

Given the fact that police surveillance of tearooms generates rich descriptive accounts of the behavior of participants, it appears that some of the observations done by Humphreys, and for which he received severe criticism for intrusiveness, are perhaps unnecessary. It is recognized, however, that his technique allowed him, among other things, to become acquainted with twelve cooperative respondents—the “intensive dozen”—who provided him with some of the richest data in the study. In addition, police generated data do not provide the kinds of information Humphreys uncovered in his covert interviews.

I was initially struck by two differences: (a) the behavior took place in shopping mall washrooms rather than parks, and (b) the voyeur-lookout role Humphreys assumed as participant observer appeared to be absent. It soon became increasingly clear, however, that police observations were largely consistent with Humphreys’ data.
The Location of Tearooms

Although he does not address the issue directly, Humphreys implies that the bulk of tearoom activity occurs in the toilets of public parks. He acknowledges the existence of other tearooms not located in parks—referring to three well-known locales—but nonetheless focuses his observations on 19 different men’s rooms in five parks of the city (1970:19).

A significant difference between the two studies is that most tearoom activities in this sample take place in the restrooms of shopping malls. Only in community #1 did tearoom activity take place in a park washroom. Police in this jurisdiction report, however, that several tearooms are active in shopping malls. In addition, police departments in the remaining four communities have no evidence that park washrooms have been systematically used as tearooms.

It appears that shopping malls may have usurped parks as the favorite locale of tearoom participants because malls have the same favorable conditions that Humphreys outlines with fewer disadvantages:

1. Shopping centers devote heavily travelled areas to retail ventures and relegate public washrooms to out-of-the-way corridors. Located in basements and other isolated areas of the mall, these facilities are seldom used by shoppers making them ideal for tearoom play. Humphreys noted that the women’s side of park restrooms was seldom used. Similarly, investigating officers in this study note that women seldom visit these out-of-the-way facilities, preferring to use the washrooms provided by restaurants and taverns located in the malls. They also note that 85-90% of male visitors to these more remote facilities either participate in tearoom sex or appear to be looking for action.

2. Humphreys’ research took place in the mid 1960’s. Shopping plazas have proliferated since then and provide an increasing number of locales that compete favorably against the few park washrooms that exist. In addition, unlike park facilities in Canada, shopping centers are open year round and are more easily accessible.

3. Individuals who use park toilets for illegitimate sexual activities are at greater risk of detection than men who use the facilities provided in large shopping centers. As Humphreys indicates, active park tearooms are easily identifiable: “If two or more cars remain in front of a relatively isolated restroom for more than ten minutes, one may be reasonably certain that homosexual activity is in progress inside (1970:7). Participants are conspicuous by the presence of unoccupied cars in the vicinity, by the lone automobile occupant lingering for a
participant to arrive, and by the traffic of men to and from their cars and the restrooms.

Just as Humphreys recorded the license plate numbers of tearoom participants, the police in community #1 identified offenders by watching and photographing them leave the tearoom and enter their vehicles. Police in this community were initially alerted to the activity by local residents suspicious of the high number of men frequenting the park washroom.

Participants who use the facilities of large shopping malls are less conspicuous because numerous vehicles are parked in the surrounding parking lot. In addition, people have many legitimate reasons for visiting a shopping center—e.g., groceries, clothing, browsing, movies, etc. and one’s presence in a mall, unlike the out-of-the-way park washroom, is not likely to arouse suspicion. Tearoom encounters in shopping centers can be accomplished in the course of everyday activities. One offender accompanied his wife to the mall each Saturday, excused himself for a few minutes while she shopped, and visited the washroom for quick sex without her suspecting anything was amiss.

(4) Many police forces deter sexual encounters in park washrooms by patrolling these areas to protect children who use recreational facilities. In addition, police often maintain a presence in order to reduce incidents of noisy parties, mini-bikes, drug usage, and sexual deviance. Shopping malls, on the other hand, are privately run and plaza owners normally contract security firms to discourage undesirables. Private security is less of a deterrent to tearoom participants than the police who are better trained, equipped, and legally empowered. Police cannot investigate tearoom activities in shopping malls, however, without being invited by mall owners. Investigating officers in three of these communities report tearoom activities in malls about which owners refuse to complain for fear of adverse publicity. This situation creates an attractive and busy setting for impersonal sexual encounters.

*Discovering the Tearoom*

As noted by Humphreys, certain washrooms gain a reputation in the gay community as a place where homosexual encounters occur, attracting men who wish to engage. When asked what brought them to the park washroom, participants in community #1 stated that the park itself is known as a meeting spot for gay men.
Two of the investigating officers strolled through the park at separate intervals and report being propositioned by gays on the make. A month after this research had begun, a member of the local gay community was murdered as he walked through the park alone in the evening.

The park's reputation presumably develops through communication between gay men. This does not explain how tearoom participants learn about the popularity of a washroom, since most do not participate in the gay community. In addition, both Humphreys' research and this study indicate that most players hide their deviance from others, remain silent during sex play, and avoid outside homosexual contacts. Even knowing of their existence, Humphreys initially had difficulty in the early stages of his research discovering active tearooms. How then does the uninitiated discover the existence and location of these facilities?

One possibility is through the media. In community #4, police were curious as to why men gravitated to the Hudson Bay Department Store washroom, since there is a more isolated public washroom in the basement of this shopping center. Surprisingly, the majority of men explain that they had interpreted the store's advertisement sexually—"Meet me at the Bay"—and correctly assumed that others would do likewise. Security indicates that stores throughout the country have had similar problems. This suggests that media publicity given to tearoom arrests may deter some men from involvement, but at the same time inform others who were previously unaware that such locales exist. Ironically, media reports on police investigations and arrests can become advertisements for new recruits.

Tearooms are also discovered accidentally and through seduction. Several men report being initiated into tearoom sex inadvertently. One man explained that he had been using the washroom a few months earlier when the occupant in the adjoining stall pushed open the 6" by 8" paper dispenser and began masturbating. The accused reports that he was at first shocked, then curious, then aroused. He returned occasionally to the same washroom for impersonal sex until apprehended and charged.

It can also be hypothesized that some participants discover tearooms through explicit homosexual graffiti as described by Humphreys and evident in all washrooms in this study. In one toilet stall, for example, someone had written the following invitation at the base of the divider: "If you put your hand down here, I know you want a blow-job." Police observed that several men responded to this message, thus initiating sexual activities.

Some offenders, in addition, admit to having looked for action in out-of-the-way washrooms. A few men, having been convicted of this activity in their own jurisdiction, searched for tearooms in other communities hoping for a safer place to play.
Table 2. Age of Tearoom Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number charged</th>
<th>Average age</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community 1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>21-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>24-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 3</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>14-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39.25</td>
<td>16-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44.31</td>
<td>19-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>41.29</td>
<td>14-68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Players

The age of tearoom participants in the present sample ranges from 14 to 68 with the median at 41 and an average of 41.29 years. Only three teenagers were observed participating in tearoom sex—two of them together. In that particular case, a 14-year-old public school student was observed engaging in fellatio with a 17-year-old secondary school student. In no cases were children involved.

Detailed information on the social characteristics of the players in Humphreys' study is provided on 50 tearoom participants. The median age in his sample is 34 years compared to a median age of 41 years in this study. The seven year age gap between tearoom participants in the two studies may be partly explained by the fact that the median age of the total population in the United States and Canada has increased in the past two decades as the birth rate has dropped and longevity increased.

The occupational status of participants in this sample varies widely and includes the following: one elementary school, seven secondary school, six community college, and two university students; one elementary school teacher; six secondary school teachers, a secondary school principal; two community college administrators; one police officer and one young man recently recruited into the police force; two ministers and a seminarian, a funeral director; a midriff professional wrestler; three Revenue Canada tax auditors; five accountants; a medical doctor; a pharmacist; two nurses; a commercial artist; two bank managers; a soldier; two hairdressers; a customs official; a letter carrier; several unskilled labourers; a hotel manager; two real estate salesmen, a fireman; numerous salesmen in a variety of businesses; several men who were retired; many who were unemployed; and a number of self-employed men in such diverse occupations as butcher, cook, caterer, computer consultant, roofer, and appliance repairman.

As Humphreys states, "Like other next door neighbors, the participants in tearoom sex are of no one type. They vary along a number of possible continua of social characteristics" (1970:129). In both samples, tearoom participants
Table 3. Marital Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Separated/Divorced</th>
<th>Common-law</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community 1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 3</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 4</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community 5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>3.15%</td>
<td>3.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey’s sample</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

appear to be mainly working, lower-middle, or middle-class men whose occupational statuses cover a broad spectrum.

Of the 50 men interviewed by Humphreys, 27 (54%) are married, 19 (38%) single, three (6%) divorced, and one (2%) separated. As indicated in Table #3, 58% in this sample are known to be married and living with their wives, 28.9% are single, 6.3% are separated or divorced, and 3.15% are living common-law. The percentage of single men (28.9%) is ten percent less than in Humphreys’ group. The significant pattern, however, is the fact that like Humphreys’ sample, the majority of tearoom participants are married, many have children, and some even have grandchildren.

Although a few men admit to being gay or bisexual, most present themselves as heterosexual. Of the 27 accused in community #1, for example, only three are professed homosexuals. The majority of men in all communities appear to fall into the category Humphreys refers to as “trade”—married or once married men with dependent occupations, masculine in appearance, and heterosexual in their orientation (1970:111). These men do not seek homosexual contact as such, do not involve themselves in the gay community, and hide their deviance from family and others. They are emotionally devastated at arrest and express extreme concern over the possibility that they may be publically identified.

With the exception of community #4, the majority of offenders (80-90%) reside in the jurisdiction in which they are apprehended. In community #4, 30/37 men live outside the area and visited this tearoom because it is located near an exit ramp on a major highway connecting two large cities. Offenders estimate that their visit would add no more than an average 20-40 minutes to their travelling time.

The following case synopses, taken from police files and investigating officers’ notes, illustrate the variety of persons involved in the tearoom trade.

#1 Insurance Salesman, Age 35, Single. This man was observed on 14 separate occasions and was nicknamed “Roger the Dodger” by the police surveillance team. He would spend up to five hours a day in the washroom and
typically enter, wait, leave for a coffee, and repeat the pattern connecting several times a day with different men. While waiting, he would casually masturbate and always take stall #1 from which he could watch the urinals. He had no previous conviction.

#2 Unemployed Labourer, Age 54, Married with Children. He has a criminal record for possession of an offensive weapon and Break and Enter. This man says that if he receives any flak from people over his offence, he will kill them. The police indicate deep concern about this threat with one officer writing: “He has the appearance of a guy who means what he says.” The offender expressed no animosity towards the police and asked the arresting officer to accompany him to his home to help explain his actions to his wife.

#3 Retired, Age 68, Married with Children and Grandchildren. This man was well known in the community and played on the “Old Timers” hockey team. He was very surveillance conscious but insisted that this was his first offence.

#4 Labourer, Manufacturing Plant, Age 40, Married with Children. This man cried when arrested and threatened suicide. He left work the next day with the intention of killing himself but decided against this course of action.

#5 Bank Manager, Age 49, Married with Children. Charged with committing an indecent act, this offender had been arrested on a previous occasion for the same behavior but was released with a caution. He explained that he was taking counselling but that it had not changed his desires. He was later dismissed from his job when his name appeared in local newspapers.

# 6 Gardener, Age 48, Married with Children. He was observed involved in fellatio on two separate occasions and has a previous conviction for Gross Indecency. He requested to see the video of his offence, and watched up to the point at which his face could be clearly identified. He then said, “That’s enough.” In response to the officer’s comment, “Pretty bad eh?” he replied, “Especially when you’re not in the mood.”

#7 Automotive Plant Employee, Age 52, Married with Children. This man is a Croatian who came into the station with his wallet open stating, “I pay.” Later he brought his family photograph book expecting sympathy and hoping to have the charges dropped. Eventually he obtained a lawyer and insisted he was innocent. His lawyer watched the video and persuaded the accused to plead guilty.

#8 Nurse, Age 41, Married with Children. This man had been arrested a month earlier in another washroom. Because his name appeared in the papers, his children aged 9, 10, and 11 were verbally abused by other students at school and engaged in several fights. After the second charge, his wife left with the children stating, “This is not over. I’m getting out.”

#9 Doctor, Age 45, Married with Children. The offender was apprehended in his home community several years earlier but was able to have the charges
dropped when his lawyer presented psychiatric evidence that he was suicidal. He was re-arrested in a community 125 miles from his home. Police in the two communities cooperated to ensure that he was convicted the second time around. Local newspapers gave the incident full coverage.

The Breastplate of Righteousness

From interviews conducted in their homes, Humphreys notes a strong tendency of many tearoom participants to maintain an outward appearance of superpropriety. This is particularly true of those men whose lifestyle make them vulnerable to exposure—married men in dependent occupations. Most of these covert deviants—referred to as "trade" by Humphreys—drive late model automobiles that are clean and polished, maintain exceptionally manicured yards, and are impeccably groomed and dressed. The covert deviant, in physical and moral presentation of self, creates an image of one who is neat, clean, proper, conscientious, moral, conservative, righteous, and religious.

Investigating officers in our samples similarly note the neat and conservative appearance of tearoom participants. As a case in point, a subject who committed suicide shortly after his arrest was an exemplary husband and father. In reporting his death, the local newspaper described him as a "model citizen who was a victim of his secret life":

He had a few more drinks than usual at the neighborhood Christmas party. That was the only indication something was bothering the tall, handsome, 42-year-old sales manager. Not even his wife suspected what was eating away at the normally outgoing, likeable man . . . . On Saturday afternoon, he kissed his wife and two young children goodbye and drove to a nearby village. With his car moving at slow speed, he doused himself with gasoline and flashed his lighter. Hours earlier, he had been summoned to the police station where he was charged with gross indecency in connection with alleged homosexual activity in the public washroom at a local shopping mall . . . . Neighbors and associates of the salesman stated that he was respectable and "normal in every sense of the word" . . . . His friends and family are shocked because he was a model citizen, a dedicated family man married for about 15 years, active in his church and well liked by everyone who knew him. He taught Sunday school and coached children's soccer. On public holidays he flew the Canadian flag on his front lawn. [Author's note: Public displays of patriotism by citizens are not common occurrences in Canada]

The meticulous and scrupulous image cultivated by this man was about to be destroyed by his arrest for tearoom activities and he no doubt anticipated the loss of all that was important to him—family, community respect, self respect, and perhaps even his job. Because he chose to die rather than face such a loss, his death can be viewed as an example of anomie suicide (Durkheim, 1951).

Although the data in this study are insufficient to systematically test Humphreys' findings, detectives apprised of his observations are of the opinion
that the “breastplate of righteousness” concept accurately portrays the lifestyle, dress, and appearance of the majority of tearoom participants they encountered.

What accounts for this concern with a squeaky clean image? The motive, Humphreys suggests, is to shield oneself from exposure. He writes:

In donning the breastplate of righteousness, the covert deviant assumes a protective shield of superpropriety . . . Motivated largely by his own awareness of the discreditable nature of his secret behavior, [he] develops a presentation of self that is respectable to a fault. His whole lifestyle becomes an incarnation of what is proper and orthodox. In manners and taste, religion and art, he strives for an otherwise low resistance to the shock of exposure. (Humphreys, 1970:135-136.)

The problem with this strategy is that it does not protect the offender from police surveillance, arrest, and public disgrace. Furthermore, he faces a horrible backlash from persons who view his actions as a form of betrayal and/or hypocrisy. The pillar of the community topples from a great height because he has publically proclaimed this higher status. Three additional hypotheses are offered for consideration.

1. Reaction Formation. Reaction formation is a psychiatric concept used to describe an exaggerated or intense reaction of persons to something that is threatening. The over-reaction functions to reassure the subject against the inner and/or external threat. In his theory of delinquency, Albert Cohen suggests that lower class boys, frustrated over their inability to achieve status in a middle class world, respond by repudiating middle class values. Reaction formation occurs because they are unable to conform to standards that are foreign to them (Cohen, 1955:133).

   With tearoom participants, the process may be reversed. They conform on the surface but covertly engage in deviant sexual practices. The over-reaction—i.e., this excessive concern with neatness and propriety—results from the anxiety brought on by their sexual deviance. The donning of the breastplate of righteousness may have a psychological cleansing effect—an emotional catharsis—in which the “clean” lifestyle washes away the “stains” that have been picked up at play.

2. Self-Validation. The public definition of tearoom behavior as “sick” or “perverted” threatens the self-concept of participants. The donning of the breastplate of righteousness may function to validate a view of oneself as “normal” and reassure players that they are not perverted.

   The actor encapsulates the deviant activity forgetting about it for the time being and denying that this is “really him.” Instead, he takes seriously the clean image that is fostered and in which he has
placed so much effort. He is indeed this person that everyone knows him to be—a husband, a father, a faithful employee, a good neighbor, and an upstanding citizen in the community. Erving Goffman describes the process:

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on—and this seems to be the typical case—then for the moment at least, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the “realness” of what is presented. (1959:17)

The mask of propriety represents the view that these men have or wish to have of themselves. By playing a conforming role, they convince themselves (and others) that this is their true self. The successful performance validates their identity.

3. The Breastplate of Righteousness - Cause or Effect? The donning of the breastplate of righteousness may serve all three functions outlined above: (a) to deflect suspicion away from deviant actions as Humphreys suggests, (b) as a means of cleansing oneself, and (c) as a mechanism for self-validation. Whereas Humphreys’ explanation assumes that the performance is intended for the general public, the other two hypotheses imply that the behavior is meant for self-consumption.

Each assumes, however, that tearoom participation precedes the concern with an image or lifestyle that is clean, conservative, and righteous. But neither study has sufficient evidence to indicate which comes first. Was the breastplate of righteousness erected to hide the deviant activity from society and the player himself? Or is the covert deviant behavior a result of a highly constrictive lifestyle?

Consider the lifestyle of the participants for a moment. These men lead lives characterized by conservative, moral ideology and devoted to religious and family responsibilities. Humphreys’ tearoom sample included a disproportionately high representation of Roman Catholics and Episcopalians (1970:137). Obviously their religious upbringing precedes tearoom participation. It may be that an overly conservative and sexually repressive childhood influences sexual behavior later in life. Perhaps the breastplate of righteousness is merely their acquiescence to society’s definition of how their lives should be led—a home, family, career, church, and all the other trappings of a socially conservative and respectable person. But clearly, participation in this sexual activity indicates that something is lacking in their lives. Unfulfilled but unable or unwilling to reject the values and roles they have acquired, they seek release in the furtive and impersonal sex offered in mens’ washrooms.
Rules, Roles, and Strategies - Humphreys' Observations

From the perspective of the watchqueen, Humphreys provides a detailed analysis of the behaviors and roles of participants. Although tactics differ, he suggests that rules and roles remain essentially the same from encounter to encounter. Rules are primarily aimed at minimizing risk and include the following: avoiding the exchange of biographical data, avoiding youths and children, and never forcing one's intentions on anyone.

Tea room participants avoid the exchange of biographical information to the point where sexual encounters are contracted and performed in silence. This silence also has the important function of keeping the encounters impersonal. As Humphreys suggests, propositioning strangers for sex acts in a public washroom is dangerous, "so much so that it is made possible only by concerted action which progresses in stages of increasing mutuality" (1970:60). A man who knows nothing of the homosexual game in progress may enter a restroom, spend a minute urinating, and leave. He is recognized as being "straight" by the fact that he "stands close to the fixture, so that his front side may not easily be seen and gazes downward" (1970:62). Straights, Humphreys argues, do not have to be concerned about being propositioned, molested, or otherwise involved in the action.

A man who knows the rules and wishes to play, however, will stand back from the urinal, allowing his gaze to shift from side to side or to the ceiling. (Humphreys, 1970:62)

Besides lingering at the urinals and looking about, participants will signal a willingness to play by openly fondling their penis in "casual masturbation." By means of various bodily movements, the actors achieve through silent communication a sign of willingness to proceed and the role each will play. Most sexual acts that Humphreys observed involved fellatio whereby one man, the insertee, performs oral sex on another, the inserter. One who wishes to be an insertee may take hold of his partner's exposed and erect penis, or take a seat in the stalls and peer out, and/or beckon to another through head or hand motions (1970:66). One who wishes to be an inserter steps into the stall in which his partner is seated. Humphreys notes that most acts of fellatio take place in this manner (71% in the stalls vs 29% at the urinals) because it is more comfortable for the insertee to sit than to crouch. It also means that only one participant need move if an intrusion takes place (1970:75).

Other roles described by Humphreys include three different lookouts (watchqueens): (a) waiters—men waiting for a particular person or a chance to get in on the action; (b) masturbators—those who are either present just to masturbate or engage in masturbation while being waiters; (c) voyeurs—those
who "get their kicks" out of watching others (these men are sometimes also masturbators).

Humphreys describes no instances in which fellatio is reciprocated, although he does state that mutual masturbation at the urinals occurs. Only two instances of anal intercourse were observed, perhaps because of the danger involved in the removal of clothing. When the sex act is complete, the insertor usually zips up, occasionally expresses his gratitude with a pat on the shoulder, wave of the hand, or whispered "thanks," and departs. The insertee leaves afterwards but may remain to participate in further action. Humphreys describes these ongoing and sequential sex acts as "series encounters," whereby sexual activity continues with differing men throughout the day, "each group of participants trading upon the legitimization process of the previous game" (1970:77). He also observes "simultaneous encounters" in which more than one sexual act is in progress at the same time.

Rules, Roles, and Strategies—The Present Study

The data in this study largely support Humphreys' assertion that the rules and roles of tearoom sex remain essentially the same from encounter to encounter. Police observations in all five communities reveal that youth and children are not involved in sex play, the action is noncoercive, and silence and impersonality are maintained. Although regular patrons occasionally nod to one another in recognition, no conversations occur within the washrooms.

Police in community #5 have made the only observations of participants leaving together and speaking briefly outside the washroom. In one instance, the conversation took place in the mall coffee shop; in the other case, the two sex partners spoke in one man's car before departing in their respective vehicles.

The various roles described by Humphreys—insertor, insertee, straights, waiters, masturbators, voyeurs—are also clearly observed in these five communities. A significant difference, however, is the relative absence of teenagers (chickens) in sex play. Humphreys describes three roles played by teenagers in the tearoom trade: enlisters—youths who want to get into the action; toughs—youths who harass other tearoom participants sometimes by physical attacks such as "rolling"; and hustlers—enlisters who demand payment for serving as insertors.

Humphreys argues that because involvement with youths is legally dangerous, most tearoom participants avoid them. In addition, enlisters are difficult to distinguish from hustlers and hustlers are potential threats because they demand payment and can turn into toughs if refused. In only three cases are teenagers involved in the tearooms of the five communities in this study. Their
absence is perhaps explained by the fact that gang delinquency and teenage prostitution are not large problems in these communities.

The actual behavior or strategies of tearoom participants in this study varies somewhat from washroom to washroom and appears to be influenced by the physical characteristics of each room. Specifically, sexual encounters usually take place in the area of the washroom hidden from view, allowing participants time to disengage when intruded upon. In community #1, for example, the sexual activity took place mainly at the urinals situated behind a partition and out of view of the entrance. As Humphreys describes, the action typically begins with one man lingering at the urinal until another arrives. He then fondles and displays an erection and looks for a response. Sex play begins by one man reaching over and stroking his neighbor’s penis or fellating him. Although mutual masturbation is common, fellatio is not reciprocated. A squeaky door warns participants of intruders, allowing each man sufficient time to zip up and depart. The amount of time spent in sexual encounters is brief and most men leave immediately afterwards.

In the other four communities, sexual contact usually took place in the toilet stalls hidden from view. In communities #2 and #4, an opening in the metal divider separating the stalls was strategic in sex play. In the former, a fist size “glory hole” had been punctured three feet above the floor; in the latter, the toilet paper dispenser could be opened to allow the occupants to peer in on another. With the stalls occupied, sex play begins with casual masturbation. This activity is visible through the opening and appears to be the cue for action. Other overtures or gestures that precede sexual encounters involve one man beckoning the other with his finger. Participants were also commonly observed writing and passing notes on toilet paper. The notes contain explicit sexual come-ons and this activity sometimes continues 15 or 20 minutes before sexual contact is initiated. Police observed that some men engage in sex immediately, while others seem to enjoy the flirtation as a type of foreplay. Still others appear shy and nervous, perhaps needing the time to build up their courage before making contact.

On occasion, one of the men will show no interest and depart. Most times, however, one player will reach over and touch the other’s penis or thrust his own through the opening. In both communities, masturbation, mutual masturbation, and fellatio results. Most of the activity takes place through the opening or underneath the stalls. Fellatio and mutual masturbation are the most common activities with the glory hole in community #2 occasionally being used for anal sex. One participant, a bank manager, was observed in anal sex with three different men in a one hour period. It was later discovered that he was afflicted with syphilis and may have transmitted the disease.

In community #3, sexual activities were observed in three washrooms of two shopping malls with most of the action taking place between adjacent stalls.
Normally a player arrives, waits in the stall, engages in casual masturbation, and spends time reading and/or writing messages on the wall. When the adjacent booth becomes occupied, contact begins by one man gradually moving his foot into the other’s stall eventually touching his neighbor’s foot. Several men also come equipped with hand mirrors which they use to look up into the adjacent stall.

In most instances, sexual encounters take the form of mutual masturbation or fellatio beneath the partition without either leaving the stall or even viewing one another’s face. Participants do not speak and the role of fellator is assumed by one man kneeling and taking the other man’s penis in his mouth. An examination of the notes that are exchanged also indicates that the insertor-insertee role is sometimes determined in this manner.

Similarly, in community #5, sexual activity takes place between the stalls with one or both men extending their lower torso (much like a limbo dancer) under the partition in order to be masturbated or fellated. Contact is usually initiated through the touching of feet or note passing. As in all communities, the insertor leaves afterwards while the insertee waits in his stall for a moment before departing. Thus, participants rarely see one another’s face. In the few instances in which they do leave the stalls at the same time, nothing is spoken and neither will look at the other except for an occasional quick glance. As in community #4, several men were observed using hand mirrors to view the action. Stall occupants also read and wrote graffiti while waiting for someone to enter the washroom.

Humphreys observed that the most common form of sex play involved one man entering a stall in which another was seated in order to be fellated. This tactic was observed in this sample only in community #5 in which the urinals were situated directly in front of the end stall. The proximity of the two allowed the man at the urinal to step into the stall and quickly step back to the urinal at the first sign of intrusion.

In all park washrooms observed by Humphreys, stall doors had been removed. This fact along with the additional benefit of having someone act as lookout allowed participants to move into and out of the stalls without being observed by an intruder.

Next to the physical setting itself, the lookout plays the most important part in maintaining the boundaries of the tearoom encounter. He signals when an intrusion is about to occur and serves to legitimize those who enter (Humphreys, 1970:54).

Although the role of waiter, masturbator, and voyeur are observed by police, on only three occasions did anyone appear to act as a lookout for others. By holding the entrance door slightly ajar, these watchqueens could survey the corridor and warn of anyone approaching. Their position, however, did not allow them to watch the action at the same time. This explains in part why
the lookout role does not emerge in these toilets to the same degree as Humphreys found. Moreover, since there are no windows, the physical means by which to discreetly play the role are unavailable. A squeaky door is the first sign of an intrusion, giving the participants little time to disengage. This necessitates the use of different strategies and accounts for the fact that most participants commit their acts out of sight of the entrance: at the urinals where they can quickly disengage, or in separate stalls where they can sit up and look innocent. All toilets in this study had doors.

Despite the danger of being caught in the act, men in several communities were occasionally observed entering another’s stall or involved in simultaneous sexual encounters in open areas of the washroom. Police in two communities discovered that some participants brought with them brown paper shopping bags in which they stood while being fellated in another’s stall. To the casual observer it would simply appear as though the occupant had placed a bag of groceries at his feet.

Like Humphreys, police observed numerous men masturbate alone and/or attend the washroom simply to watch others. Participants were charged only if they engaged in sexual acts with one another or in open view of someone. Police also observed numerous men who were unsuccessful in their search for a sexual partner. These men would enter the washroom, linger for long periods, sit in the stall, play with themselves, read and write graffiti, and leave often without using the facilities. Some men are discriminating and will enter the washroom up to a dozen times a day without meeting someone to their liking. Most, however, respond to whoever happens to be willing. Frequent tearoom visitors generally do not have sex with one another, apparently preferring someone new. In both studies, men waited outside the tearoom and watched for others to arrive.

Although tearoom participants do not force themselves on others, some men are brash and persistent in their attempt to engage shy and reluctant partners. In more instances than not, this boldness pays off and sexual contact follows. Occasionally, however, this aggressiveness can lead to a rebuke by someone who is not inclined. In one instance, a subject was kicked in the hand when he reached into another’s stall. In another case, a subject ran from the washroom when threatened by a man he attempted to look in upon. These two faux pas, however, represent less than one percent of tearoom encounters observed. Most participants are cautious enough to wait for cues that others are willing before moving into sexplay.

The Motivation

Why do men, many of whom are married and presumably heterosexual, participate in sexual activities with other men in public washrooms? Why do
they risk criminal prosecution and serious damage to family relations, reputations, and careers?

Men who are closet gays or bisexual may find this type of sexual activity arousing because they are attracted to other men yet do not wish to be known as homosexual. Because they value their marriages, careers, and reputations, open involvement in the gay community is ruled out. Tearooms allow them to keep their homosexual urges private and lead publicly respectable lives as long as they are not exposed.

An example of such a case involves a 24 year old man who traveled 200 miles round trip to community #2 for tearoom encounters. He cried when arrested and expressed remorse and shame over his behavior explaining to the police that he had known since childhood that he was gay. His overwhelming concern was to keep this secret from his mother whom he said would be devastated. Consequently, he avoided gay bars, did not have a boyfriend, and stated that he would never marry. He chose to participate in tearoom sex because he considered it relatively safe.

For men who are gay, the attraction to tearoom sex is perhaps easier to understand given their sexual orientation. Yet most gay men avoid tearooms. It can be hypothesized that they do so because they are less concerned about having a gay reputation, thus allowing them the freedom to frequent gay bars, parties, etc.; gay locales offer personal and impersonal sex if desired in a less dangerous setting; finally, some men are involved in monogamous relationships spurning impersonal encounters.

For men who are primarily heterosexual, involvement in tearoom sex is theoretically difficult to explain because the behavior conflicts with a heterosexual self concept. Humphreys’ research indicates that such men are unlikely to take the insertee role in fellatio, telling themselves that they’re not “queer” if they’re on the receiving end. Other studies similarly note the use of this rationalization in male to male sex (Reiss: 1961). Several men in this sample emphasized their limited role in the sexual encounter stating, “No I’m not gay! I never gave blow jobs.”

It appears that the impersonal nature of their contact with other men in conjunction with the self imposed restrictions on sexual behavior, allow them to participate in tearoom sex yet still protect their self concept as heterosexual. There is, after all, minimal physical involvement (participants often do not even see one another) and no emotional commitment.

For some men, tearoom sex may be attractive because it is their only sexual outlet. One participant, a midget professional wrestler, justifies his actions by complaining that he has no other means of obtaining sexual gratification: “I go there for sex because I can’t get it anywhere else. Who would want to screw me?”
Married men who find their sex lives inadequate may also turn to tearooms as an alternative means of sexual gratification. Humphreys describes the married lives of several of the men that he interviewed as woefully lacking in affect and physical pleasure. Tearoom sex, he argues, is fulfilling a need that is not met in the context of their conjugal relationship.

I find no indication that these men seek homosexual contact as such; rather they want a form of orgasm production action that is less lonely than masturbation and less involving than a love relationship (Humphreys, 1970:115).

Police in this sample report that although a few men complain that their wives have put on weight or are no longer interested in sex, many more say that they are happily married family men who do not have serious marital problems. The only explanation given is that they have “this urge.” A subject who regularly took his children to play in the park while he visited the tearoom, said to the police: “I have a wife and two children and I’m happily married. Why am I doing this? I don’t know . . . I never think of it afterwards; it’s as though it didn’t happen.”

If heterosexual men have an urge for illicit sex, why don’t they have an affair or visit a prostitute? Even if they are bisexual or gay, why participate in furtive impersonal sex in a public washroom with so much risk? What are the factors that make tearoom sex attractive?

As Humphreys tells us, tearoom sex is impersonal and anonymous—it does not lead to problem entanglements. Ironically, it may be considered a safer alternative than having an affair. Tearoom sex, unlike an affair, involves minimal effort, commitment, obligation, expectation, resources, or demands on one’s time. The fact that tearoom sex is free is also an attraction. Prostitution is impersonal, anonymous, and free of entanglements and obligations but can become expensive if used on a regular basis. This may preclude its use by those who might otherwise be so inclined.

Another feature of tearoom sex is the speed at which encounters can be contracted and completed—some taking no more than five minutes from start to finish. Players do not have to be away from family for extended periods of time or explain lengthy absences.

The variety of partners available adds unknown and exciting elements to the encounters providing additional incentives for some. Humphreys further argues that kicks are derived from playing the game successfully, i.e., making contact with a stranger and following through until the sexual payoff is achieved. Danger itself may be experienced as stimulating, enhancing the game and the sexual pleasure. Readers may recollect instances in which they have been involved in sexual encounters open to discovery (in a car or next door to one’s parents’ bedroom) and recall the aphrodisiac effect of taking such risks.
For men attracted to other men or for whom heterosexual outlets are unavailable, tearoom sex is attractive because it provides fast, inexpensive, impersonal, relatively safe, exciting sex with a variety of partners.

One final question must still be addressed. Even if one is inclined to participate in tearoom sex, why does the possibility of arrest and exposure not act as a powerful deterrent? Although some men are surveillance conscious, most are not. Given the fact that the majority participate regularly in tearoom sex, they have perhaps been lulled into a false sense of security because they have experienced no problems. After all, they don't force themselves on others, there is no victim to complain, and their behavior is discreet. Consequently, some participants may believe that they are involved in an activity that law enforcement agencies care and/or know little about. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that in three of these five communities, no police investigation of this type had ever taken place before. In another, police had made arrests four years previously but little publicity was involved and the names of offenders were not made public.

In community #5, however, a highly publicized police investigation had recently occurred. Although tearoom participants in this community were cautious and surveillance conscious, they were obviously undeterred. Many searched for cameras, left quickly if disturbed, and/or took evasive actions when leaving the washroom. These men knowingly took risks, but ignorance of police capabilities perhaps led them to believe that they could detect surveillance and were safe in this criminal conduct.

We can also hypothesize that most offenders simply fail to consider the possibility or consequences of getting caught. Like shoplifters apprehended in a store, many of the tearoom participants are mortified and humiliated at arrest and terrified that their identity may be made public. They involve themselves in a crime failing to consider the possible harm that may result to themselves and their families.

Finally, some men may be naively unaware that their behavior constitutes a criminal offence. Several men who masturbated in front of others express surprise at their arrest stating, for example that, "I didn't know it was against the law to pull your own wire." It is the public nature of the act that makes it an offense.

CONCLUSION

Like many studies of covert deviance, this paper is based upon a captive sample of persons who have come to the attention of law enforcement agencies. The existence of Laud Humphreys' research, however, makes possible a comparison of police generated data with data obtained through observations and
interviews with "un apprehended" offenders. Because police observations were so detailed, a rare opportunity to replicate a qualitative study presented itself. This research largely substantiates the picture drawn by Humphreys in his classic study, *Tea room Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. Consistent with his observations, most tearoom participants (a) communicate through non-verbal gestures and seldom speak, (b) do not associate outside the tearoom or attempt to learn one another's identity or exchange biographical information, (c) do not use force or coercion or attempt to involve youths or children, (d) are primarily heterosexual and married, (e) depart separately with the inserter leaving first, (f) commit their sex acts out of sight of the entrance and accidental exposure, (g) do not undress or engage in anal sex, (h) break off sexual contact when someone enters the washroom, (i) rarely approach straight men, (j) read and write sexually explicit homosexual graffiti, and (k) linger inside and outside the washroom for someone to appear. In addition, (l) fellatio is generally not reciprocated and fellators are usually older men; (m) most offenders are neat in appearance; (n) some engage in single sexual encounters; (o) encounters are brief, usually not exceeding twenty minutes; and (p) few have criminal records with the exception of those previously convicted of similar offenses.

The behavior of players reveals remarkable consistency over time, from community to community, and across national boundaries. Many men, the majority of them married and primarily heterosexual, continue to visit out-of-the-way public washrooms in search of fast, impersonal, and exciting sex despite the risk to family, friends, job, and reputation. Although shopping malls have usurped public parks as the favorite locale of tearoom participants, the basic rules of the game and profile of the players—as Humphreys contends—remain the same over time and place.

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Prevalence and Patterns of Same-Gender Sexual Contact Among Men

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The prevalence and patterns of same-gender sexual contact among men are key components of models of the spread of HIV infection and AIDS in the U.S. population. Previous estimates by Kinsey et al. from data collected between 1938 and 1948 have been widely criticized for inadequacies of sample design. New lower-bound estimates of prevalence developed from data from a national sample survey conducted in 1970 indicate that minimums of 20.3 percent of adult men in the United States in 1970 had sexual contact to orgasm with another man at some time in life; 6.7 percent had such contact after age 19; and between 1.6 and 2.0 percent had such contact within the previous year. Although these estimates incorporate adjustments for missing data, the likelihood of underreporting suggests that these estimates might be lower bounds on the prevalence of same-gender sex among men. Two sets of alternative estimates are derived to assess the sensitivity of these estimates to the assumptions made in imputing values to missing data. Detailed estimates are presented by frequency of contact, age, education, and marital status; and supporting estimates are derived from a 1988 national survey. Data from both the 1970 and 1988 surveys indicate that never-married men are more likely than other men to have had same-gender sexual contacts within the last year. The 1970 survey also indicates, however, that approximately half the men estimated to have such contacts are found among the more numerous population of currently or previously married men.

Widely used projections of the magnitude of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic in the United States depend crucially on estimates of the size of the population of men who have sex with men. For example, the Coital Contact (1) estimate that 1.5 million people in the United States were infected by HIV as of 1986 made use of data collected by Kinsey et al. (2) between 1938 and 1948 to estimate that "more than 2.5 million (4 percent) of U.S. men between 16 and 55 years of age are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives; an estimated 5-10 million more will have some homosexual contact." (1). The estimates of population size were multiplied by the presumed prevalence of HIV infection in these groups in order to derive an estimate of the number of men infected with HIV through same-gender sexual contacts. These same estimates have also been used in the more recent reviews of the prevalence of HIV infection (3).

Even 40 years ago, Kinsey's data were regarded as unsuitable for making such estimates (4). Kinsey gathered most of his cases by recruiting networks of friends through contact persons who offered him entrance to institutional groups (for example, faculty members who introduced Kinsey to their classes) and through similar contacts that led to less institutionalized collections of persons (for example, Parent Teachers Associations). The sample was disproportionately drawn from the Midwest and from college campuses.

Since the Kinsey sample was not a probability sample, the data do not allow estimation of the characteristics of the national population with knowable margins of error. It is this point that is made most trenchantly in the major statistical reviews (4) of Kinsey's research.

The failure of the data of Kinsey et al. to satisfy our present needs does not, of course, detract from the pioneering efforts of these investigators to systematically study human sexual behavior among a broad collection of adult Americans. Their work has influenced the way in which we think about the varieties of human sexual behavior, and it hastened the adoption of systematic interview and research techniques in the study of human sexual behavior (5).

Nonetheless, the need for more contemporary data is evident (6). Below we describe an attempt to obtain an alternative estimate of the proportion of the U.S. male population who have had sexual experiences with another man sometime during their lifetime (specifically, sexual experiences with other males when either the respondent or his partner came to a sexual climax). These estimates of the frequency of same-gender sex are derived for selected age groups, educational levels, and marital statuses. Supporting estimates are derived from a national survey conducted in 1988 by Michael et al. (7), and the sensitivity of the 1970 estimates to the assumptions made in imputing values to missing data is explored.

The numerical estimates presented throughout this article reflect what respondents reported in response to a series of survey questions. Our estimates will provide an accurate reflection of the prevalence of actual behavior only if respondents answer the survey questions in an unbiased manner—that is to say, if they do not systematically distort their responses (although random errors of recall or reporting may occur). For many survey topics, this assumption is reasonable. Societal intolerance (8), however, may cause some survey respondents to conceal histories of same-gender sexual contact (9). Although there is no simple way of estimating the number of such respondents, it is likely that the number of men who conceal such experiences exceeds the number of respondents who (deliberately or through misunderstanding of survey instructions) report homosexual contacts that did not occur. Given this potential reporting bias, the numerical estimates presented in Tables 2-8 should be regarded as setting lower bounds—except for

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