Tearoom trade: a study of homosexual encounters in public places

You have received a NSF grant to do a re-study of the classic work of Laud Humphreys (1930–1988), whose Ph.D. dissertation was titled "Tearoom trade," and his 1970 book by the same name. His research was an ethnographic study of anonymous male homosexual sexual encounters in public toilets, a practice that was known as "tea-rooming" in U.S. gay slang. His 1970 Tearoom Trade won Humphreys the C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems, arguably the most prestigious book award given in North American Sociology.

You are to attempt to replicate his research design at close as possible (duplicating his participant-observations, interviewing and analysis styles and techniques) to determine the reliability of his findings in the current social environment.

Humphreys’ study was a ground-braking analysis of homosexual acts taking place in public toilets. Humphreys asserted that the men participating in such activity came from diverse social backgrounds, had differing personal motives for seeking homosexual contact in such venues, and variously self-perceived as "straight," "bisexual," or "gay." His study called into question some of the stereotypes at the time associated with the anonymous male-male sexual encounters in public places, demonstrating that many of the participants lived otherwise conventional lives as family men and respected members of their communities, and that their activities posed no danger of harassment to straight males.

Humphreys was able to observe and describe various social cues (body language, hand language, etc.) developed and used by participants in those places. The encounters usually involved three people: the two engaged in the sexual activity, and a look-out, called "watchqueen" in slang. By offering his services as the "watchqueen," Humphreys was able to observe the activities of other participants. Humphreys revealed his role to some of those he observed, but he noted that those who tended to talk with him openly were better educated; as he continued his research, he decided to conceal his identity in order to avoid response bias. He would write down their license plate numbers, then have a friend at the DMV look up the owners/addresses, and went from there to contact people he had observed to secure additional information. Humphreys' rationale was that because of public stigma associated with the homosexual activities in question, and his subjects' desires to keep their activities secret, many were unlikely to allow him an opportunity for observation and follow-up interviews were he to reveal himself as a researcher.

Humphreys found that 38% of his subjects were neither bisexual nor homosexual; 24% were clearly bisexual; 24% were single and were covert homosexuals, and only 14% corresponded to the popular stereotype of homosexuality - clear members of the gay community interested in primarily homosexual relationships. Because Humphreys was able to confirm that 54% of his subjects were outwardly heterosexual men with unsuspecting wives at home, an important thesis of Tearoom Trade is the incongruity between the private self and the social self for many of the men engaging in this form of homosexual activity. Specifically, they put on a "breastplate
of righteousness" (social and political conservatism) in an effort to conceal their deviation from social norms.

Humphreys also concluded that such encounters were harmless, and posed no danger of harassment to straight men. Importantly, his research has convinced many police departments that such encounters resulted in victimless crime; hence they were able to focus on other problems.

**Question**: In consideration of his research design, would you be able to fully replicate it in your re-study? If not, what would be of concern and challenge in the re-study? Fully discuss.