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Mapping same-sex couple family households in Australia

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Abstract

The map (1:1,218,987) accompanying this report is the first to depict the distribution of same-sex couple family households across Australia. The map and the report contribute to emerging scholarship combining critical geographies of sexualities with quantitative techniques and GIS in order to advance the political claims of sexual minorities. The data were collected through the 2006 Census and obtained via consultation with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. These data included the number of same-sex couple family households for all Statistical Divisions across Australia and for Statistical Sub-Divisions within metropolitan capital cities. Geographical concentrations of same-sex couple family households were determined by calculating the proportion of couple family households that were same-sex in each Statistical Division and Statistical Sub-Division, since the Census defines cohabiting same-sex couples as a subset of couple family households. To visualise where the proportions fell above and below the national average, and thus where concentrations were found, these ratios were converted to location quotients using the Australian average as the denominator. The map combines different scales — Statistical Divisions and Statistical Sub-Divisions — to illustrate distributional patterns between inner-city and suburban areas, as well as between urban and regional localities. While high concentrations are found in inner-cities, there are also significant suburban and regional concentrations, thus contesting assumptions about same-sex couples' inner-city residential choices. Moreover, since same-sex couples were found in most Statistical Divisions, areas below the national average cannot be considered devoid of these families, with implications for constitutive identity politics and the operationalisation of equal rights legislation.

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1. Introduction and background

Variation in the way people occupy space is a central concern of human geographical inquiry (Johnston et al., 2000). Within this tradition, spatial patterns of social difference have been a key interest (Valentine, 2001). Since the 1970s, social and population geographers have given much attention to spatial differences wrought by class, race and gender, the 'classic triad' of social variation (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004). More recently, during the 1990s, interest in spatial patterns of social attributes has broadened to encompass 'other' differences, such as age, disability and minority sexual orientation (i.e. gay men, lesbians and bisexuals) (Valentine, 2001; Johnston and Sidaway, 2004). The present publication aims to advance knowledge of the geography of same-sex-attracted persons. Specifically, the accompanying map depicts the distribution of same-sex couple family households across Australia, rendered at the national scale.

The data are derived from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing. The last three censuses (1996, 2001, 2006) have provided the opportunity for cohabiting same-sex couples to report their de facto partnership status via a question clarifying the relationship between household members (the choices are husband/wife, de facto partner, child, stepchild, brother/sister, unrelated flatmate/co-tenant, or other). These couples are classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as 'same-sex couple family households'. Over this period, the data have become more extensive and reliable (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), with persons declaring same-sex couple status increasing from 19,594 in 1996 to 49,364 in 2006 (a 152% increase). This increase is attributed to growing awareness that same-sex couples can now be counted in the Census, combined with wider public acknowledgement of same-sex relationships (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Yet the count of same-sex couple family households is still likely to be an under-representation. Since the declaration of same-sex de facto partnership status is voluntary, some may not report their relationship because of a desire to maintain privacy or fears about discrimination. Promises of anonymity are not enough to assuage lifelong practices of discretion; this is perhaps especially so in particular regional or suburban areas where a recent survey found that homophobic attitudes remain prevalent amongst residents (Flood and Hamilton, 2007). The Census also cannot capture LAT (Living Apart Together) couples, where partners reside in separate households (Roseneil, 2006; Duncan and Phillips, 2008), or 'families of choice' — intimate friendship networks which arguably constitute significant relationships in many same-sex families (Weeks et al., 2001).

Despite this possible under-representation, the markedly increasing enumeration of cohabiting same-sex couples means that the Census nevertheless comprises an ever more important source of data on the incidence of same-sex couple family households in Australia. However, due to ongoing cultural and political sensitivities around minority sexual orientation in Australian society, the data are not publicly available, and

were obtained via consultation with the ABS. Consequently, the accompanying map is the first attempt to render the geographical patterns of same-sex couple family households in Australia. The map illustrates the concentration of same-sex couple family households by ABS-defined Statistical Divisions (SDs) at the national level, with a further breakdown into distribution patterns across Statistical Sub-Divisions (SSDs) in metropolitan centres and selected non-metropolitan (regional) localities. The map shows that, contrary to popular wisdom about same-sex couples' inner-city residential preferences, these families are not limited to inner-city SSDs. While the highest concentrations of same-sex couples are found in some inner-cities, significant concentrations are also present in suburban SSDs and regional SDs. Unlike Gates and Ost's (2004) *Gay and Lesbian Atlas*, we do not claim this map as a proxy for the distribution of the wider sexual minority population, but limit our representation to cohabiting same-sex couples.

This mapping of same-sex couple family households is an important intervention in both geographical scholarship and the politics of inclusion. Brown (2007) has pointed out that geographies of sexuality — with their emphasis on post-structural critique — have largely avoided quantitative techniques in favour of qualitative methods. However, with government agencies across the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and elsewhere now collecting information on same-sex couples — such as census bureaux, social security agencies and marriage/civil union registries — there are increasing quantitative records of sexual minority populations. Some scholars have started using these data, especially in the US (Brown and Knopp, 2006; Cooke, 2005; Cooke and Rapino, 2007; Gates and Ost, 2004), but also in the UK (Duncan and Smith, 2006) and Australia (Birrell and Rapson, 2002). Brown (2007, p. 208) thus argues that the "careful use of quantitative techniques and data" in geographies of sexuality is crucial for "providing an internal critique to scientific studies of sexuality, ... claiming space and ontology against those who would ignore or erase our very presence in their world, and ... avoid[ing] the trap of being the 'others' who are spoken of and about, but never heard themselves". Participatory GIS is a useful ally in this agenda, allowing sexual minority groups to 'collate' and 'represent' their spaces, and thus 'constitute' their collective identities and histories, through visually mapping their communities (Brown and Knopp, 2008). For instance, working collaboratively with the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project to map historically significant lesbian and gay sites in Seattle, Washington, Brown and Knopp (2008) demonstrate that GIS enabled the sexual minority population to 'claim space' and affirm their communities' contribution to the city's history and development.

This foreshadows the like contribution of the present map of same-sex couple family households in Australia to a broader agenda of inclusive politics, both constitutive (identity affirmation) and distributional (securing rights and resources). Knowledge of the size and distribution of same-sex couple families is important in the current context of agitation for legal, social and political rights attached to same-sex partnership status (Gates and Ost, 2004; Baird, 2005; 2006). In Australia, rhetoric and action is framed

at the national scale, since the federal government has the constitutional authority to legislate for (and against) same-sex partnership rights (Bavinton et al., 2007). Greater understanding of the patterns of concentration of same-sex couple family households at the national scale — by visualising their extent and distribution across the nation — can help bring these debates from the social margins to the political mainstream (Gates and Ost, 2004). Of course, this means making same-sex couples more visible, and this entails some danger as well as possibilities. Visualising same-sex couple family households could make them more vulnerable to certain political groups urging for the ongoing exclusion of same-sex couples from legal rights and social acceptance. Nevertheless, we believe the benefits outweigh this danger: it is important to demonstrate same-sex families are 'everywhere' as part of a political effort to secure legal and social recognition. Moreover, the scale of representation — SDs and SSDs — is sufficiently broad to ensure individual households cannot be identified and targeted for discrimination (further detail on this point below). Before discussing the data represented through the map, the methods are described.

2. Method

Data on same-sex couple family households from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing were acquired through consultation with the ABS. Data were requested on the number of same-sex couples for all SDs in Australia. Additionally, we requested the same data for SSDs in metropolitan centres (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra, Darwin) and two regional areas with publicly-recognised sexual minority populations (East Central Highlands, Victoria, and Central Northern Territory — Gottschalk and Newton, 2003; Hobson, 2004). In requesting the latter data for specific localities, we applied Brown and Knopp's (2006) suggestion that 'experiential authority' — or familiarity with particular lived geographies — can be usefully deployed in quantitative analysis and GIS. Brown and Knopp's (2006) critical analysis of Gates and Ost's (2004) US-based *Gay and Lesbian Atlas* also provided valuable advice on how to approach the mapping of the Australian data. They provide a telling critique of the scale-framing power of Census data, pointing out that Census-defined scales (e.g. States, SDs, SSDs and Collection Districts) may bear only limited "relationship to locally meaningful places" (p. 226). Drawing "insights from critical cartography and GIS studies", they ask "what is the 'proper' scale at which concentrations should be mapped" (p. 226)?

Contemplating their argument, we decided it was empirically and analytically preferable to mingle non-metropolitan SDs with metropolitan SSDs in our map. Given Australia's urban bias, metropolitan SDs are significantly more populous than regional ones (e.g. the Sydney SD alone comprises 20% of the national population), and more accurate

detail can be seen by breaking down these large metropolitan SDs into their composite SSDs. Moreover, previous investigation of the 2001 same-sex couple family data did reveal higher concentrations in urban areas (Birrell and Rapson, 2002), suggesting that later analysis would benefit from a more fine-grained view of their concentration in metropolitan centres — enabling, in particular, insight into differences between inner-city and suburban SSDs. We admit that this does not perfectly resolve the issue of scale-framing or fully address Brown and Knopp's (2006) call for a better relationship between Census data and meaningful places, but ethical considerations limited the scales at which data was accessible from the ABS. The ABS consultant advised that the same-sex couple family data for regional (non-metropolitan) SSDs would be likely to be randomised (i.e. the 'true' numbers of couples masked to preserve anonymity) because of their relatively small population sizes, and would thus be unsuitable for analysis. Accordingly, we decided to use SD data for regional Australia, SSD data for the metropolitan SDs of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra and Darwin, and further supplement this with specially-requested data for the regional SSDs of East Central Highlands and Central Northern Territory. While mediated by data availability, we hope this partially redresses the issue of population imbalance caused by mapping only at the scale of SDs. Moreover, it enables a more nuanced analysis of 'locally meaningful places', particularly a comparison of inner-city, suburban and regional localities.

The present map, then, seeks to represent the distribution pattern of same-sex couples across Australia, especially with regard to inner-city, suburban and regional differences. The ABS supplied data as actual numbers of same-sex couple families. To calculate variance in the geographical concentration of same-sex couple families, the number of all couple families across the different SDs and SSDs were also needed (the ABS defines 'same-sex couple family households' as a subset of 'couple family households', which include both married and de facto cohabiting couples with or without dependent children). These were accessed via publicly-available Basic Community Profiles on the ABS website. The proportion of same-sex couple family households was then determined by dividing the number of same-sex couple families by the number of couple families in each SD and SSD under examination. To better appreciate the distribution and concentration of same-sex couple families across Australia, location quotients of the ratios of same-sex couples were calculated using the Australian average as the denominator — this average was 0.595% (i.e. 0.595% of couple families were same-sex at the 2006 Census). The choice of scale used as the denominator in location quotients is a critical decision. Brown and Knopp (2006) demonstrated why by conducting a mapping experiment on the distribution of same-sex households in Seattle, Washington: applying a range of denominators (city to national average) to maps of different areal extent (city to CMSA [Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area] scope) they illustrated that patterns of concentration varied as the denominator, in particular, changed. Since, at this initial stage of the research, we were interested in patterns observed at the national scale, 0.595% was used as the denominator for all calculations, both SDs and SSDs.

To map these calculations, the data were imported into ArcGIS and joined with their respective SDs and SSDs. A colour grading was applied to best demonstrate the distribution and concentration of same-sex couple families. Initially, those SDs and SSDs with location quotients greater than (or equal to) 1.0 were distinguished by colour coding from those with location quotients less than 1.0, the latter represented by grey tones. Coloured polygons thus show the SDs and SSDs where same-sex couples are concentrated above the national average; these are also named on the map. Colour coding was used to distinguish different levels of concentration within these SDs and SSDs: up to 1.99 times the national average (yellow); 2-3.99 times the national average (orange); 4-7.99 times the national average (light red); and equal to or greater than 8 times the national average (dark red). But many same-sex couples also live in those SDs and SSDs with concentrations below the national average. Moreover, just as concentrations vary between the 'above average' areas, they also differ across the 'below average' SDs and SSDs. Accordingly, different grey tones are used to indicate four different levels of concentration within these SDs and SSDs, from light to dark grey: up to 0.25, 0.25-0.49, 0.5-0.74, and 0.75-0.99. The resulting map illustrates the geography of same-sex couple family households in Australia, showing differing levels of concentration both *above* and *below* the national average.

3. Discussion and conclusions

While same-sex couple family households are present in almost all SDs (they are absent in only three — ACT Balance, South West Queensland and Other Territories), there are distinct geographical concentrations. Same-sex couple families reside in levels greater than the national average in only 32 of the 117 SDs and SSDs enumerated in this analysis (or 27% of SDs and SSDs). To aid the following discussion, these 32 SDs and SSDs are detailed in Table 1. Following the methods discussion above, the 117 SDs and SSDs used in this analysis are comprised of all the regional (non-metropolitan) SDs in Australia, along with the SSDs within the metropolitan SDs of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra and Darwin, and the two regional SSDs for which data was specially-requested — the East Central Highlands and Central Northern Territory. The metropolitan SDs themselves (as listed above) have been omitted in favour of their constituent SSDs, in order to allow for consideration of inner-city and suburban differences in the distribution of same-sex couples. However, the two regional SDs which encompass the East Central Highlands and the Central Northern Territory — respectively, the Central Highlands and the Northern Territory Balance — have been included in order to account for the balance of their populations (since not all of their constituent SSDs could be counted separately in this analysis).

Rank	SD/SSD	State	N° of Same-Sex Couples	% of Same-Sex Couples	Location Quotient
1	Inner Sydney	New South Wales	3873	7.19	12.09
2	Inner Melbourne	Victoria	1775	3.89	6.55
3	Inner Brisbane	Queensland	500	3.72	6.25
4	North Canberra	Australian Capital Territory	195	2.60	4.37
5	Eastern Suburbs	New South Wales	691	1.57	2.65
6	Moreland City	Victoria	413	1.49	2.50
7	East Central Highlands	Victoria	132	1.47	2.47
8	Southeast Inner Brisbane	Queensland	419	1.33	2.23
9	Northwest Inner Brisbane	Queensland	435	1.29	2.17
10	Central Metropolitan	Western Australia	301	1.22	2.05
11	Northern Middle Melbourne	Victoria	609	1.19	2.00
12	Inner Western Sydney	New South Wales	371	1.04	1.75
13	Central NT	Northern Territory	57	0.94	1.59
14	South Canberra	Australian Capital Territory	45	0.93	1.57
15	Darwin City	Northern Territory	118	0.91	1.54
16	Woden Valley	Australian Capital Territory	63	0.88	1.48
17	Western Adelaide	South Australia	365	0.85	1.43
18	Weston Creek-Stromlo	Australian Capital Territory	42	0.80	1.35
19	Eastern Adelaide	South Australia	376	0.79	1.33
20	Lower Northern Sydney	New South Wales	491	0.79	1.32
21	Western Melbourne	Victoria	667	0.76	1.28
22	Belconnen	Australian Capital Territory	138	0.74	1.24
23	Outer Western Sydney	New South Wales	473	0.71	1.19
24	Richmond-Tweed	New South Wales	317	0.67	1.13
25	Boroondara City	Victoria	221	0.66	1.11
26	Gungahlin-Hall	Australian Capital Territory	49	0.66	1.11
27	Far North	Queensland	305	0.65	1.09
28	Southern Melbourne	Victoria	551	0.64	1.07
29	Central Highlands	Victoria	192	0.63	1.06
30	Southern	Tasmania	53	0.63	1.05
31	East Metropolitan	Western Australia	333	0.60	1.01
32	Greater Hobart	Tasmania	255	0.60	1.01

Table 1. SDs and SSDs with above average concentrations same-sex couples.

What geographical concentrations and differences are illustrated in the map? First, inner-cities are the sites of greatest concentration for same-sex couples. The map shows the Inner Sydney SSD recorded the highest number of couples (3873) and the greatest concentration: 7.19% of couple families are same-sex, with a location quotient of 12.09 (i.e. 12.09 times the national average). The three next highest concentrated divisions are also inner-city SSDs in metropolitan centres: Inner Melbourne (with 1775 couples, the 2nd highest number), Inner Brisbane and North Canberra. A range of other inner-city or nearby SSDs rank amongst the twenty highest concentrations of same-sex couples, including Central Metropolitan Perth, Darwin City, South Canberra, Eastern Suburbs (Sydney), Moreland City (Melbourne), Southeast Inner Brisbane, Northwest Inner Brisbane and Western and Eastern Adelaide. Indeed, it is telling that *all* the inner-city SSDs registered concentrations >1.0. These figures would tend to support long-standing rhetoric about the inner-city residential preferences of gay and lesbian populations. But at the same time, the map shows there is a more complex story in the Australian case.

Contesting a uniform and simple inner-city bias, the map shows there are some significant suburban and regional concentrations of same-sex couples as well. For instance, suburban concentrations of same-sex couple families are found in Northern Middle Melbourne, Western Melbourne and Southern Melbourne in Melbourne; Inner Wes-

tern Sydney, Outer Western Sydney and Lower Northern Sydney in Sydney; Woden Valley, Weston Creek-Stromlo and Belconnen in Canberra; and East Metropolitan Perth. In some areas — especially suburban Melbourne — the *numbers* of couples are greater than those in the inner-cities of Brisbane, Canberra, Perth, Adelaide and Darwin (cf. Table 1). And further decentring metropolitan assumptions of same-sex couples' residential choices, the map highlights five notable concentrations in regional Australia: East Central Highlands in Victoria (part of the Central Highlands SD), Central Northern Territory, Richmond-Tweed in NSW, Far North Queensland and Southern Tasmania. Clearly, a more complex story is at work than one where same-sex couples choose to live openly only in the anonymity of inner-cities. Rather, while Australian inner-cities — especially Sydney, but also Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra, Perth, Adelaide and Darwin — have high concentrations of same-sex couples, many have found their homes in select suburban and regional areas as well, with some of these localities gaining gay-friendly reputations in wider Australian society, such as Daylesford, Victoria, and Alice Springs, NT (Hobson, 2004; Gorman-Murray et al., 2008). This has implications for the geographical scope of sexual minority identity politics and organisation: calls for equal legal rights for same-sex couples are not a concern for inner-city denizens alone, since same-sex couples also live in suburban and regional areas in significant concentrations.

But what of those SDs and SSDs with concentrations of same-sex couples *below* the national average? What can we conclude about the 'grey areas' of our map? Brown and Knopp (2006, p. 239) urge "those engaged in mapping queer space [to] be cognisant of the hidden assumptions, values and possibilities inherent in them". One assumption is that those areas with 'low' concentrations of sexual minority populations "are all-too-often reified as being 'non-gay', even if some same-sex couples are present" (p. 238). Consequently, they offer a provocation: "Imagine how differently the maps might be read if ... *negative* deviations from 1.0 (as well as positive ones) were clearly visible" (p. 239). We have applied this suggestion to our map, differentiating levels of below average concentration through a range of grey tones. These patterns draw attention to the problem of representing all < 1.0 areas as a single — and implicitly 'non-gay' — category. Instead, the map demonstrates not a single 'grey area', but 'shades of grey' that vary greatly across Australia. In turn, this suggests that these areas *cannot* be understood as absent of same-sex couple family households. In fact, 42.57% of same-sex couples — or 10,913 families — live in the 'grey areas'. Moreover, some of these 'below average' SDs and SSDs have greater numbers of same-sex couples than many 'above average' areas — for instance, there are 566 couples living in the Hunter, NSW, and 554 on Queensland's Gold Coast (cf. figures in Table 1). Thus, there is a widespread distribution of same-sex couple families across Australia, even if their concentration varies between places.

This has political and governance repercussions. First, there are implications for planning the provision of public services in the wake of the *Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws General Law Reform) Act 2008*, which gives same-sex

couples equal rights under Commonwealth laws. Rather than focusing on areas with high concentrations of same-sex couples, government agencies should more urgently target those 'grey areas' with fewer same-sex couples in order to ensure equal access to the provisions of the new legislation and facilitate its successful operation. Second, critically considering the < 1.0 concentrations across Australia elicits a broader point pertaining to the politics of inclusion. Brown and Knopp (2006, p. 239) suggest that mapping gradations of low, as well as high, concentrations has "the potential to construct areas with very few same-sex couple households as being just as deviant as those with relatively large proportions". In this vein, our map calls attention to the geographically uneven contours of social difference and inclusion in Australia, and seeks to contribute to the social and political equality of sexual minority populations by visualising such irregularities. Third, the map also works beyond distributional claims for equal rights, possessing a rhetorical power that advances a constitutive politics, "where politics is an end in itself rather than a means to an end" (Brown and Knopp, 2006, p. 44). As a material artefact, the map visibly expresses the widespread presence of same-sex families — 'we are everywhere' — linking such families with national space in a way that constitutes a politics of identity entwined with a sense of belonging.

Same-sex families are not unitary, however, but differentiated along various intersecting social axes. Further work on these differences is needed, particularly the distributional differences between male and female same-sex couple family households. 53% of same-sex couples recorded at the 2006 Census were male, and 47% were female. While we did not distinguish gendered patterns in the present map, work based on the 2000 US Census indicates that male and female same-sex couples have different patterns of residential concentration (Brown and Knopp, 2006; Gates and Ost, 2004) and migration (Cooke and Rapino, 2007). Likewise, preliminary analysis of the Australian data suggests female couples are less concentrated, more diffuse, and more likely to be present in above average numbers in suburban SSDs and regional SDs, than male couples. For instance, in most of the regional concentrations of same-sex couples noted above, female couples outnumber male couples (reversing the national proportion). Some of these regional concentrations find their heritage in feminist and lesbian separatist communities of the 1970s and 1980s, notably those in Richmond-Tweed (NSW) and the Central Northern Territory. Indeed, our next step in this project is to analyse the similarities and differences between male and female same-sex couple family households, and therefore elicit how gendered experiences shape same-sex couples' residential patterns. This work will also entail attention to how age, income, parenthood, ethnicity and ancestry intertwine in the geographical distribution of same-sex couples. This investigation will, in turn, contribute to scholarship on the geographies of 'new' families, particularly to what extent same-sex couple families are involved in processes of gentrification, suburbanisation and counter-urbanisation (Duncan and Smith, 2002; 2006). The present map thus provides an informative foundation for further nuanced analysis of geographies of sexualities and 'new' family formations in Australia.

Software

Initial calculation of census data and location quotients was made using Microsoft Excel. The map was created using ESRI ArcGIS 9.2.

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