

## *Chapter 1*

# MAPPING HOMOPHOBIA IN AUSTRALIA

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One-third of the Australian population believe that 'homosexuality is immoral', and this belief is spread in distinct ways across the nation. Using data from a survey of nearly 25,000 Australians, we can 'map' homophobia in Australia. Homophobic attitudes are worst in country areas of Queensland and Tasmania. Men are far more likely than women to feel that homosexuality does not have moral legitimacy, and this gender gap in attitudes persists across age, socioeconomic, educational, and regional divides. Surprisingly, Catholics are the least homophobic of those Australians with a religious affiliation. Finally, homophobic attitudes seem to be improving over time.

### **Homophobia and heterosexism**

Homophobia refers to the fear or hatred of homosexual people and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices. The term 'homophobia' has become a popular descriptor for attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and other cognitive and affective responses based on hostility towards and fear of gay men and lesbians. Typical homophobic beliefs include the idea that homosexuality is unnatural, sick, perverse or dangerous, while heterosexuality is natural and normal.

The term homophobia increasingly is complemented by another term, *heterosexism*. This term is useful in emphasising the *system* of injustice and oppression organised around sexuality. Heterosexism refers to collective, institutionalised relations of advantage and disadvantage. It highlights the fact that people

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who are heterosexual receive privileges and benefits and recognitions while those who are non-heterosexual do not. Gay men, lesbians, bisexual people, and others who are not heterosexual are subject to a range of injustices and disadvantages, which together make up a system of oppression. Heterosexuality is compulsory in nearly all spheres of everyday life. Gay men and lesbians experience cultural invisibility, they are routinely told that their innermost feelings and desires are disgusting, dangerous, just a phase or non-existent; they are denied civil and legal rights and the recognition of their partners and relationships; their consenting sexual relations are criminalised and policed; and they are subject to verbal and physical harassment, bashings and even murders.

The other side of these injustices is the fact of heterosexual privilege. Heterosexuals are free from discrimination based on their sexual orientation, can adopt children, can get insurance for their partners, and so on. Heterosexual relationships are subject to social support and status, both informally through friends, families and communities and formally through such rituals and institutions as weddings and marriage. There are many positive images of heterosexual people and relationships. Heterosexuals can be intimate and sexual in public and can talk about their partners or lovers freely. More generally, heterosexism is institutionalised, as a pervasive part of societal laws, customs and institutions. Essentially, there is 'a presumption of heterosexuality which is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> Homophobia therefore should be seen as one element of a wider system of heterosexism.

While this pattern of sexual inequality remains pervasive, it is also true that in the past four decades we have seen the emergence of positive and supportive spaces for the expression and exploration of same-sex desires, practices, relations and identities. And there has been some degree of progress in removing the bluntest and most obvious forms of formal discrimination. Heterosexist inequalities have been widely contested, some have been eliminated, and diverse sexual identities and relations are increasingly visible in popular culture.

It is worth noting that homophobia is distinct from a true 'phobia', such as an intense and irrational fear of spiders or heights. Phobias usually involve fear, whereas homophobia often involves hatred or anger. Phobias usually involves recognition

that the fear is excessive or unreasonable, whereas homophobic responses often are seen by those who offer them as understandable, justified and acceptable. Phobias typically trigger avoidance, while homophobia often manifests as hostility and aggression. Phobias usually do not relate to a political agenda, whereas homophobia has obvious political dimensions including prejudice and discrimination. Finally, people suffering from a phobia often recognise that it is disabling and are motivated to change, while homophobic individuals typically have no such motivation.<sup>3</sup>

Given the limitations of the term 'homophobia', scholars such as Gregory Herek argue for substituting the term 'sexual prejudice'.<sup>4</sup> This refers to negative attitudes based on sexual orientation, which given the current organisation of sexuality almost always involve prejudice against non-heterosexual sexualities. Sexual prejudice has three features:

1. It is an attitude (involving evaluation or judgment);
2. It is held towards a social group and its members, and
3. It is negative, involving for example hostility or dislike.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, homophobia is a popular term for anti-homosexual beliefs and attitudes, and this chapter will continue to employ it, using it interchangeably with references to sexual prejudice and anti-homosexual hostility.

What effects do homophobic attitudes and beliefs have? Such beliefs are implicated in heterosexual people's conscious and unconscious hostilities towards those they perceive to be non-heterosexual, in discriminatory and hostile interpersonal relations, and in the maintenance of wider systems of sexual oppression. Those with anti-homosexual attitudes or beliefs will not necessarily behave in a discriminatory or hostile way to gay men and lesbians, and their behaviour towards the latter will be influenced by a variety of personal and social factors. However, homophobic attitudes are correlated with general patterns of heterosexist behaviour. Over time and across situations,

[H]eterosexuals with high levels of sexual prejudice can be expected to respond negatively to gay individuals, support antigay political candidates and policies, and discriminate against gay [and lesbian] people considerably more often than heterosexuals who are low in sexual prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

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Moreover, to the extent that individuals espouse homophobic attitudes, they contribute to a general climate of intolerance and hostility. In such a climate, others will feel that their vilification of, discrimination towards, or attacks on gay men, lesbians, and others are condoned if not supported. The consequences of such behaviour among gay men and lesbians are well-documented, from discrimination and denial of their access to civil liberties and public resources, to harassment, prejudicial treatment and career restrictions in the workplace,<sup>7</sup> to verbal abuse and physical violence in the streets<sup>8</sup> and at school,<sup>9</sup> to illness, depression, and suicide.

Homophobic attitudes also influence gay men and lesbians directly, through internalised homophobia. This refers to gay men's and lesbians' internalisation of negative messages about homosexuality, associated with shame, guilt, and self-hatred.<sup>10</sup> Such responses reflect the damaging influence not only of heterosexist norms but of the experience of structured and systematic inequalities themselves. In schools for example, same-sex-attracted young people typically experience routine patterns of bigotry, exclusion and harassment. The consequences of this for gay and lesbian students include isolation, confusion, marginalisation, higher rates of personal stress and alienation, lowered self-esteem and self-hate, poor school performance, dropping out of school, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide.<sup>11</sup> In naming these, we must avoid reinforcing the common pathologising of homosexuality, in which gay and lesbian people's difficulties are interpreted as the product of their sexual orientation rather than as an understandable response to prejudice and oppression. In addition, there is evidence that in some schools being gay, lesbian or bisexual is a positive and creative experience, and young gay men and lesbians do challenge and resist heterosexism.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, homophobic social norms also constrain heterosexual men and women themselves. Given this, *everyone* is hurt by homophobia and heterosexism. While gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and others who do not fit dominant heterosexual norms are oppressed, those who *do* fit these norms, members of the dominant group, are also limited in this system. For example, homophobia locks all people into rigid and gendered ways of being that inhibit creativity and self-expression. It inhibits the ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of the same sex, particularly

among men. It may encourage premature sexual involvement to prove that one is 'normal', increasing the risks of unplanned teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted infections. And it can be used to stigmatise and target heterosexual individuals who are perceived to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual.<sup>13</sup>

### **A map of homophobia**

Data gathered by the polling company Roy Morgan Research has made it possible to 'map' homophobic attitudes in Australia. Using this data, it became possible to establish levels of anti-homosexual attitudes in particular regions across the country and among particular population groups.

By collecting data from 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over across Australia in self-completion interviews during the period October 2003 to September 2004, Roy Morgan Research compiled an extensive demographic and attitudinal database. The Australia Institute, a public interest think-tank based in Canberra, drew on this database to examine the nature and extent of homophobia in Australia. One of the attitudinal questions in the Roy Morgan Research survey allowed the identification of those individuals who hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality. In particular, survey respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I believe that homosexuality is immoral'. Agreement with this statement was used as the indicator of homophobia.

On the one hand, this is a limited measure of homophobia. It focuses on a particular dimension of sexual prejudice, support for the notion that homosexuality is immoral, while other research has used multi-dimensional instruments to assess homophobic attitudes and beliefs. We return to this in a later section of this chapter. On the other hand, the survey is based on a very large, nationally representative sample, allowing comparisons across a variety of regional and demographic characteristics.

### **The extent and distribution of homophobic attitudes**

How widespread is homophobia in Australia? About one-third of Australians believe that 'homosexuality is immoral'. Overall, 35 per cent of the population aged 14 years and above support this view, including nearly 43 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women.

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How does this compare with data from other Australian sources? In a national survey of 20,000 Australian adults aged 16 to 59 years, one-quarter of respondents agreed that 'sex between two adult women is always wrong' and 'sex between two adult men is always wrong'.<sup>14</sup> Somewhat higher proportions of adult Australians also reject same-sex marriage and the legal recognition of same-sex relationships.<sup>15</sup> Forty per cent of Australians (51 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women) are opposed to the legal recognition of same-sex relationships, while 44 per cent (56 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women) are opposed to same-sex marriage. This does not mean that the remainder support such initiatives, as substantial proportions noted that they 'cannot choose'.

To map where and among whom one can find agreement with the notion that 'homosexuality is immoral', let us begin with the geographic distribution of agreement across the country.

#### State, city, and country

Figure 1.1 depicts the percentage of people in each State who believe that homosexuality is immoral. Looking at the average for men and women, it shows that Queensland and Tasmania are the most homophobic States and Victoria is the least. However, among men the Northern Territory is the most homophobic area of Australia (50 per cent) with Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia not far behind.

By and large, city areas in all States are less sexually prejudiced than country areas, but there are exceptions. For example, the Newcastle and Hunter region of New South Wales is less homophobic than several areas of Sydney. The finding of greater levels of anti-gay hostility in areas outside major cities is true also of countries such as the United States: here, heterosexuals with negative attitudes towards homosexuality are more likely to reside in rural areas or the midwestern or southern States.<sup>16</sup>

Within the major cities there are substantial variations in the level of homophobia by region. Figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5 and 1.6 graph homophobic attitudes by region within Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth. Thus in Sydney, the central region is the least homophobic and the southern suburbs the most. In Melbourne, the inner city is the least homophobic and the outer south and east the most.

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Greater levels of anti-gay hostility in rural areas are likely to reflect at least three possible influences. First, they may reflect a variety of factors associated with the demographic makeup of the populations in these areas: their age, levels of education, religiosity, and so on. Secondly, they may express the prevalent norms in such regions. Other research documents that rural areas have more conservative sexual and gender norms.<sup>17</sup>

The less homophobic attitudes of people in inner-city areas may also reflect greater levels of personal contact with openly gay men and lesbians. It is hard to tell if there are higher proportions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender-identified people in inner cities than in outer metropolitan areas or rural areas.<sup>18</sup> However, while queer populations in inner cities are not necessarily more numerous, they are certainly more *visible*. Other studies suggest that interpersonal contact does lead to less heterosexist attitudes. For example, in a US study, adults were asked whether any friends or relatives had 'let you know that they were homosexual', and interpersonal contact predicted attitudes toward gay men better than any other demographic or social psychological variable.<sup>19</sup> In a further study, heterosexuals who reported interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians also showed more positive attitudes.<sup>20</sup> There appears to be a reciprocal relationship between contact and attitudes: heterosexual men and women who have contact with gay men and lesbians report more positive attitudes, and positive attitudes in turn can foster further contact (for example, through disclosure).

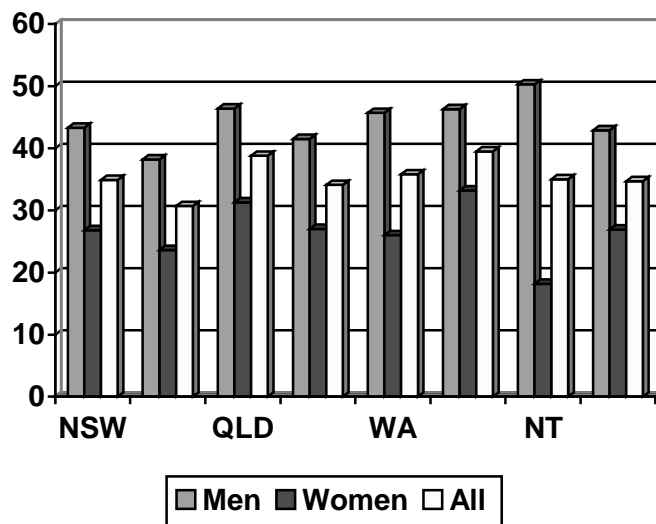
Figure 1.7 shows the three least homophobic and the three most homophobic regions of Australia. Overall the most anti-homosexual regions are the Moreton area of country Queensland (excluding the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast), the central south-west region of Queensland and the Burnie/western region of Tasmania, where 50 per cent of residents believe homosexuality is immoral. The least homophobic region is the inner city of Melbourne (14 per cent) followed by central Perth (21 per cent) and central Melbourne (26 per cent).<sup>21</sup>

If we take men only, the most homophobic areas are central south-west Queensland and Eyre in South Australia with 63 per cent and 60 per cent respectively of men believing that homosexuality is immoral. Moreton remains the most anti-homosexual area where women are concerned. In all cases, inner city Melbourne is the least homophobic area in Australia, with

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only 15 per cent of men and 14 per cent of women agreeing that homosexuality is immoral.

Figure 1.1. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by State





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Figure 1.2 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Sydney (%)

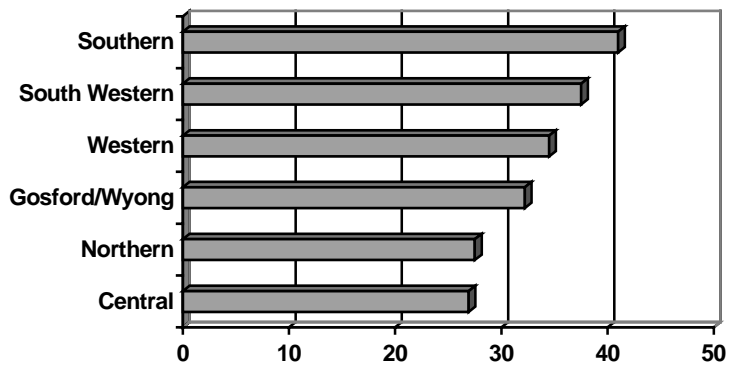
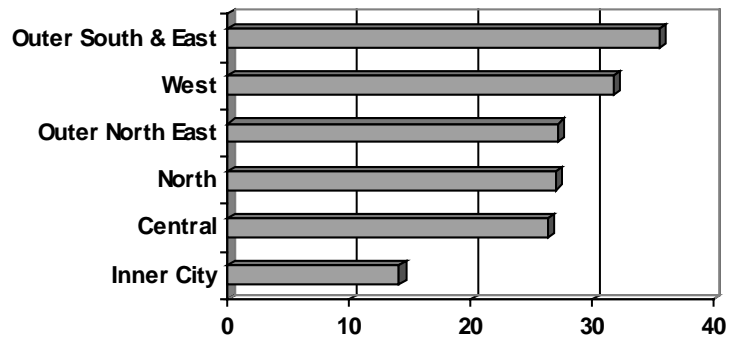


Figure 1.3. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Melbourne (%)



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Figure 1.4. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Brisbane (%)

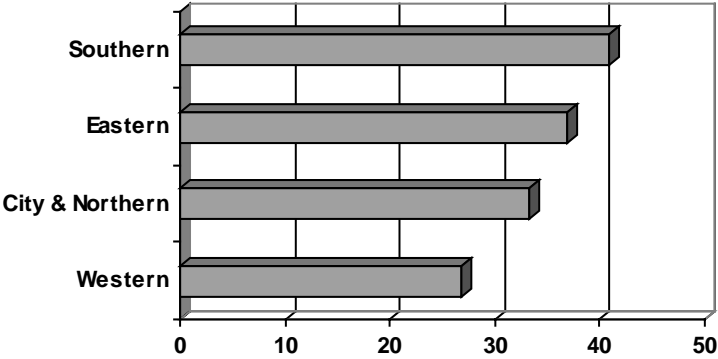
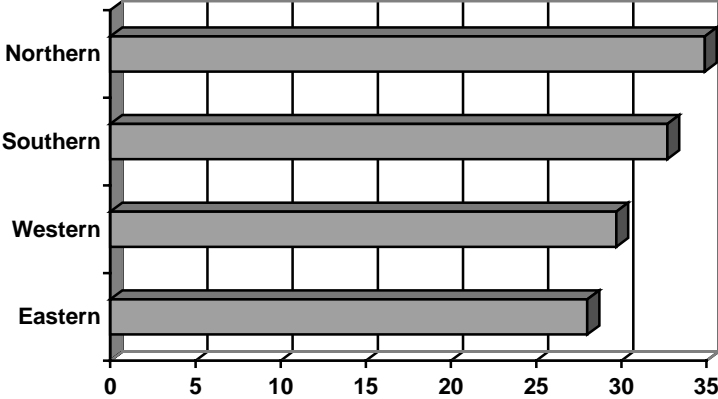


Figure 1.5. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Adelaide (%)



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Figure 1.6. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by areas within major cities – Perth (%)

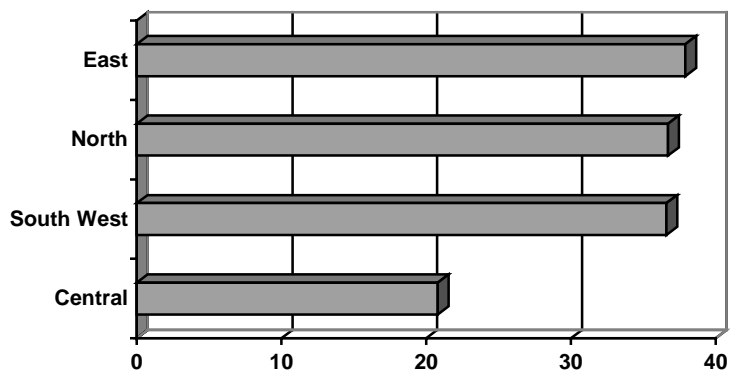
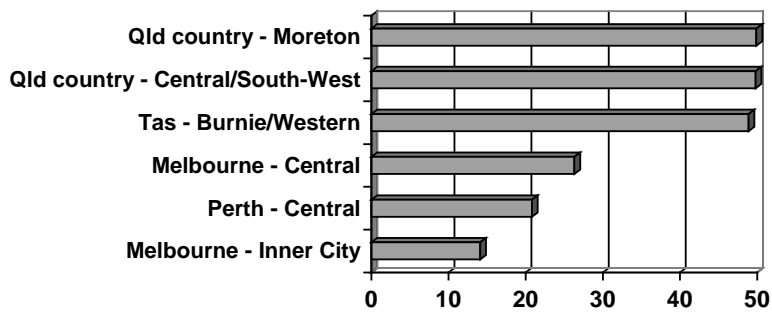


Figure 1.7. Most and least 'homophobic' regions in Australia (%)<sup>22</sup>



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I turn now to the question of *who* in Australia agrees that 'homosexuality is immoral'. In other words, what are the demographic correlates of homophobia?

#### Gender

Men are more likely to be homophobic than women, with 43 per cent of men believing homosexuality to be immoral compared to 27 per cent of women. The data in the Roy Morgan survey show that the difference between men and women is remarkably consistent across different age, socioeconomic and regional groupings.

This gender gap in attitudes towards homosexuality is unsurprising, given that the link between heterosexist attitudes and gender is a consistent finding in the literature. A variety of studies in Western countries reveal a consistent tendency for heterosexual males to express more hostile attitudes than heterosexual females, especially towards gay men.<sup>23</sup> This reflects the homophobic character of dominant constructions of masculinity, of what it means to be a man. Masculinity is defined as essentially heterosexual and defined *against* or *in opposition* to homosexuality, as well as femininity. 'Real' men are heterosexual men, and the dominant model of masculinity is of a heterosexual masculinity.<sup>24</sup> This means two things. First, men in general are more homophobic than women in general. Secondly, men (and women) who hold more conservative attitudes towards gender than other men (and women) also hold more conservative attitudes towards homosexuality.<sup>25</sup> Anti-gay hostility is particularly powerful in the peer cultures of boys and young men, as we discuss below.

There are important differences between heterosexual men's attitudes towards gay men and their attitudes towards lesbians, which the Roy Morgan survey data unfortunately does not allow us to explore. As Herek summarises, 'heterosexual men's attitudes towards gay men are consistently more hostile than their attitudes towards lesbians or heterosexual women's attitudes toward homosexuals of either gender'.<sup>26</sup> Australian data confirms this pattern. A national survey of 20,000 Australian adults aged 16 to 59 years found a substantial gap between men's and women's attitudes towards sex between men, but not between women.<sup>27</sup> In general, women are more tolerant or accepting of homosexuality than men, and more consistent in their views regarding

homosexual activity between men or women. On the other hand, men's views are shaped more by the sex of those involved. Men are *more* tolerant than women of sex between women, but less tolerant of sex between men.

Heterosexual men's attitudes towards gay men and lesbians in general may be guided by political or religious values. However, their attitudes towards gay men in particular may be guided by their investments in heterosexual masculine identity, their perception of gay men as violating appropriate masculine gender codes, gay men's apparent threats to masculine identity, and their beliefs about HIV/AIDS.<sup>28</sup> Heterosexual men's attitudes towards lesbians in particular may be shaped on the one hand by their pornography-inspired fetishisation of lesbians as objects of heterosexual male desire, and on the other by their hostile perception of lesbians as threats to patriarchal power (as women who do not 'need men') and as feminists.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to the Roy Morgan survey data, in most regions women are less homophobic than men by a significant margin. However, in the Hunter region of New South Wales (excluding Newcastle), women are more homophobic than men, 37 per cent to 28 per cent. This result is unusual. Although there are exceptions, as a general rule the percentage difference between the attitudes of men and women to homosexuality is smallest where both are least homophobic.

### Age

As might be expected, older Australians are considerably more homophobic than young adults. Among those over 65, 53 per cent adopt the view that 'homosexuality is immoral', compared to 26 per cent among 18 to 24 year olds – see Figure 1.8. However, those in the 14 to 17 age group, especially boys, are much more inclined to hold anti-gay views than young and middle-aged adults. Forty-three per cent of males in the 14 to 17 age group consider homosexuality to be immoral compared with 23 per cent of females. Boys and young men thus stand out for their heterosexist attitudes, with close to twice as many males as females denying the moral acceptability of homosexuality.

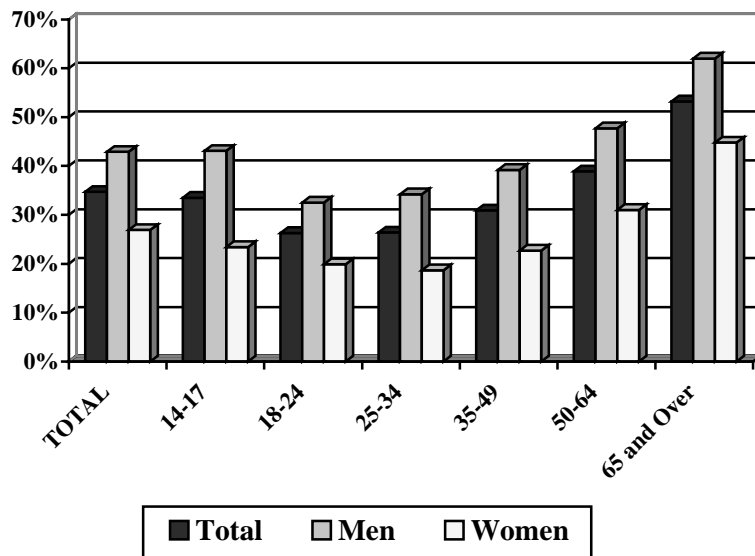
Boys' and young men's support for the view that 'homosexuality is immoral' reflects the wider, indeed pervasive influence of homophobia on boys' lives and especially on male-male relations. Growing up, males are faced with the continual

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threat of being seen as gay and the continuous challenge of proving that they are not gay.<sup>30</sup> The school and peer cultures of boys' early teens are marked by an intense gendered policing of boys' lives and relations.<sup>31</sup> Boys' peer cultures in schools and elsewhere are saturated with homophobic references and accusations.<sup>32</sup> Boys and young men who stray outside the boundaries of stereotypically masculine behaviour, or who are 'deviant' or 'other' in any way, are verbally and sometimes physically attacked as 'gay'. 'Gay', 'faggot', 'poofter' and other terms referring to gay men (and lesbians) are used routinely by students to abuse other students or teachers, for humour, for disruption, and as part of performing gender or sexuality.<sup>33</sup> For example, boys in a classroom may use homophobia to perform [prove?] heterosexuality, to emphasise their own heterosexual credentials.<sup>34</sup> Given such contexts therefore, boys and young men may be particularly prone to expressing anti-gay views.

Among males, homophobia – and sexism and gender segregation – seem to peak in early adolescence. Both gender segregation and anti-homosexual hostility decline in the late school years and after school, as boys invest more in social and sexual relations with girls, they are less influenced by school peer groups, and they achieve more stable gender and sexual identities. Thus, the influences of education, maturity, and greater experience of cross-sex social and sexual relations lessen both older males' endorsement of heterosexist attitudes and the gender gap in this endorsement. Figure 1.8 below shows that young adults aged 18 to 24 show less agreement than younger individuals with the idea that 'homosexuality is immoral', although over a third of young men in this age group continue to advocate this idea. Moreover, the gender gap in anti-gay attitudes persists in this and older age groups.

Figure 1.8. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by gender and age



### Education and socioeconomic groups

Homophobic attitudes are closely related to levels of education: more highly educated people are less homophobic, as Figure 1.9 shows. However, even among tertiary-educated men, 33 per cent consider homosexuality to be immoral, as do 17 per cent of tertiary-educated women. Anti-gay hostility among the lower three educational levels is high with 53 per cent of males and 38 per cent of females considering homosexuality to be immoral.

Other studies echo this association between higher levels of education and lower levels of anti-homosexual sentiment.<sup>35</sup> One reason why people who have received university education (for example) have more progressive attitudes than others is that university education and experience itself may undermine anti-homosexual prejudice. Certainly this is true for other attitudes that overlap with attitudes towards sexuality, such as attitudes towards gender roles. A national, longitudinal study of close to 15,000 students in the United States assessed agreement with the statement that ‘the activities of married women are best confined

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to home and family'.<sup>36</sup> Controlling for pre-college attitudes and other background characteristics, it found that liberalisation in attitudes was associated with majoring in the humanities (for men only), living on campus (for women only), and taking women's studies courses. On the other hand, interacting with religious peers, and for men, affiliating with a primarily male peer group, had a negative influence. Similar patterns may hold for attitudes towards homosexuality.

In part reflecting education levels, people in higher socioeconomic groups are less homophobic than people in lower socioeconomic groups. As Figure 1.10 shows, 23 per cent of people in the AB quintile (the highest socioeconomic group, among five equal-size groups) are homophobic compared with 45 per cent in the FG quintile (the lowest socioeconomic group). In every socioeconomic group, men are more homophobic than women.

Figure 1.9. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by levels of education

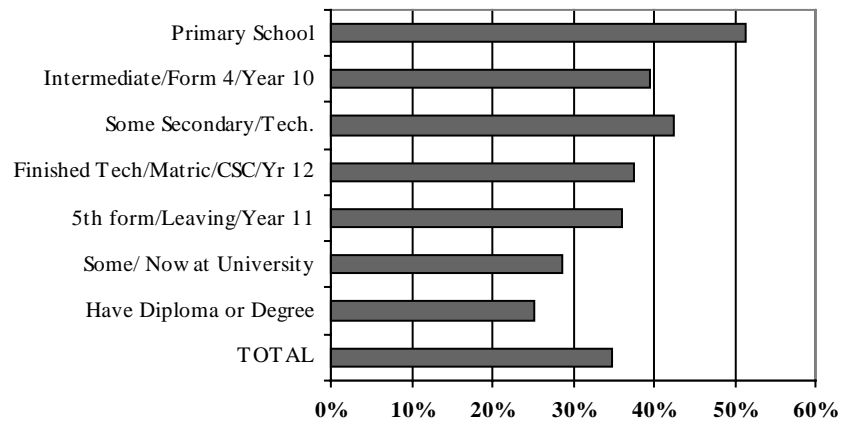
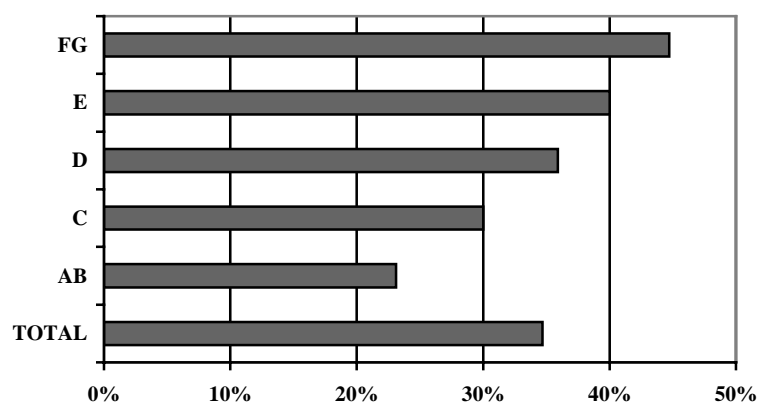




Figure 1.10. Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by socioeconomic level (quintile)



### Religion

People with religious affiliations and involvements also tend to have greater levels of sexual prejudice. Those who say they have no religion are the most tolerant regarding homosexuality in Australia, with only 19 per cent accepting the moral illegitimacy of homosexuality. This association between religiosity and homophobia also holds for other measures of attitudes towards homosexuality. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003 finds that people's support for legal recognition of same-sex relationships is highest among those with no religion.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, US studies document that heterosexuals without religious adherence are more likely to express favourable attitudes towards gay men and lesbians, and towards bisexual people, than heterosexuals who are religious.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, people with negative attitudes are more likely to be religious, and in particular to attend religious services regularly, to hold to conservative religious maxims, and to endorse orthodox religious truths such as the literal truth of the Bible.<sup>39</sup>

Some religions officially condemn homosexuality as immoral. Perhaps the Catholic Church's views on this subject are best-

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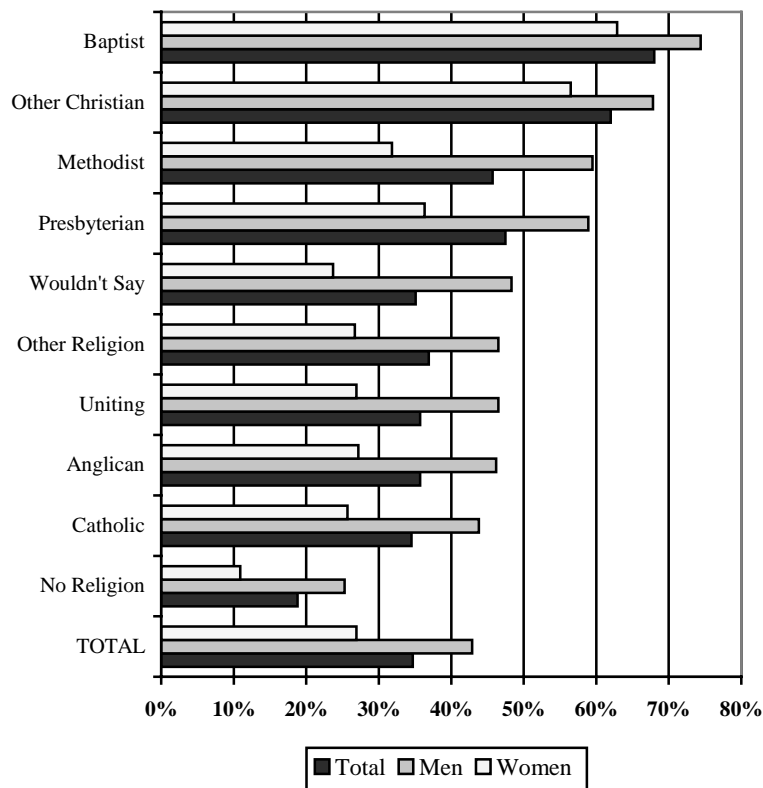
known in Australia, with prominent Catholic leaders active in debates over gay marriage and resisting calls to recognise gay priests. Cardinal George Pell of Sydney has taken a particularly conservative position on these issues, as have other religious leaders such as Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen.

However, it turns out that, among those who declare a religious affiliation, Catholics are the most tolerant in Australia, with only 34 per cent believing that homosexuality is immoral (although those affiliated with the Anglican and Uniting Churches have similar scores) – see Figure 1.11. The most homophobic religious community in Australia are Baptists, where 68 per cent believe homosexuality is immoral. They are followed closely by evangelical Christians (62 per cent). These counter-intuitive findings suggest that the Catholic Church has less doctrinal authority over its congregation than some other Christian and non-Christian churches and that Catholics have become adept at interweaving their own moral instincts with the various proscriptions of their church.

It is interesting to note that while homophobia is high among Methodists (46 per cent) the difference of opinion between Methodist men and women is particularly wide, with twice as many men (60 per cent) as women (32 per cent) believing homosexuality is immoral.

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Figure 1.11 Percent who consider homosexuality to be immoral, by religion



Measuring homophobia

The survey data on which this discussion is based provide a useful basis for depicting attitudes across the country towards homosexuality. However, there are weaknesses to our single measure of sexual prejudice. Several limitations are worth noting.

First, our depiction of homophobic attitudes relies on people's responses to a single survey question regarding the morality or immorality of homosexuality. Other research has examined attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality using quantitative instruments with multiple questions.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, and

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related to this, homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and responses may have multiple dimensions, including cognitive components and emotional or affective components such as anger or warmth. Measures of homophobia ideally will tap these various dimensions. For example, the 'Modern Homophobia Scale' explores both personal discomfort with homosexuality and levels of support for gay men's and lesbians' rights. Thirdly, it is problematic to measure attitudes towards 'homosexuality' in general, as it is increasingly clear that attitudes towards gay men differ from those towards lesbians, particularly among heterosexual men, as we discussed above. Fourthly, qualitative research can generate more detailed and complex accounts of the workings of homophobic understandings than the quantitative tools discussed thus far.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the data compiled by Roy Morgan Research does allow us to examine the correlates of at least one measure of homophobia across the country. It allows us to relate anti-homosexual attitudes to both geographic and demographic characteristics, drawing on nationally representative data.

More pragmatically, the Australia Institute's release of its findings helped to maintain public attention on the issue of anti-gay prejudice in Australia. When the findings were released, we found ourselves in something of a media blitz, and we engaged in a flurry of interviews both in national daily newspapers and on radio. Newspaper and radio journalists, as well as advocates and activists both for and against the recognition and removal of heterosexism, offered comment on the patterning of homophobic attitudes in Australia and their significance. As the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* asked, 'Homophobic? Us?' We can only hope that such public debate accelerates progress towards people's unanimous respect for sexual diversity.

## Conclusion

This exercise in 'mapping homophobia' has shown the highly uneven ways in which anti-gay prejudice is spread across the Australian population. The good news is that two-thirds of the Australian population reject the view that 'homosexuality is immoral'. While gay men and lesbians in Australia continue to face a range of formal and informal discriminations, majority

opinion in the community shows at least a liberal tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality.

However, it is also clear that a significant proportion of the Australian population accepts the view that homosexuality is immoral. Individuals who hold this view may or may not subscribe to other heterosexist beliefs and values, and they may or may not engage in discriminatory behaviour against gay men and lesbians and those perceived to be so. Nevertheless, they do believe that homosexuality is outside the forms of sexual attraction, behaviour or identity that have moral legitimacy. Men are far more likely than women to accept this belief. The gender gap in attitudes towards homosexuality persists across different age, socioeconomic, educational and regional groupings.

The relationship between religious adherence and the belief that homosexuality is immoral is more complex than some popular stereotypes would lead us to believe. In particular, while Roman Catholic doctrine is seen to be clear in its condemnation of homosexuality, Catholics are the least homophobic of those Australians with a religious affiliation. This suggests that there is a gap between the official teachings of the Church and the everyday beliefs and values of those people who share its faith.

Finally, what is the future of homophobia in Australia? Anti-homosexual prejudice is likely to decline over time in this country. The belief in the moral unacceptability of homosexuality is most common among the oldest age groups, less common among younger adults, and least common among the youngest adults. Boys in the youngest age group, 14 to 17, do show relatively high levels of homophobia, but this declines by the time they reach early adulthood. This suggests that a belief in the immorality of homosexuality will lessen over time as these cohorts age. While this is heartening, it is also true that homophobia is far from gone. Significant levels of anti-homosexual prejudice remain in Australia, and there is still much work to be done.

## Notes

- 1 Sections of this chapter first appeared as a Web Paper produced by the Australia Institute. This 2005 report was co-authored by Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, both affiliated with the Australia Institute at the time.
- 2 Debbie Epstein and R Johnson, 'On the straight and narrow: The heterosexual presumption, homophobias and schools' in D Epstein,

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- (ed), *Challenging lesbian and gay inequalities in education* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), p 198.
- 3 David Plummer, *One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999), p 4.
  - 4 Gregory M Herek, 'Beyond 'homophobia': Thinking about sexual stigma and prejudice in the twenty-first century', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, Vol 1, No 2, (2004), pp 6-24.
  - 5 ~~*Ibid.*~~, Above, p 17.
  - 6 ~~*Ibid.*~~, Above, p 19.
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