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
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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 20th century.
Acknowledgements

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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Field note reflections of participants

Alan 71
Alexander 71
Arthur 72
Bert 72
Brett 73
Brian 73
Bryce 73
Craig 74
Damien 74
Dennis 75
Duncan 75
Eddie 77
Evan 77
Frank 78
Greg 78
Harry 79
Howard 79
Ivor 80
Jordan 80
Joseph 81
Justin 81
Leo 82
Lloyd 83
Luke 83
Mike 84
Neil 84
Pat 85
Ray 85
Rhys 86
Richard 86
Rick 87
Robert 87
Rowan 88
Ryan 88
Sam 89
Theo 89
Timothy 90
Tom 90
Trevor 91
Walter 91
Warren 92
William 92
Focus group one 93
Focus group two 93
Focus group three 94
Focus group four 94

Triangulation in grounded theory 96
Triangulation in the current research 97

Discourse analysis 98
Discourse analysis in the current research 100

Conclusion 105
## Conclusion

### CHAPTER 6: SPORT AND THE CREATION OF AUSTRALIAN MASCULINITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of sport</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different experiences of sport for boys: ‘I was fearful’ ... ‘I was very keen’</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport embodies masculinity: ‘The sportsmen were seen as the “real” men’</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How boys treated academic ability: ‘...you were perceived to be more on the girls' side of things’</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions: How schools, sports teams and male-dominated environments valourise physical masculinity: ‘...academia seemed to matter less to the school’</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising boys into teams: ‘... it taught you to be part of a team’</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising men into teams: ‘...there's pressure to conform’</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The risks of no longer being one of the boys: ‘It was the last I ever saw of him’</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The right sports: ‘Soccer was for Europeans and Nancy-boys’</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boxing and fighting as masculine performance: ‘I'm a boy, I'm supposed to be able to fight’</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male emotions: ‘...eaten alive’</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER 7: CHANGING OPINIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books: ‘You took the risk of feeling uneasy’</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel: ‘...the forces that informed me’</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme situations: ‘...does this mean I’m a poof?’</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing opinions over time: ‘...we become more mellow’</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions: ‘I get more emotional as I get older’</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and masculinity: ‘What I don’t do is to define myself by my work’</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships: ‘...the best thing in my life’</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>