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# Normalising sex and resisting shame: young Aboriginal women's views on sex and relationships in an urban setting in Australia

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores young Aboriginal women's views on sex and relationships in Australia – including their beliefs about broader social attitudes relating to sexuality, gender, and well-being – and how these understandings can impact young women's sexual health. The project adopted a strengths-based approach and used peer interviewing to investigate how Aboriginal young people in urban settings develop and manage their sexual well-being. The findings draw on interviews with 35 Aboriginal young women, between 16 and 26 years old and living in Western Sydney, Australia. Although the young women's views and experiences were broad and diverse, several key themes were identified. In this paper, we explore how young women's understandings and experiences of sexual shame were gendered and racialised, how they reconciled shame-inducing discourses by embracing more open and positive views about sexuality and how they drew on various sources to foster self-worth and sexual agency. Moreover, the paper describes what young women saw as the defining features of positive sexual relationships which, in their views, included love, connection, respect, consent, trust, honesty and responsibility. Implications for how young women's ties to family, community and culture supported them in fostering sexual well-being are also discussed.

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Aboriginal; First Nations; sexual health; beliefs; discourse

## Introduction

Existing literature on Aboriginal young people's sexual health is dominated by problem-oriented studies reporting on risky sexual practices, poor prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), teenage pregnancy, and lack of access to services. These studies provide insights into young people's sexual practices; however, they may also reinforce deficit views of Aboriginal young people as risky and needing intervention. In this paper, we purposely

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counter risk-oriented approaches by documenting Aboriginal young women's perspectives on sex and relationships, how they understand positive sexual relationships, and how these perspectives, together with elements of culture and community, work to promote sexual well-being. Focusing on positive beliefs and discourses that promote sexual well-being offers opportunities to advance sexual health promotion for Aboriginal young people.

## Discourses of deficit

Aboriginal peoples are indigenous to Australia and comprise hundreds of different groups of people, each with distinct languages, traditions, histories, and connections to Country (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2015). Invasion and colonisation have resulted in the dispossession of Aboriginal lands, colonial violence, forced removal of Aboriginal children, and other harmful state-imposed policies and acts, underpinning the ongoing economic, social and health disparities experienced by Aboriginal peoples today (AIWH 2015; Cunneen 2014; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Much existing literature takes the history of colonisation as the focal point for understanding Aboriginal people's health experiences; however, an over-emphasis on the destructiveness of colonisation can risk overlooking Aboriginal strengths, survival, resistance and the richness of Aboriginal cultures and histories which may contribute to ongoing discourses of deficit.

Deficit discourses of Aboriginal peoples are rooted in colonial ideologies that frame them as inherently prone to ill health and in need of intervention (Bryant et al. 2021; Dawson et al. 2020; Gorringe, Ross, and Fforde 2011; Moreton-Robinson 2009). Negative stereotypes contained within deficit discourses contribute to harmful behaviours and interventions aimed toward Aboriginal peoples (including racism and destructive child removal policies), create barriers for Aboriginal people accessing healthcare and impact the quality of care they receive (Fforde et al. 2013; Gorringe, Ross, and Fforde 2011; Paradies, Harris, and Anderson 2008). When Aboriginal peoples are implicated as the 'source of the problem', colonial processes, structural inequalities and systematic failures in policy and service provision are often overlooked (Arabena 2013; Fogarty et al. 2018). Meanwhile, Aboriginal understandings of well-being are typically subverted by the dominance of Western value systems and biomedical health models (Dawson et al. 2020).

Aboriginal young people are further impacted by risk discourses attached to youth where young people (particularly adolescents) can be framed as 'delinquent', 'instinct-driven', 'irresponsible', and 'risky' (Foster and Spencer 2011, 130; Shoveller and Johnson 2008; Thurlow 2007). Young people are thus often seen as incapable of making 'good' decisions for themselves and as requiring more rigid policing (Thurlow 2007).

## Aboriginal young people's sexual health

Deficit views are sometimes apparent in the sexual health literature which is dominated by quantitative epidemiological studies. These studies can provide insights into disparities experienced by Aboriginal young women in their sexual and reproductive health. For instance, national surveillance reports show that young Aboriginal women are disproportionately impacted by STIs and blood-borne viruses (BBVs), including notification rates for chlamydia that were significantly higher than those of non-Indigenous young women, young Aboriginal men and older Aboriginal women (The Kirby Institute 2022). Aboriginal

women are also substantially more likely to experience teenage motherhood than non-Indigenous women, which carries greater risks for adverse health outcomes (AIWH 2020). On-going gaps in sexual health outcomes suggest existing health strategies and services are failing to meet the needs of many Aboriginal young women.

Qualitative studies may help circumvent deficit framings by offering a more nuanced picture of how Aboriginal young women and men manage risks and cultivate sexual well-being. Indeed, Aboriginal young people in Queensland and Northern Territory (NT) were found to use various strategies to protect themselves and others from sexual risks, including retrieving free condoms from health centres, establishing trusting relationships with sexual partners, promoting condom use and STI screening among friends, accompanying friends to health appointments, and educating peers about STI prevention so 'others could be spared' (Bell et al. 2020b; Mooney-Somers et al. 2009; 2011; 2012). These findings are bolstered by national survey results where 74% of sexually active young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported STI testing and 67% reported using condoms 'always' or 'sometimes' in the previous year (Ward et al. 2020). These findings highlight how Aboriginal young people want to be safe and often make proactive efforts to manage their sexual well-being.

Aboriginal young people living in urban settings have different experiences to those in rural and remote settings, such as being a smaller minority among largely non-Indigenous local communities and having distinct experiences in navigating Aboriginal identity and connections to Country, culture and community (which young Aboriginal people view as deeply linked to their well-being) (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2021). Yet studies specifically exploring the health needs and experiences of Aboriginal people in urban contexts are limited as research has predominantly focused on rural and remote communities who are disproportionately affected by various health challenges, including STIs and BBVs (Jennings et al. 2021; The Kirby Institute 2022). However, with over one-third of the Aboriginal population living in major cities, calls for further investigation into the health needs of urban-based Aboriginal young people are justified (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2022; Jennings et al. 2021).

### *Our approach*

In this paper, we sought to purposely counter deficit framings. We applied standpoint theory, allowing us to reveal the diverse experiences and intersectional identities of Aboriginal young women living in Western Sydney, Australia. Qualitative data was collected to describe their perspectives on sex and relationships, how they understand positive sexual relationships, and how these perspectives, together with elements of culture and community, work to promote sexual well-being and safety. By focusing our study on understanding how beliefs and culture promote sexual well-being, we wish to bolster and reinforce narratives of strength among Aboriginal young women. An analysis of young men's perspectives has been published elsewhere (see Graham et al. 2023).

## Design and methodology

### *Research setting*

The research was conducted in two communities in Western Sydney – which is home to roughly 4.2% of Aboriginal people in Australia and where nearly one quarter

(23.2%) of the local Aboriginal population are young people aged 15–24 years (ABS 2021a; 2021b).

### A strengths-based research approach

The research adopted a strengths-based approach, recognising the strengths, resources and agency of individuals and communities to build knowledge, skills, capacities, and connections to promote well-being (Brough, Bond, and Hunt 2004). A sociocultural lens was applied to stress the importance of social relationships and the collective identities, practices, and beliefs of Aboriginal peoples (Bryant et al. 2021). In line with this approach, our research sought to identify what Aboriginal young people do to cultivate sexual well-being for themselves and others, how they utilise social connections, skills, knowledge, and resources; and how family, community and culture support them in doing so.

The research followed the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC 2018b) principles of Aboriginal governance and data. These included five members of the research team being Aboriginal, establishing an Aboriginal Advisory Committee (AAC) (which included peer interviewers (PIs)) to oversee the research, using participatory methods, working closely with local Aboriginal health and community workers to facilitate the research, employing an Aboriginal research assistant, establishing a postgraduate research opportunity for an Aboriginal person, and gaining ethics approval through the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW (AH&MRC). This article is authored by three Aboriginal women, a Māori woman, two non-Indigenous women and one non-Indigenous non-binary person.

### Peer-interviewing method

The participatory peer-interviewing method used in this study is based on previous sexual health research with Aboriginal young people in remote Australia (Bell et al. 2021). Through this approach, Aboriginal young people were allowed to drive conversations toward matters that they thought were important, thus better reflecting their views. The peer interviewing method tapped into existing social networks where trust and rapport were pre-established, which was considered beneficial since interviews asked about matters that could be considered personal or sensitive. The method created opportunities for capacity building as Aboriginal young people were able to gain research skills and paid work experience.

Nine Aboriginal young women aged 16–21 years were employed as PIs to conduct interviews with other Aboriginal young women in their networks. PIs were recruited through local Aboriginal community organisations and underwent four days of training, focusing on the study's themes, research ethics, and research skills. The training was co-facilitated by two Aboriginal, one Māori and one non-Indigenous research team members, as well as four Aboriginal health and community workers and one non-Indigenous sexual health worker.

Each PI was asked to conduct three semi-structured interviews with three same-sex peers, with each interview focusing on a different topic: (1) individual, family, community and cultural strengths and resources, (2) sexual beliefs, attitudes, practices and relationships, and (3) perspectives on and experiences of sexual health promotion and services. PIs were given interview schedules but were encouraged to take ownership of their interviews, such as by asking questions in their own words, creating follow-up questions to

seek clarification or explore topics further, or adding questions they thought were relevant to the interview topic. Research team members conducted debriefing interviews with PIs to discuss PIs own insights into each of their interviews, support PIs to develop their interviewing skills and oversee data quality. PIs participated in interviews with UNSW researchers of the same sex. All participants provided consent before interviews were conducted and audio recorded.

### *Data analysis*

Interviews were transcribed and de-identified before being loaded into Nvivo12 (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2020) for coding. Iterative thematic analysis methods were used, involving both deductive and inductive coding and cyclic analysis with several rounds of ordering and reordering themes (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). A draft coding frame was developed in line with our research questions, interview topics, and strengths-based approach. JB and KM tested the draft coding frame by coding and cross-checking interviews. The coding frame was further reviewed and revised by the project's investigator group. Key themes were identified by the frequency in which they appeared throughout the data or the emphasis that young women placed on topics to signal their significance.

Analysis for this paper drew on standpoint approaches to explore the sexual well-being experiences of Aboriginal young women. In particular, we were guided by Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous women's standpoint theory where Aboriginal women are understood as having intersecting and shared histories, knowledge and experiences – such as of colonisation, racial oppression and patriarchal control – which are distinct from both Aboriginal men and non-Indigenous women (Moreton-Robinson 2013). However, Moreton-Robinson (2013) is also careful to resist the homogenisation of Aboriginal women who are recognised as having diverse, unique and complex identities, experiences and knowledge that are shaped by 'intersecting oppressions that situate [them] in different power relations and affect different individual experiences under social, political, historical and material conditions … and which are also complicated by respective cultural, sexual, racialised, abled and class differences.'

### *Ethics*

The project gained ethical approval through AH&MRC, UNSW Sydney, and South Western Sydney Local Health District (SWSLHD). The research was conducted in alignment with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduction in Human Research* (NHMRC 2018a) and the 'five key principles for research into Indigenous health outlined by AH&MRC (2020). Research tools, training materials and all research outputs – including this article – were reviewed and approved by the AAC and AH&MRC.

## Findings and analysis

### *The participants*

35 Aboriginal young women (including 9 PIs) participated in interviews. Of these, 20 were aged 16–18 years and 13 were aged 18–26 years – whilst the exact age of 3 participants

are unknown. 18 participants described themselves as recent high school students, two as university students, 7 as employed full-time, and three as 'not currently working', whilst the employment/study status of 5 participants' was unknown. Of the young women, 23 lived with family, 4 lived with partners, 1 lived with her children, and 1 lived alone, with 6 not disclosing their living situation. Many participants identified with one or more First Nations groups – including the Biripi, Kamilaroi, Dhungatti, Wiradjuri, Dharawal, Anaiwan, Mandandanji, Yaegl, Wailwan and Barindji – with one also identifying as Torres Strait Islander; however, some participants either did not disclose or were not sure of their nation affiliations. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

## Sexual beliefs

### Resisting shame

Many participants expressed a critical awareness of sexual shame and unequal gender dynamics as they collectively described a context where there were few sexual choices young women could make that did not carry the burden of social judgment. For example, having multiple sexual partners or 'sleeping around' could cause a young woman to 'get a reputation' (Charlotte, 17 years) and 'be called a skank, a slut, a whore' (Gabrielle, 16 years). Shame was also attached to *not* having sex, with there being 'pressure to have sex' (Piper, 17 years) in that 'if you don't have sex, [people] will be like, "you're a virgin!"' (Ellie, 21 years) and 'no one wants to be a virgin' (Susie, 21 years). Young women also expressed worries about body shaming, how partners perceived their bodies and whether information about their bodies would be relayed to others – 'You're just worried if some fella was gonna say that your fanny stank' (Olivia, 26 years).

Young women were concerned about rumour-spreading, gossiping and 'slut-shaming'.

> Waking up the next morning you're just like, 'Fuck. What have I done?'. I think that's a big [worry] … It's like, 'Is this gonna be on Facebook tomorrow?' It's just shame. And then this person's gonna tell this person, and then that person knows. And then your father's gonna know. (Olivia, 26 years)

Miller (2016) proposes that sexual rumour-spreading and gossiping functions to establish norms and identify deviance as enactors stake claims to 'normative identities' by discouraging deviation from sexual and gender expectations. The social consequences, however, were more severe for young women than young men, highlighting a sexual double standard – that is, having different criteria or 'rules' to assess people's sexual behaviours and identities based on gender (Bordini and Sperb 2013). These findings also allude to the gender 'double bind' whereby women are encouraged to make themselves sexually desirable and available whilst simultaneously being punished or denigrated for desiring sex too openly, being too sexually available or deviating from other feminine ideals (Miller 2016; Williams 2021). Young Aboriginal women's heightened vulnerability to 'reputational damage' has been captured in research in other parts of Australia (Bell, Aggleton, and Ward 2017; Bell et al. 2020a; Senior and Chenhall 2008).

Participants described young men as more confident in talking about sexual experiences, often to the point of bragging – '[boys] say it proud, as if they won a trophy'

(Ava, 16 years). In contrast, many young women felt pressure to contain and control sexual information to manage the risks of public shaming and avoid a 'bad reputation'. This included conforming to sexual norms and avoiding behaviours marked as deviant, being careful about who they engaged with sexually (e.g. only having sex within a committed relationship), and practicing caution about who they disclosed sexual information to (e.g. only telling trusted friends). Young women thus drew on their existing knowledge of gender relations and social networks to manage the risk of social judgment and to assert some control over their public sexual identities.

A few young women discussed how shame could be internalised and impact young people's sense of worth:

> Sometimes you can be ashamed of yourself … and just feel disgusted. I feel when people put their commentary on you, eventually, you start to believe it and then you start to feel shit about yourself. (Piper, 17 years)

Shame could be intrusive and impact how young people managed their sexual wellbeing. For instance, young women spoke about how worries about shame could deter people from seeking help for sexual and relationship problems, getting and using contraception, purchasing and taking pregnancy tests, and accessing sexual health services.

> I think they would [steal pregnancy tests and condoms] just so they wouldn't have to go up to the counter and show that embarrassment or feel like they're judged … . (Lilly, 16 years)

Research in remote and rural communities also captured how shame and stigma negatively impacted young Aboriginal people's access and willingness to engage with sexual healthcare, education, and contraception uptake (Bell et al. 2020a; Coombe et al. 2020; Larkins and McGinty 2009).

The impact of racism is relevant when talking about Aboriginal young people's experiences of sexual and gendered shame. For instance, feelings of insecurity regarding appearance and desirability were sometimes shaped by young women's exposure to racism and Eurocentric beauty standards.

> I think in Indigenous communities, a lot of body image problems … come from just being black. We feel like we're not wanted because we're black, because of our features. (Susie, 21 years)

This is echoed by Carlson (2020) who documented how some Aboriginal women concealed their Aboriginality on online dating apps to present a more 'desirable' self, and how misogynistic and racist harassment only occurred *after* their Aboriginal identities were revealed. Moreover, research with older Aboriginal women suggests racism can negatively impact self-worth and affect the ability to develop healthy sexual relationships (Dune et al. 2018). Therefore, whilst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal young women may share experiences of misogyny and sexual shame, it remains critical to recognise how these experiences are highly racialised.

### *Normalising sex, embracing difference*

Young women in our study framed sex as 'normal', highlighted its positive aspects and embraced sexual diversity. They spoke about pride and resistance and, in doing so, expressed sentiments that challenged shame-fostering discourses.

'People shouldn't judge 'cause everyone does it' (Ava, 16 years).

> I'm at an age now I think it's okay. It's appropriate because we are coming into young women, young men. I don't think anything is wrong with that. (Cherice, 17 years)

Sexual feelings and experiences were seen by several participants as being an important part of 'growing up' and as playing a fundamental role in the shaping of young people's identities.

> The ages of thirteen through to sixteen is when sex[uality] is probably incredibly important to learning about who you are as a person. Kind of like shaping … your sexual identity and romantic identity. (Madeleine, 20 years)

It was widely felt that young people were more positive and open-minded about sex than previous generations. Sex was described as something that young people often found 'enjoyable', 'fun', 'meaningful' and was something people did for different reasons.

Several young women appeared to embrace sexual diversity, expressing acceptance toward casual sex, non-monogamous relationships, and sexual pride.

> … The world is changing over time. So, some people might find different ideas of relationships to be their types of thing, like people that are in multiple relationships or open relationships. (Lauren, 20 years)

> I'm all about that. Free love … I feel like there's a big attitude surrounding pride. [S]ex is more open now. And, culturally, I find that really beautiful because in the past, it hasn't been that way. (Susie, 21 years)

A few participants were openly supportive or part of the LGBTQ + community and saw themselves and other young people as being advocates.

> I think young adults are leading the conversation when it comes to LGBT issues. Young adults and … teens too – pretty much the younger generation. (Susie, 21 years)

> Growing up, your parents hopefully do their part in educating and being a role model for relationships. And now that I'm a big lefty gay activist, I tell them all the time my understandings of sex and gender and identity and it's kind of gone both ways. I've definitely seen my mum grow over the past couple of years and she surprised me the other day and was like super woke. (Madeleine, 20 years)

In this last quote, the family's role in informing young people's understandings of relationships is recognised which was reiterated by other participants. Madeleine also frames herself in the role of educating her parents, thus presenting a model where parents and children engage in an exchange of ideas about sex and gender. In their statements, Susie and Madeleine present young people as capable of contributing valuable knowledge and discourse and as playing active roles in reconstituting ideas about gender and sexuality within their families, peer groups and communities.

Young women were most likely to talk about their sexual and romantic lives with close, and usually female, friends that they trusted – sometimes as a strategy to protect themselves from social judgment. Friendships with other young Aboriginal people could offer an additional layer of shared understanding and support.

> Indigenous and Aboriginal peers, they were who I went to … Because as soon as you meet another person who's Indigenous, you know the struggles you've shared, the aspirations

> that you both share and it's just like this immediate 'we know each other, we get it' … Because when you might talk to some non-Indigenous friends, they just kind of don't get it. (Madeleine, 20 years)

Overall, participants' friendships functioned as non-judgmental spaces where young women felt more accepted, allowing them to talk more candidly about their experiences, seek and give personal advice, and explore their sexual beliefs and values. These findings parallel those from research with Australian young people whereby friendships offered space for 'shared values and mutual identity work' and were 'a source of non-judgmental advice and discussion regarding one's sexual experiences' (Byron 2017a, 490). As such, young people's friendships exist as sites for both conformity and resistance to sexual norms and as spaces in which young women can more safely explore their sexualities.

By expressing and encouraging increasingly open and accepting attitudes around gender and sexuality, participants challenged some of the stigmatising views about sex that they knew to persist in broader society and among their communities and peers. Some talked specifically about resisting sexual and gender-based shame. This included 'not taking on' other people's negative judgments, overcoming fears of shame to seek help, and questioning sexual and gendered norms.

> Being Aboriginal, it's a shame thing … I find being a female in an Aboriginal family, especially being a young one, asking for help is quite hard. But you've just gotta own it. Asking for help is probably one of the strongest characteristics in a young person. (Leah, 20 years)

> I think that queerness has always been a part of our culture and I think it's more of a white Eurocentric idea to be anti-queer, a Christian sort of Fundamentalist concept that being queer is bad. You know, we've got sistergirls and brotherboys. That's a part of our culture. (Madeleine, 20 years)[1]

In suggesting that queerness is part of Aboriginal culture, Madeleine resists anti-queer sentiments which she considers a product of colonial efforts to 'assimilate, 'civilise' and Christianise Aboriginal peoples' (Cunneen 2014, 386). Susie (21 years) also associated social preoccupations with female virginity and 'purity' with Christianity. Such instances demonstrate how young women could draw on their Aboriginal identities, culture and historical knowledge to question or resist discourses on gender and sexuality they considered problematic.

Young women also saw cultural pride and belonging as helping to build confidence in their Aboriginality, which could help foster self-worth and confidence in their bodies and appearance.

> I think within the Aboriginal community, [blackness] is also celebrated. Like we love feeling black, we love looking black. (Susie, 21 years)

> It's fine to be however you want … From my experience, I have come to believe that you'd probably experience a lot more fat-shaming and size-shaming from white Western cultures than you would from black Indigenous cultures. (Madelaine, 20 years)

Connecting to and embracing culture and community can therefore present some young women with additional understandings of blackness, beauty and self-worth that promote pride and self-acceptance, and counter Eurocentric ideals. This is important as self-worth was seen by participants as playing a key role in establishing healthy sexual relationships.

## Features of positive relationships

### Intimacy and love

Talking about features of positive sexual relationships, many participants emphasised the importance of intimacy, connection, and love. It was considered positive for 'sexual intercourse [to be] with a person who you feel loved and connected to' (Dorothy, 16 years). Many participants described the importance of 'having a connection with the other person' (Grace, 23 years) which entailed 'being near each other' (Violet, 17 years), being 'comfortable with a certain someone' (Gabrielle, 16 years), being with someone 'that can [also] be their best friend' (Lucy, 17 years), and 'getting to know a person throughout all of their depth and all the levels or layers of stuff they've got underneath themselves' (Lauren, 20 years). Having a sense of love was seen to contribute to greater happiness and satisfaction within sexual relationships. Though love and intimacy were often spoken about in regard to monogamous romantic relationships, they could also exist within other relational dynamics – 'you can have love, you can have a relationship and love someone, but you don't have to be with them' (Alix, unknown age).

Young Aboriginal men in our study also valued intimacy and connection in their sexual relationships, and talked about love, 'having chemistry' and 'creating bonds' (Graham et al. 2023). Non-Aboriginal young Australians saw intimacy as enhancing young people's sexual experiences and pleasure, with sex often facilitating a stronger connection between people within romantic, friendly and casual relationships (Byron 2017b). The value that young people place on intimacy in their sexual relationships 'challenges assumptions that young people's primary motivation for sexual activity is sexual pleasure' (Byron 2017b).

### Respect, care, and consent

Most participants spoke about respect and care as key features of positive sexual relationships. These features were entwined with young women's notions of safety in relationships.

> I feel women are looking for support and care. They want someone who believes they should feel safe, believes that women are allowed to be open and safe. (Susie, 21 years)

Respect in sexual relationships was conceived by participants as respecting people's privacy, needs and boundaries. Moreover, to care was to behave in ways that considered the other person's physical, mental, and sexual well-being. Exploring these issues triggered discussions about the importance of consent.

> You need to be very understanding and you need to be respectful of the other person, they may have boundaries. I think that's kind of a big one. [J]ust knowing your limit, what you can and can't do, because you don't want to push someone out of their comfort zone. (Cherice, 17 years)

Some young women talked about how negotiating consent and sexual boundaries was not always easy. For example, several participants talked about the pressure that many young women felt to have sex without condoms because it 'felt better' for male partners – 'guys make girls feel like they shouldn't use [condoms] because it doesn't make them feel good' (Julie, 17 years). When asked why a young woman might have sex without a condom, even when they felt uncomfortable, one participant said:

> The boys are supposed to take charge of the relationship, I guess. And they think 'cause they're dating, they can make all the choices. And maybe [young women] are too scared to say 'no'. (Charlotte, 17 years)

Studies have identified similar sentiments among other young Aboriginal women who described male partners who could sometimes exert a 'controlling' influence over sexual negotiation and act coercively to gain sex or sex without condoms (Bell, Aggleton, and Ward 2017; Ireland et al. 2015; Senior, Chenhall, and Helmer 2020). In these studies, and our own, many male partners were not Aboriginal (although some were) highlighting that unequal gender dynamics in sexual relationships exist across cultures. Indeed, research with a mixed-race, mixed-age cohort of Australian women identified frequent accounts of women allowing male partners 'to take the lead in sexual practice', abandoning condom use 'because their male partners did not like them', and prioritising male partners' sexual pleasure (Kelly et al. 2017). This suggests that unequal gender expectations around sex often complicate processes of consent for young women.

Participants specifically emphasised the need for respect 'for yourself and others … ' (which included '[not doing things] just to make other people feel comfortable') (Hannah, 18 years); for men to respect women – 'they should respect the girl 'cause it's her body, it's her right' (Charlotte, 17 years); and for young women to have a stronger sense of self-worth and sexual agency:

> … young women often have very negative and naive understandings of their sexual worth and power as a sexual agent. I think a lot of women grow up believing that they are meant to be this submissive servant and they don't really have a choice in how they engage their sexual agency. I think that's something that needs to be changed. (Madeleine, 20 years)

Elders, parents, and other family members were seen to play a key role in educating young people about relationships and encouraging them to value respect, care, and consent within their relationships.

> A lot of the Elders and parents think that it's important for young people to respect themselves and have respect for others when it comes to sexual relationships, which is like the most important part … So, they encourage the youth to respect each other and know each other's limits and boundaries. (Kelly, 19 years)

It was felt that respect and care were ingrained within Aboriginal culture. Therefore, it made sense for these values to extend into young people's sexual and romantic relationships.

> I think our [Aboriginal people's] connection with one another is really strong and with the land and community as one. We respect and love each other. (Piper, 17 years)

Aboriginal culture, communities and families thus helped to promote a sense of agency, self-respect, and self-worth among some young Aboriginal women, which older Aboriginal women in Queensland saw as being crucial to establishing healthy and positive sexual relationships with oneself and others (Dune et al. 2018). In asserting young women's worth and right to mutual respect and care, participants construct and reinforce narratives about sexuality that bolster young women's sense of agency and promote reciprocity and respect for self and others, thus challenging gender scripts that centre male power and sexual pleasure in heterosexual relationships (MacKinnon 1989; Van Roosmalen 2000).

### *Trust, loyalty, and honesty*

Young women identified trust and honesty as crucial to building positive relationships. Like respect and care, these qualities contributed to women's sense of safety within relationships.

> There's always a worry when you ask them to stop, they won't. It comes back to trust … Like, [if] you're having sex with someone and you say 'no', you're gonna trust them enough to stop. (Charlotte, 17 years)

Trust included having faith in the other person to respect one's sexual boundaries, however, was also discussed in relation to trusting their partners would be honest and 'loyal'.

> I want someone to be loyal and trustworthy and honest with me, cos I hate it when people lie to me. They just need to tell me straight up. (Gabrielle, 16 years)

Regarding loyalty, young women typically spoke about commitment within a sexually and/or romantically exclusive relationship and wanting to have a partner that did not cheat – ' … you wanna trust your partner to go out and not 'do' anything' (Charlotte, 17 years). This emphasis on loyalty may be tied to wider views about young men 'just want[ing] sex, that's all they want' (Cherice, 17 years) and being 'players' – 'guys, they cheat more' (Julia, 17 years). Such views were reinforced by young men in our study who talked about young men encouraging each other to 'act like a player' (Graham et al. 2023). Therefore, many young women preferred to 'get to know someone' before sexually engaging with them in order to gather information (such as whether someone was trustworthy and safe) to better inform their decision-making. Having sex within trusting relationships has been documented among other Aboriginal young people as a key strategy for keeping themselves safe (Bell et al. 2020b; Mooney-Somers et al. 2012; 2011).

Honesty and openness were key to building trust and supporting positive relationships.

> It is one of the most fundamental principles of any relationship, because if you don't have open communication … it's just not going to function. You need to be able to communicate what you want, what will make you happy, what's not making you happy. I think that's sort of the core of a good relationship. (Madeleine, 20 years)

Openness and honesty were considered essential to effectively communicate desires, expectations, and boundaries, address concerns and solve problems, negotiate sexual decisions and practice, and establish informed consent. Whilst Aboriginal young men also talked about the importance of having trust and honesty, they were less concerned with matters of disloyalty and 'cheating' (Graham et al. 2023).

### *Responsibility and growth*

Positive sexual relationships were associated with responsibility and 'safe sex'. Acting responsibly was framed as an ideal for young people transitioning into adulthood and implied a mental and behavioural shift towards more 'adult' ways of being. Young people spoke about responsibility as being symbolic of maturity – 'You get older and you get more wise about your shit, like STIs and safe sex' (Olivia, 26 years).

Being responsible in sexual relationships meant ensuring sex was consensual, communicating and respecting needs and boundaries, honouring one's desires and limits, discussing concerns and risks with partners (such as disclosing previous exposure to STIs), using appropriate contraception, and getting tested for STIs. However, being responsible entailed more than just sexual responsibility and was seen as a general way of being.

> Like someone that has a job, that has a goal, has a future. And, you know, like [young women] want someone … that has goals, that wants to do good in life, and that doesn't wanna just sit around and like … smoke cones or something. (Charlotte, 17 years)

Responsibility was associated with thoughtful decision-making; having ambition; taking on responsibilities and commitments; improved problem-solving and conflict resolution skills (e.g. learning to compromise, avoiding aggressive behaviours); having serious conversations, and developing a more open and considerate style of communicating. Also significant to some participants was that relationships were seen as contexts to facilitate personal growth – 'it can teach them … things might happen throughout it that can make them a stronger person' (Jasmine, 17 years) – and where partners could support one another in 'maturing together' (Ellie, 21 years).

## Conclusion

Young women in this study described navigating a range of negative, and often contradictory, discourses concerning women's sexuality within their communities. Participants contested stigmatising narratives by advocating for understanding of sex as normal and diverse, and articulated features of positive sexual relationships which, in their view, included intimacy, care, respect, trust, honesty and responsibility. Existing research shows that older Aboriginal women in Queensland valued these same features within their sexual relationships, suggesting these values are widely shared (Dune et al. 2018).

Participants asserted a range of positive framings of sex and relationships. In doing so, they were able to reconcile broader deficit-based discourses around sexuality by reframing their experiences as healthy and 'normal'. Through this process, they resisted beliefs that fostered sexual shame, demonstrated agency and ownership over their sexual narratives and identities, and established expectations about partner's behaviours to encourage sexual relationships where young women are respected and treated appropriately. Some participants drew on their sense of Aboriginal identity, culture and knowledge to resist particular beliefs about sexuality and gender that fostered shame, or to encourage a sense of pride and self-acceptance among Aboriginal young people. As shame-inducing cultural scripts about sexuality have been shown to create barriers to sexual help-seeking, service use and contraceptive uptake by Aboriginal young people (Bell et al. 2020a; Coombe et al. 2020; Larkins and McGinty 2009), Aboriginal young women's adoption and promotion of more positive and accepting attitudes around sexuality likely fosters improved sexual well-being.

Respect and care were seen as ingrained within Aboriginal culture. Elders and adults in young people's families and communities were recognised as encouraging positive values and behaviours in relationships, including respect for self and others. Aboriginal young women's friendships functioned as spaces to explore their sexual values, attitudes and beliefs and spoke to the importance of having supportive friendships with other young women. Friendships with other Aboriginal young women could be particularly

valuable so as to have the resources to understand how experiences and understandings of sex and relationships can be racialised. Findings, therefore, highlight how young women's understandings of sex and relationships are not only informed by their own sexual and romantic interactions but also through their various other social relationships – including platonic and familial relationships – and broader sociocultural norms.

This paper has focused on how Aboriginal young women's understandings of sex and relationships can impact how they manage their sexual well-being, and how connections to family, community and culture help shape the beliefs that guide sexual decision-making. Throughout their interviews, participants framed young people as being capable of having positive and healthy sexual relationships; and, as contributing to important discussions, reconstituting ideas about gender and sexuality and promoting more open and positive views about sex. These findings challenge stereotypes that frame Aboriginal youth as inherently 'risky' and 'irresponsible' by highlighting how Aboriginal young people can be proactive, thoughtful, and responsible in managing their sexual well-being and fostering positive relationships.

## Note

1. 'Sistergirls' and 'brotherboys' are terms, often used in Aboriginal communities, to refer to people who identify as transgender or genderqueer (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing 2022).

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