

# The Pressures of Modern Manhood:

## The Role of Homophobia in Shaping the Gender and Sexual Identities of Australian Men

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

of the University of New England

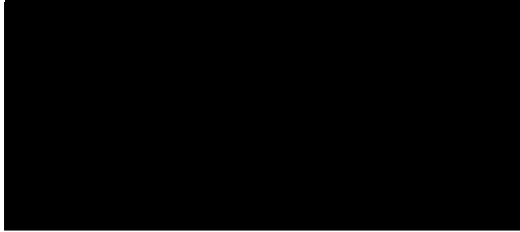
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## **Certificate of Originality**

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any other degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis



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## **Abstract**

Homophobia has previously been discussed in the context of its policing capacities on gay men (Herek 1990; Kimmel 1994; Nayak & Kehily 1997). Although originally a psychological term (Weinberg 1972), more recently the focus has moved to encompass sociological understandings. Kimmel (1996) and Plummer (1999) discuss homophobia in the context of policing gender transgressions, not simply about monitoring sexual activity.

The current research took that position as a starting point, and aimed to discover the policing behaviour of homophobia on Australian masculinity. Therefore, the focus was moved from gay men to masculinity in general. A sample of 63 men participated in qualitative face-to-face interviews and focus groups to discuss how their behaviour, perceptions and views were formed. Under specific investigation was the fear of being seen as a lesser, emasculated form of male, with the name 'poofter' emerging as the most powerful constraint on men.

The results show that homophobia was cited as an effective means of labelling a range of different activities, interests and emotional states – few of which had any relation to sexual behaviour. Thus it had the capacity to monitor and restrain a broad range of activities that boys and men may encounter and was implicit in the creation of a series of hierarchies on which men's social positions were continually negotiated.

Men described what they felt admirable masculinity entailed, what was distained, and how social distances were set up between 'right' and 'wrong' males. The use of language, particularly teasing and humour, was examined, as were the socialising capacities of sport.

Homophobia was described as a learned attribute which functioned to broadcast adherence to hegemonic masculinity. For some men, it was an attribute that was 'unlearned' and discarded once the peak years of gender-performance (adolescence to early adulthood) passed. The implications of these results suggest that homophobia

has strong, negative consequences on all men, whether or not they are directly the targeted by it. As well as restraining men's behaviours, there is the risk that men will attempt to 'prove' their manhood through hypermasculine activities in an attempt to distance themselves from what becomes perceived as 'failed' masculinity.

The majority of the participants in this sample currently held liberal attitudes to gender and sexuality, although many of this group expressed holding more restrictive ideas earlier in their lives. As was shown in some of the focus groups, the voices of homophobic men did not necessarily reflect the rest of the group – and yet were infrequently challenged. Homophobia has a disproportionately strong voice.

While a discourse of homophobia continues to loudly permeate and restrain Australian masculinity – particularly for young men – there was a secondary discourse of acceptance underpinning many of these participants. Men were able to access and incorporate diversity into their lives once the pressures to perform in narrow masculine scripts were left behind. Not all participants were able to make this transition, and some of those who did still expressed slippages in some areas of what they consider 'acceptable' masculinity. But even among the most conservative men in this study, there were immense shifts in what they considered to be allowable activities for men – activities that a generation earlier would have invoked verbal or physical violence.

The West is in the midst of a 'culture war', and gender and sexuality are both weapons and targets for conquest as witnessed by the wedge politics surrounding topics like same-sex marriage. While a shift back to conservative gender roles in the dominant culture of the United States is observed by social commentators, Altman (2006) notes that despite globalisation affecting some aspects of Australian life, Australia creates its own social policy and landscape autonomously. While both the government and opposition attempted to 'defend' marriage as an institution between man and woman, the shift towards liberal attitudes around homosexuality by the populace has out-paced both political parties.

Australia has, at times, had a dismal record of homophobic attitudes and violence. The results uncovered by this research show a country that is still constrained by narrow gender roles and attitudes to other sexualities, but also open to consider the possibility that other lifestyles are valid. As the changes in the attitudes from conservatism to liberalism of many participants show, as too do the blurring of ideas of male and female roles of some of the more traditional men, attitudes to gender and sexuality have moved rapidly over the lives of men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Preparing a thesis is an at-times isolating project where one spend months collating information, analysing it for patterns and presenting some hopefully original and cogent findings. It is also a project that drives you very close to a group of people who support and encourage you on the journey. Some of these relationships are professional, some are personal, and some bridge those two categories. These are some of the people who assisted me over the last three and a half years.

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