



# Masculinity and Homophobic Violence in Australia's Recent Past

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**Abstract** This paper examines a set of research evidence compiled in the last two decades by the author and several of his Australian colleagues to argue that violence directed at gay men, lesbians and transsexuals as ‘sexual minorities’ has not been wholly distinct from other general forms of male perpetrated violence with a broad range of victims including heterosexual women and other men attacked in general male-on-male violence. It observes that harassment and violence directed against sexual groups have been highly gendered and everyday phenomena and narrow views of homophobic prejudice should be refined in order to appreciate this. Furthermore, reflecting on these research findings indicates these violent acts have been widespread and collective social phenomena built on masculine understandings of a sexual mainstream and subordinate others. By focusing upon the masculine facets of this violence it can be seen that much of this violence has been a hostile response to sexual and gender non-conformity through which male perpetrators have sought to enact, police and reinforce sexual hierarchies and gender boundaries. There is contemporary research uncertainty about the real extent of sexual prejudice and related violence in Australia and similar liberal democratic nations around the globe. Nevertheless, it is evident that this social phenomenon had a key historical role in signaling socially acceptable masculine appearance and behavior.

**Keywords** Violence · Homophobia · Masculinity · Heterosexuality · Gay men · Lesbians

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## Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, a common view among gay and lesbian lobbyists around the globe is that ‘homophobia’ motivates and shapes harassment and violence directed against homosexual men, lesbians, transsexuals and bisexuals. This perspective has come to be shared by Australians who see themselves as countering the pronounced (but by no means unique) levels of aggressive masculinity and the frequently hostile responses to sexual non-conformity in that nation (Flood and Hamilton 2008; Robinson 2008; Tomsen 2009; Smaal and Willett 2013). Although homophobia was originally meant to label a mental illness resulting in an exceptional hatred or fear of homosexuals, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries its social movement use has described a wide dislike of homosexuals or even opposition to their political claims directed towards attaining equality and full citizenship rights in democratic systems.

Much of the appeal of the term homophobia has been due to its apparent inversion of a historical injustice. It raised a charge of illness against heterosexuals by groups who themselves formerly suffered under labels of perversion and sickness. The term appeared to reverse the onus of social prejudice and the suspicion of illness onto heterosexuals themselves. Additionally, it often highlighted acts of discrimination, harassment and violence that might otherwise be dismissed by authorities as routine, trivial and inevitable responses to sexual nonconformity. Local activists appropriated this term and harnessed its political usefulness to advance a range of political claims and to petition police and state agencies for further protections against discrimination and violence. Yet it is also the case that this has always been a problematic term for any developed understanding of sexual prejudice and the abuse and violence that is directed against sexual minorities in most nations.

The first use of this term reflected the impact of Gay Liberationist efforts to lift homosexuality out of its deviant position in medicine and professional psychology. An American psychotherapist named Weinberg (1972) offered a liberal challenge to the orthodox sickness model of homosexuality by insisting that mental health problems among homosexual men and lesbians were a consequence of the social hostility directed at homosexuality. He insisted that he had uncovered a new phobia marked by ‘the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals’ which experts had overlooked by virtue of their own prejudice (1972: 4).

In a revealing 1990s American gay press interview Weinberg discussed the personal and professional circumstances behind his generation of this new term:

After seeing in the 1950’s and 1960’s the enormous brutality against gays and seeing that I myself couldn’t introduce known, professed homosexuals even to my friends who were supposedly liberal or psychoanalysts... that they always had reasons for avoiding these people [and] they weren’t at all distressed by the worst kinds of brutalities toward gays. I realized that something else was going on more than simple mis-education. This was some deep emotional misgiving these people had, some phobic dread... this was something that had a very deep root, [it was] a classical phobia, but of all the phobias, the most

destructive being homophobia. Claustrophobia or agoraphobia—if you can't go to the theater or outside—or you have almost any kind of dread... doesn't ordinarily get converted into the violence. These were recognized as phobias, but this—homophobia—was not recognized as one' (G. Weinberg, Interview 1997).

Since this account, 'homophobia' has had a widespread but confusing usage as most subsequent interpretations have followed a conservative model of fixed hetero/homo human sexual desires and identities. Much ambiguity also followed Weinberg's own suggestion that a key clinical symptom of homophobia was a marked 'fear of being homosexual oneself' (1972: 11). This observation led to a misleading view that all homophobes are themselves repressed homosexuals, so that homophobia itself became pathologized and resurfaced in this mold as a disturbed minority condition. Research does not confirm that these sentiments are like a clinical phobia. Also, many anti-homosexual individuals do not display physiologically typical fearful reactions to homosexuality. Far from being a mental phobia that is unpleasant and troubling for sufferers, anti-homosexual sentiment is often highly rational and rewarding and it enhances the social esteem of those who display it. Furthermore, the term often suggests that such sentiments are to be understood as an individual phenomenon, rather than being derived from social group relations and the wider culture of the society that every person inhabits (Herek 2007).

In recent decades, many activists came to prefer the term 'heterosexism' because it offered a structural dimension. It suggested parallels with other forms of disadvantage linked to prejudice and distinguished between cultural heterosexism based in such institutions as social customs, religion and law, and psychological heterosexism comprising the attitude and behavior of individuals. Some others have favored analysis of harassment and violence as instances of 'sexual prejudice' (see Herek 2007; Herek and McLemore 2013) or have preferred the use of 'heteronormativity' stressing language, representations and discourse (see Adam 1998). Nevertheless, with a wide backdrop of debate about the qualities of different social aspects of sexual prejudice and hostility, a growing number of researchers have given ground to the persistent popular use of 'homophobia'. This term appears redeemed by calls for its retention and development among constructionist and queer analyses of sexuality, or even by explanations of homophobia as it is intimately related to everyday patterns of male dominance and masculinity (Sedgwick 1994; Gamson and Moon 2004; Meyer 2012).

## Masculinity, Homosexuality and Violence

A further understanding of 'homophobic' violence in relation to its meaning for perpetrators has been found in the expanding research around social forms of masculinity. Explanations of anti-homosexual assaults as exclusively derived from minority-held prejudiced sentiments have not sufficed for a complete understanding of these offences as they relate to issues of male identity. Men perpetrate most crime and the general tie between masculinity and violence has been illustrated with a



broad range of evidence (see Messerschmidt 1997; Messerschmidt and Tomsen 2011). Much traditional criminological analysis had a close concern with the study and control of ‘dangerous’ forms of masculinity, particularly working-class male delinquency. Nevertheless, it did not tackle the relation between criminality and the socially varied attainment of male status and power. Instead of doing this, it studied crime by a male norm and never developed a critical view of the link to gender, especially to non-pathological and widespread forms of masculine identity that are tied to violence. The result of this was a tendency to naturalize male violent offending and a reversion to gender essentialism by explaining male wrongdoing as an inherent and biological phenomenon that men are inevitably drawn to.

This legacy that restricted understanding of gendered offending has now been challenged by several decades of research on masculine criminality and the everyday qualities of its aggressive and destructive forms. This shift since the 1980s was a response to the wider reflection on gender from social movements including feminism, gay and lesbian activism, and sections of the nascent men’s movement. In particular, research on violence against women stressed the relationship between attacks and everyday and often legitimated constructions of manhood. More generally, in this time there was a general expansion of critical research on masculinity or ‘men’s studies’ (see Kimmel 1987; Segal 1990; Connell et al. 2005).

With these influences there has been an emphasis on the relations between different masculinities, the patterns of most criminal offending and victimization, and the broader workings of the wider criminal justice system of public and private policing, criminal courts, corrections and prisons (Newburn and Stanko 1994). Critical researchers have come to share the view that masculinities are plural, socially constructed, reproduced in the collective social practices of different men and embedded in institutional and occupational settings. Furthermore, masculinities are intricately linked with struggles for social power that occur between men and women and among different men.

As there are different forms of masculinity that are differently linked to the attainment of social power, crime itself has been a means or social resource to achieve masculinity and analyses seek to balance consideration of structural forces and human agency in explaining this (Messerschmidt 1997; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This explanatory model has promised to offer far more than an account of the current relations between violence and masculinity in relation to sexuality. Both homosexual and unconventional heterosexual men and boys are often direct targets of anger and anxiety related to the gendered social practices of men (Connell 1995; Plummer 1999).

The value of this critical masculinities perspective was illustrated by examples from a strand of research on violence and sexuality conducted by the author from the early 1990s. This produced an original study of 75 killings motivated by anti-homosexual sentiment that occurred in New South Wales over two decades. This found that great majority (88 of 92) of perpetrators and co-perpetrators of these crimes were young men and teenage boys (see Tomsen 2002, pp. 28–29). Furthermore, two general crime scenarios emerged from the detailed study of police, coroner and criminal court records.



The first of these scenarios was a planned attack in a public place on a victim who either was or presumed to be homosexual, and who was usually a complete stranger to the assailant or assailants (Tomsen 2002, p. 36). These perpetrators typically attacked in groups. Some victims were killed at locations that were near areas with hotels, bars, nightclubs and restaurants favored by a gay-male clientele. However, victims were most vulnerable when attacked at well-known cruising areas such as parks and public toilets. Although the statements of a number of arrested perpetrators were marked by a tone of outrage concerning same-sex activities at these locations, it was evident that they were often selected as likely places to seek readily available homosexual victims. In the second typical killing scenario, a personal dispute between two men over sexual activity or an allegedly unwanted sexual advance led to fatal violence between parties who were friends or acquaintances (Tomsen 2002, p. 37). These incidents usually occurred in private settings. Nevertheless, it was the case that sometimes these sexual advance claims were made by perpetrators involved in public attacks.

This evidence about the typical scenarios of anti-homosexual killings suggested that most fatal attacks on homosexual and gay men have not been intended to kill even though they have reflected a reckless indifference to life: they were mostly similar to the general pattern of other non-fatal anti-gay assaults. Equally, the biographical detail regarding perpetrators indicated that most of the perpetrators of these crimes were psychologically ordinary young men. This signaled clearly that it was erroneous to view much anti-gay violence and killing as the result of an exceptional bigotry or phobia deriving from a serious mental condition, and to disregard the major impact of more everyday constructions of gender identity and forms of masculinity generated within the dominant social order.

The high involvement of men in violence against sexual minorities was found in general research on attacks against gay, transsexual, lesbian and bisexual victims (Comstock 1991; Ehrlich 1992; Harry 1992; Herek et al. 2002; Herek 2007; Herek and McLemore 2013). At first look this seemed to simply fit the general correlation between criminal activities, particularly acts of violence, and the high proportion of male perpetrators found in more general studies of crime. But in the case of anti-homosexual attacks this violence had a deeper significance for the identity of perpetrators that accentuates the 'maleness' of such crimes.

In the author's homicide research, evidence from police, court and other records suggested that attacks which fitted the pattern of both major scenarios for killing were closely linked to aspects of the masculinity of perpetrators, although taking a different form for each type of homicide. By contrast, an extreme irrational hatred of homosexuals had a less certain relation to many fatal attacks. It seemed at first that many gang attacks by groups of young men could be more readily regarded as irrationally hateful and 'homophobic', but the patterns and motives for these crimes suggested that they were critically linked to the group reproduction and policing of masculine identities. The more private fatal disputes with homosexual advance allegations also suggested a key significance of the killer's preoccupation with issues of male honor and bodily integrity and hostility to sexual objectification.

In the well-known account developed in *Masculinities*, Connell defined hegemonic masculinity not as a particular character type, but as the whole complex

of historically evolving and varied social practice in societies which either legitimate, or attempt to guarantee, the shoring up of patriarchy and male domination of women (1995). Any attainment or approximation of this hegemonic form by individual men was highly contingent on the levels of real social power reached in their lives. Dynamic relationships and tensions existed between hegemonic and other 'subordinated' and 'marginalized' forms of masculinity. The recognition of such diversity led to questions of power relations between different masculinities and even a gender politics within masculinity (1995, p. 37). (1) The major example of a subordinated masculinity that was offered in this model was male homosexuality. This contravened dominant ideals of manhood and met with legal bans, extensive stigma and violent hostility (1995, p. 143). Male homosexuality had an opposed relationship with hegemonic masculinity epitomized in anti-homosexual violence (1995, p. 83).

This view had the strength of allowing for an explanation of anti-homosexual violence as it was perpetrated by groups of men with very different levels of social power such as members of street gangs, soldiers or police. Yet the actual practice of direct intimidation and violence was mostly explained by the contradictions that underlay one of the forms of masculinity described as marginalized. For Connell, the life histories of a group of young working class Australian men who have little formal education, minor criminal histories and subsisted on the edge of the market for unskilled laboring jobs, were the key examples of 'protest masculinity'. This term, which had been used often by criminologists and sociologists and appropriated Adler's psychoanalytic description of masculine protest, described a form of masculinity characteristic of men in a marginal location of social class, with the masculine claim on power contradicted by economic and social weakness (1995, p. 116).

The protest masculinity of the group studied by Connell was reflected in hyper-masculine aggressive display often done at a collective level, with violent and minor criminal behavior. It exhibited a juxtaposition of overt misogyny, compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. Some men in this account freely admitted to gay-bashing and most were disgusted by the idea of male homosexuality. Connell was struck by the extent to which the social circumstances of these men appeared to have led to an indifference towards the possible psychological and emotional contrasts between men and women, in favor of a heightened awareness of violence and sexual activity as the most important markers of true gender boundaries as established in natural body differences (1995, p. 109).

This raised the possibility that an exaggerated (though highly conformist and culturally reproduced) homophobia reflected the extent to which male same-sex activity was understood as a major symbolic threat to the gender differences that were not clearly marked by much else than sexual practice in the circumstances of social marginalization. Connell's theoretical model proved to have global significance for explanations of contemporary gender relations and the different forms of masculine power as these emerge in varied national, institutional and social contexts (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It has also proven highly useful to understanding anti-homosexual hostility and violence in the local Australian context.

There was a remarkable likeness between the social histories, characteristics and attitudes of Connell's sample of young men and most of the perpetrators who featured in the author's own research on anti-homosexual killings. The latter were younger, working class and poor men with a marginal existence in the labor market (Tomsen 2002, pp. 32–33). Much of this violence, especially the planned gang attacks on homosexual men, suggested an underlying search for masculine status. Although assaults on these victims took the outward form of a type of rebellion or protest against dominant social values and partly attracted young marginalized men for this reason, in reality a continuous backdrop to the motives of offenders was mainstream constructions of male identity and the deviant positioning of male homosexuality in the codes, practices and discourses that reproduced social understandings of masculinity. The hegemonic form remained beyond reach for those with little or no material wealth or institutional power, and violence and harassment directed against sexual minorities served as a ready means of establishing a respected male identity within the less empowered form of 'protest' masculinity. This finding illustrated how anti-homosexual bashing served a dual purpose of constructing a masculine and heterosexual identity for perpetrators through a simultaneous involvement with violence and by establishing homosexuals as an opposed group of social outsiders.

Homicide case evidence also suggested that these attacks are often part of a difficult struggle to achieve the status of adult masculinity: a struggle which was doomed to fail or left unresolved in the situation of many killers. Numerous perpetrators convicted of murder in cases of group killing, and men and boys questioned in regard to unsolved deaths, had a strong declared interest in fighting and years of formal training in boxing and martial arts. Furthermore, the group status of some key figures in these gangs was built on a reputation for unrestrained street violence and their successful efforts to initiate and train novices in the skills of 'poofster-bashing'.

In one 1990s incident a gay man was viciously bashed and killed at a known homosexual cruising area (Tomsen 2002, pp. 47–59). He was attacked by a group of youths and died after he fell or was chased over a high ocean cliff. The key perpetrator in this killing could not resist bragging about his violence to numerous friends, and had expected to make a positive impression about his manliness on a girlfriend by writing to her a few days before the killing of his intention to bash gay men. These boasts reflected the limited material and cultural resources available for the achievement of status among the groups of young men who carried out many of the fatal attacks. A reminder of the powerful influence of these concerns within young male peer groups was the involvement of one youth in the group killing of a gay man in a city park. This offender explained that he participated readily in the murder so as to counter a reputation among mates for being too soft and a 'wimp' (Tomsen 2002, p. 57).

The intention to police the public sexual expression and gender identity of other men was a key aspect of this group production of masculine identity. In another case a group of gay male friends who had spent a night visiting bars were set upon by four youths outside a takeaway food outlet. The one man who did not run away was kicked to death. The later revelation that the deceased and his friends were attacked



because they looked effeminate was a stark reminder of the role of stereotyping in victim selection and the arbitrariness of this form of attack (Tomsen 2002, p. 46). It also suggested the frequent public danger in many popular night-time areas presented to both homosexual and heterosexual men who did not have a conventional and narrowly defined masculine appearance that satisfied the critical scrutiny of other aggressive men.

## Violence, Gender and Transsexualism

As well as punishing presumed sexual deviance, this violence also served to discipline gender identity in a very extended way. Anti-homosexual violence and harassment resulted in the direct and indirect control of homosexual men and others who were outside conventional gender boundaries. Different activists and researchers have perceived prejudice against transsexual/transgender people as either a similar or separate phenomenon from anti-homosexual outlooks (Moran and Sharpe 2004; Meyer 2012). Nevertheless, the similar gendered features of this were evident in perpetrator concerns about the results of corporeal threat and a perceived desecration of the male body by feminine adornment. In specific social circumstances such as the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and other celebratory events frequented by heterosexuals, there was a suspension of prejudice, and transsexualism that is viewed as playful and sexually exciting (Tomsen and Markwell 2009).

However, as focus group discussions the author conducted with a mix of heterosexually identified men and women in Sydney in 2004–2007 suggested (see Tomsen 2009), cross-dressing was at other times perceived as a serious threat to gender norms. Frequent remarks suggested a fine line between cross-dressing being viewed as entertaining or instead as confronting. In certain contexts where sexual pick-ups were typical it caused sexual confusion. Some men experienced being touched or sexually objectified as a very personal affront in such places as:

Clubs with blokes that look like Steve Roach [former Australian Rugby League international] dressed as women. I found it intimidating especially with some transvestites picking up the vibes of me being slightly uncomfortable. I remember on one occasion being tapped on the back and turning around and this extremely unattractive transvestite was twinkling her fingers at me and giving me this big smile and obviously revving me up because she could sense the discomfort I was in.

Different models of normalized sexuality have been imbued with ideologies of gender. Sexual desire has not simply been an attraction towards a body with the right chromosomes. It has represented an understanding and expectation of the cultural traits that go hand-in hand with one of the supposed two genders that all people must in theory belong to. Some killings reflected an outright disgust and rage about the breach of gender norms implied by public displays of effeminacy, especially through clothing and grooming. This disgust did not fit with a supposed contemporary tolerance for cross-dressing and a reveling in its transgressive

pleasure that might accompany aspects of urban cultural queering (Tomsen 2009). Obviously, such tolerance is highly constrained by social context. In the majority of circumstances, public cross-dressing evoked anger by virtue of a disturbance of the binary cultural opposition between male and female anatomies stressed in the classic account of Garber (1992).

One of the most horrific gang attacks uncovered in the research was reserved for the victim who most obviously breached these gender norms. A teenage male who was dressed in a wig, short dress and high heels and wearing facial make-up, went walking alone in the darkness along a public cycle-way in a regional city (Tomsen 2002, pp. 60–63). He was approached by young male strangers and then tortured and killed in a lengthy attack. According to the one youth convicted for the killing, he had approached what he thought was a young woman in the darkness only to be subjected to a sexual advance provoking violence. This allegation still stands historically as one of the more dubious claims accepted by the criminal courts, and the key perpetrator who later bragged about having bashed a ‘poofter’ [homosexual male] and ‘rockspider’ [paedophile] was very confused about what derogatory label to attach to his victim. However, it seemed that the critical element of his rage against the deceased concerned the issue of public feminine appearance.

Any view of this event as a straightforward hate crime might discount both the masculine motives and the particular gendered interaction between this killer and his victim with perceived double deviance in the sexual and gender order sparking the violence. In the darkness, with make-up, skirt, high heels and a hooded top, the victim could have had the convincing allure of an attractive woman who was alone and vulnerable to sexual harassment. One witness to the crime claimed that a fight broke out when the perpetrator realized he was speaking to a male. If this was so, his anger at being fooled in this way may have overlapped with a sense of sexual frustration and contempt for any male dressed publicly as a woman.

It has been evident from this and other examples that anti-homosexual violence may or may not be preplanned. It has often be spontaneous and situationally structured. It has also not distinguished clearly between homosexuality, transsexualism, paedophilia and other stigmatized sexualities as its target. Despite confused and contradictory statements, this killing of a man dressed as a woman left the author with an overall impression of the complexity of perpetrator motives though with a continuous undercurrent of rigid male views of sexual expression and gender identity. The killing also reflected the urgency with which young low status men in groups had assumed the role of policing the public sexual and gender behavior of other men. Perhaps most importantly of all, the author found that the effects of this form of violence reverberate among all men. Anti-homosexual violence and harassment do not just result in the public control of homosexual men who were regarded as a sexually deviant minority.

Evidence regarding the second major type of anti-homosexual killing found in this research also signaled the significance questions of gender behind offender claims that a fatal incident was set off by a sexual advance or pass from the deceased (Tomsen 2002). These sexual advance killings were among the most problematic of all fatal assaults on homosexual victims. The arguments of arrested offenders and defense counsel appeared to play on the popular stereotype of

homosexual men as sexual marauders and libertines, and this often undermined the victim status of the deceased. In fact, these killings occurred in a range of different circumstances in which different motives seemed to prevail. A regular number of these crimes were obviously premeditated and molded by the intention to rob a target victim who would not report an attack. Allied claims about sexual advances were often untrue or implausible, but an analysis of those occasions where a homosexual advance appeared to have been the real catalyst for a sudden and bloody rage of violence, also gave new insights into understanding the relationship between gender identity and the situational structuring of hostile responses to same-sex desire.

Criminological research seeking to explain why violence has been a predominantly male activity stressed the importance of issues of personal honor and self-respect among the participants in many assaults and fatal attacks. This research suggested that many disputes between males that result in serious injuries and death have been prompted by overreactions to minor affronts or reputational slights which have challenged male honor and necessitated revenge (Archer 1994; Polk 1994; Mullins 2006). Such concerns also featured significantly in many confrontational homicides arising from status contests in situations of male socializing and drinking. These confrontations have arisen regularly in everyday activities like drinking in bars, driving in traffic, travelling and socializing in public space. They may objectively seem minor in cause but have often been highly meaningful among certain groups of males and particularly to low status youth:

Young men at the margins of society are particularly prone to violent fights, and these mostly occur on the streets around where the protagonists live, and also in and around bars and other places selling alcohol. Violent acts usually develop from an escalating exchange of verbal aggression and minor physical acts. The exchange begins with an event which one of the protagonists perceives as an identity threat. Although this often appears trivial to outsiders, or even to the protagonists in retrospect, it initiates a series of threats, insults and commands which transform the nature of the dispute into one which arouses anger through perceived threats to personal self-esteem or becomes a matter of face-saving and reputation. (Archer 1994: 137–8)

This approach to analyzing the significance of male honor also extended understanding of an important category of anti-homosexual killings that lacked premeditation but were characterized by an extreme frenzy of violence. These examples involved matters in which these claims about a sexual pass or advance appeared to be true. In one case of such a killing, a teenager entered the flat of an older homosexual man who had offered beer and cigarettes, and soon afterwards killed the man with a violent flurry of punching and numerous knife wounds inflicted in response to sexual touching.

The violence of this offender far exceeded the level needed to rebuff a non-violent pass, and the attack was viewed as out of character for this perpetrator. More deeply, this reflected widespread notions of the integrity of the male body and its sexual parts on which a sense of male status has itself been founded. Evidence led to the view that male honor was temporarily undermined by the emasculation of



homosexual touching, and then partly restored by the immediate and exaggerated violence that had been commonplace in such situations of threat. Homosexual bodily touching featured as a critical aspect of this provocation to violence (Tomsen 2002, p. 83).

Historical trials such as this were a striking instance of the importance of the reproduction of conventional sexual taxonomies in criminal justice. In particular, the role of legal discourse in sustaining sexual boundaries were evident in responses to allegations of a sexual advance through what Sedgwick in her foundational contribution to queer theory importantly called a 'doubly minoritizing taxonomy' of the hetero/homo divide (1994). Masculine heterosexual identity has been built around ensuring the sanctity of the body, with rigid limits imposed on the circumstances and socially admitted forms of male to male physical contact. Warding off the dishonor from a homosexual pass was a distinct concern from either genuinely fearing or fighting off a sexual assault. However, perpetrators and many others viewed aggression and violence as the most appropriate response to a sexual advance by another male.

Questions of the male honor of accused assailants lurked behind the late twentieth century success of homosexual advance claims in homicide trials (Dressler 1995; Tomsen 2002). This was because these notions of male honor and masculinist ideas of appropriate violence had a wider level of community respect and courtroom impact than obvious homophobia. Just as gang attacks on homosexual targets reflected evident concerns with questions of group masculinity, these incidents suggested to the author a further relation between matters of honor and male identity in anti-homosexual killings. And this violence was seen as also more complexly linked to the historically shifting and dynamic relations between differently empowered and subordinated forms of masculinity.

The growing homoerotic quality of much popular culture and more mainstream representations of gay and lesbian lifestyles also came to induce contradictions in the public representation of dominant and desirable forms of masculine identity (Dowsett 1996; Tomsen 2009). Evidence about the commonplace occurrence of anti-homosexual violence suggested male unease with ruptures in the simple linked dichotomies of unmasculine/masculine and homo/hetero. These acts of harassment and assault were not just the symptoms of episodic difficult changes in individual male identities. They were an intricate and defining part of these social forms. Heterosexual and homosexual masculinities have been created, reproduced and then to some extent destabilized in many past instances of violence and the official and wider social response to them.

An interesting paradox concerning shifting forms of masculinity and male sexuality arose with this. The past success of offender claims about the horror of being subjected to a completely unwanted homosexual advance was premised on an assumed certainty of the homo/hetero divide. Yet homosexual desire had been commonly understood as a type of sexual contagion (Moran 1996) which men needed protection from. Research evidence about the widespread harassment of and violence against homosexual men appeared difficult to reconcile with evidence regarding the widespread pattern of actual same-sex activity and desire among men in the general community (Tomsen 2009). Same-sex engagements were common

in situations defined as being without personal choice such as those that arose during periods of detention in juvenile institutions and prisons. However, what these particular violent incidents often shared was hostility to any open and public assumption of a homosexual identity by victims.

This appeared to confront and undermine the perpetrator's own determination to achieve manhood in a socially honored though often difficult heterosexual pathway. It appeared that resentment towards men who had appeared to abandon the social struggle to sexually dominate women lay behind this. The statements of perpetrators in police interviews and criminal trials reflected the importance of male group status, the contextual and ad hoc nature of the course of these killings, confusion and fear of same-sex desire and a measure of rage about the categorical uncertainty of some victims and their identity. Most importantly, killers assume the role of policing the public sexual identity of different victims. For the author, this signaled the wider historical importance of the enforcement or inscription of essentialist categories through acts of harassment and violence in a heavily masculinist culture. In each case, masculinity remained central to issues of perpetrator motive. Moreover, the author's findings regarding the key role of male identity and masculinity in such homicides has been reinforced by a more recent analysis of fatal attacks in the United States with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender victims, and the apparent motives for these crimes (see Kelley and Gruenewald 2015).

## **Gender, Hate Crime, and Anti-lesbian Violence**

Since the late twentieth century, mobilization against anti-homosexual violence has become a key feature of gay and lesbian activism in Australia and other liberal democratic nations. The historical shift towards naming and classifying such violence as homophobic hate crime and the proliferation of new research and action that accompanied this process, suggested this activism had become very significant to gay and lesbian movements. Globally, violence had become a key platform of gay and lesbian politics. References to these incidents as 'hate crimes' usefully assisted the mobilization of a gay and lesbian community response to such forms of victimization. Claiming a legitimate victimhood in regard to the experience of violence became an important element of associated political action in a range of nations.

The violence and hate crime issue has been a cogent example of how new social movements focused on building and asserting a particular collective identity, rather than just engaging in conventional political lobbying to alter state practices (Jenness and Grattet 2001). This collective action was driven by and took place against the backdrop of an evident uncertainty regarding social identity. Conflicts over gender, sexuality and nationality, and the exclusive assertion of religious, racial/ethnic identities in violence and revived fundamentalism, have all reflected the post-industrial situation of people experiencing uncertainty about fading social forms and patterns of living (Beck et al. 1994; Bauman 2007). The issue of homophobic violence appeared to be highly valued by activists for its more obvious implication of a shared interest between lesbians and gay men. Moreover, evidence about

similar victimization and fear of violence became ideologically inviting in periods of unease about the multiple divisions within queer communities fractured by divisions of locality, social class, health status, race, ethnicity and age, as well as gender (Gamson and Moon 2004; Meyer 2012).

Tight distinctions between victims and offenders have been a politically advantageous stance for groups and movements in oppressive conditions to assume. A galvanizing symbolism in which heterosexuals and homosexuals were recast as divided species of perpetrators and victims then emerged in discourse about these issues (Tomsen 2006, 2009). In reality, widespread violence was not the same as constant and ubiquitous violence. Moreover, the emphasis on the recognition of the everyday forms of this violence suggested a need to more adequately explain occasions of contradiction and tolerance as a social backdrop to prejudice and hostility. Conflation of homosexual and victim identities and a social-movement stress on the shared danger of victimization could easily emphasize the general risks of violence in ways that reinforced static and divisive understandings of sexual prejudice.

Furthermore, there was a backdrop of political doubt among lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals about the real validity of coalitionist strategies in this sphere. Most notably, the major feminist understanding of the causes and patterns of violence in patriarchal societies which developed in previous decades, led to a persistent uncertainty as to whether or not there was any significant resemblance between violence directed at homosexual men and violence directed at lesbians (Tomsen and Mason 2001). In fact, this understanding was often taken to vindicate separatist models of lesbians organizing against violence.

A small amount of feminist literature directly addressed the question of homophobia with the problem of anti-lesbian violence as its primary concern (von Schulthess 1992; Robson 1992; Mason 2001). Some of this took its lead from wider feminist engagements with homophobia by positioning anti-lesbian violence, and the sentiment it represents, within an overall paradigm of misogyny. The effect has been to analytically sever anti-lesbian violence from violence directed against gay men, with the latter reduced to being understood as a secondary effect of patriarchy (Pharr 1997; von Schulthess 1992). This model engages with homophobia by positioning it as a 'weapon' of sexism or patriarchy rather than a problem of masculinity.

Anti-lesbian attacks have occurred more often in private context with known perpetrators, such as incidents that occurred at home or work and were committed by older men acting alone (Mason 2001). Accordingly, some critics suggested that these attacks had much in common with violence directed at women generally rather than with attacks directed at gay men and other sexual minorities. Nevertheless, a more mixed pattern of overall victimization prevails in anti-lesbian attacks (Tomsen and Mason 2001). It also seemed likely that researchers had overlooked the varied forms of harassment and violence that are experienced by gay men. Many of the attacks directed at both lesbians and gay men were conducted by non-strangers and with motives other than a completely irrational hatred (Tomsen 2009). In particular, everyday concerns about achieving and protecting masculine status played a key underlying role.

A further way of understanding the partial similarity between violence directed against gay men and lesbians was by a closer focus on and recognition of the further



concern with masculinity among perpetrators of anti-lesbian harassment and assaults. A key Australian study did this by considering experiential accounts of anti-lesbian violence in the lives of 75 women (Mason 2001). The type of incidents described ranged in severity and included the sending of hate mail, schoolyard harassment, workplace harassment, verbal abuse on the street or at home, and sexual assault. Male strangers, work colleagues, or family members (including ex-partners) perpetrated the majority of incidents. Verbal abuse featured prominently in these women's narratives, both as an incident of hostility in itself and as an accompaniment to an act of physical or sexual assault. To understand the gendered dynamics of these homophobic acts it was helpful for the researcher to look closely at the specific language used by perpetrators. From this language, and the social and personal contexts within which it was used, she found it was possible to identify the primary ways in which gender patterned this anti-lesbian violence. Critically, these included the feminization of the lesbian subject through enforced acts of male heterosexuality, and the association of lesbianism with masculinity (Mason 2001).

In some incidents of anti-lesbian violence or hostility, and particularly in cases of sexual assault, perpetrators justified their actions by referring to an assumed heterosexual imperative between women and men. Many perpetrators' comments reflected a naïvely essentialist view that heterosexual desire could be coaxed out of any woman. In incidents of this sort, the perpetrator's expectation that the woman should have reciprocated desire for heterosexual gratification led to anger and abuse, and sometimes escalated into violence. The similarity with the commonplace sexual harassment of heterosexual women and accompanying rage over sexual rejection was apparent. Rejected men have often accused the women who spurn them of lesbianism. Here it appeared that by momentarily hetero-sexualizing a woman who was known to be lesbian, the perpetrator was also able to temporarily feminize her so as to re-establish his sense of masculine sexual right (Mason 2001).

A common adjective found in incidents of harassment, physical violence and verbal abuse was the word 'butch'—as in butch lesbian. Queer theorists in the 1990s began to demonstrate how in early sexology, homosexuality in men and women has been understood in Western cultures as a psycho-medical problem of gender inversion (Halperin 1990). Despite recent rejections of the pathologization of homosexuality, the legacy of this history was to be found in the everyday popular association of homosexuality in men with femininity and in women with masculinity. Asserting the power to be able to designate some women as 'butch' was an apparent means of establishing the masculinity of whoever delivered the insult. Moreover, it was not unusual for this to become manifest in the conflation of lesbianism with feminism, and feminism itself was understood as a further form of gender disorder.

## Conclusion

Despite research that has stressed the openness of human sexual capacity and erotic desire, the belief that sexuality is a key means for dividing people into fully coherent groups with their own separate forms of desire, practices and collective identities has persisted. Contemporary concern about homophobia has meant useful resistance

to the repression of stigmatized sexual groupings. Yet the view that hostility and violence stem from a pathology founded on the repression of desire in a specific minority group of homophobes does not move beyond the notion that such violence is a minor group matter where the repressed victimize the sexually open in the homosexual side of the hetero/homo dyad. Law and legal discourse have reinforced this same narrow binary when they have judged the masculine violence of different perpetrators and excused or exonerated acts of abuse, assault and killing.

The end point reached by the notion of 'homosexual panic'<sup>1</sup> in many parts of the Anglo-American legal world has now been overcome by the even more insidious impact of homosexual advance allegations that have normalized masculine violence targeting sexually marginalized individuals and groups. The relationship and ranking between regimes of sexuality and gender as distinct, parallel or overlapping modes of oppression have been increasingly vexed matters for social movements in the last four decades. Activists and community leaders have often understood homophobia as describing a needless bias or prejudice held by unenlightened individuals, bigots and backward social groups with outmoded views and values. In a problematic way, the focus on this has been thought to offer the most likely basis for a link between the separate forms of violence and harassment that homosexual/gay men and lesbians and other sexual minorities experience.

Research into HIV risk drew out widespread levels of same-sex activity among men who did not identify as homosexual, gay or bisexual, and contemporary studies have found evidence for this same-sex activity in a further range of masculine institutions and social settings (Ward 2015). Similarly, sociologists studying younger and well-educated urban men have gathered recent evidence of a new level of tolerance of openly homosexual identities and committed friendships between gay and straight men (Anderson 2012; McCormack and Anderson 2014). Nevertheless in different nations, shifting levels of homophobic violence may signal a growing vulnerability along the lines of social class and racial disadvantage (Meyer 2012). Even in ostensibly tolerant nations, there is a persistence of homophobia among some state institutions (e.g. the police, military) that have had a key historical role in expounding homophobic views (Dwyer and Tomsen 2016). And globally, any reduction in levels of open prejudice now have to be weighed against the recent coupling of this with state nationalism, revived Far-right politics, and sexually repressive forms of religious fundamentalism (Weis and Bosia 2013).

This reflection on recent decades of Australian research and theorizing in relation to anti-homosexual violence and masculinity demonstrates how gendered social practice around different forms of masculinity are now understood as shaping much of the commonality of violence in relation to offending as well as victimization. Analysis of the violence inflicted on victims reflects how perpetrators have both policed and punished sexual deviance and enforced conventional gender identity. In

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<sup>1</sup> Arising from research done by Kempf in the 1920s, 'homosexual panic' has referred to a specific pathological condition suggesting a strong and pre-determined likelihood of a violent reaction to a homosexual pass among men suffering from a morbid fear of homosexuality which it itself fed by repressed homosexual desire. Both this, and later accounts of 'homophobia' as a serious psychological illness, have overly pathologized anti-homosexual sentiment and disregarded its relation to wider societal culture (Tomsen 2009).

effect, they have sought to socially impose closed sexual and gender categories by their very actions. The research evidence of the attraction of such violence to many young Australian men who were not regularly criminal or psychologically disturbed begged further explanation of this phenomenon as it has been tied to more ubiquitous patterns of aggressive masculinity. These have been culturally valued but also unstable models of gender. For this reason anti-homosexual violence and the social and legal response to it can be likened to a historical microcosm of wider social conflicts over sexuality and gender identity.

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