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Between binaries: life story interviewing with nonbinary plurisexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background and Aim: Historically, the perspectives and lived experiences of First Nations people whose identities fall between traditional gender and sexual binaries have often been overlooked or homogenized in research centered on broader LGBTIQA+ communities. This article foregrounds the life stories of four Indigenous Australians whose experiences traverse and disrupt normative binaries of gender and sexuality, illuminating the complexity of identities at diverse intersections. This article explores how nonbinary and plurisexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians interpret their developmental trajectories during adolescence and early adulthood, situating these understandings within the context of their intersecting identities.

Methods: Drawing on Atkinson, a Life Story Interviewing approach was employed and analyzed through Phillips and Bunda's Storying framework, an approach grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing. Interviews were conducted with four young Australian adults aged 18 to 30 years identifying as nonbinary and plurisexual (e.g. bisexual, pansexual, queer) and sought to understand how they explored their gender and sexual identities and experiences through narrative reflection.

Results: Throughout this piece, the stories of four participants are interwoven, highlighting both the shared and distinct aspects of their journeys in shaping a vessel that honors historically marginalized voices. The article explores experiences of connection, disconnection, and mental health within multiple contexts – including peer, family, social, and cultural environments. While some participants described affirming and accepting family relationships, other navigated significant challenges within their family dynamics.

Conclusions: This research offers deeper insights into the lived experiences of young nonbinary and plurisexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and highlights both the challenges and strengths within their lived realities. Study findings may inform professional practice for those working with diverse young people from priority populations, enhancing understanding and responsiveness to the unique needs of nonbinary, plurisexual and Indigenous Australians.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples; life story interviewing; storying; Australia; plurisexual

Introduction: the beginnings

Stories are ways of communicating and sharing human experience across written, spoken, and expressive mediums (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Storytelling is both deeply personal and a natural part of relationship-building, often undertaken without awareness of the profound meanings and connections these narratives can create (Atkinson, 2012). The stories we share form evolving pieces of a broader self-narrative that shifts across time and context. This paper contributes to a wider body of research exploring the stories of young Australians who are plurisexual—a spectrum of sexual identities characterized by attraction to more than one gender (e.g. bisexual, pansexual, queer). Plurisexual was first introduced in the literature by Galupo an colleagues (2014) with reasons for this term further elaborated in their later work (Galupo, 2020). This research journey began with the first author's reflexive exploration of their

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own bisexual identity (Johnson et al., 2024), which informed the team's positionality and approach to interviewing and documenting the lives of other Australians attracted to more than one gender. Our other work (Johnson et al., 2026) examined themes of mental health and family relationships within the life stories of 21 young plurisexual Australians. The present paper specifically focuses on four nonbinary and plurisexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, respectfully situating their narratives within methodologies grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing. The authors recognize the critical importance of centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in research concerning Indigenous Australian peoples and their experiences—an area historically under-represented and fraught with settler-colonialism (Day et al., 2023; Dudgeon et al., 2025; Liddelow-Hunt et al., 2025). This project was conducted in collaboration with Indigenous Australian community members who are trans, including a nonbinary academic who are all integral members of the research team, and the article is structurally presented in a fashion that aligns with and honors the Storying approach (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). More specifically, this approach uses first person-language and utilizes headings that align with standardized language of scholarly publications followed by a colon and a reframed meaning that is more accessible to readers of historically marginalized and oppressed backgrounds.

The Australian context: the stories of those who walked before us

As we recognize the international audience and impacts of globalization in increasing access and allowing platforms to previously untold stories, it is important for us to acknowledge the unique context in which this research occurs, as well as locating "self in place" within the stories we tell (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 18). The historical context from where research participants are recruited can have profound impacts on their subjective interpretation of lived experiences due to the unique policies, legislation, and societal attitudes in particular place at a specific time and place (Vasileiou et al., 2018). As all participants ($n=4$) were born within Australia, inspired by the work of Siverskog and Bromseth (2019), this section will provide some socio-political and medical-legal context to this country.

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent one of the world's oldest surviving cultural groups, with archaeological evidence (Clarkson et al., 2017; Hiscock et al., 2016) and genealogical analyses (Malaspinas et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2011) indicating their presence on the Australian continent for over 60,000 years ago. This deep temporal continuity opens pathways to storytelling traditions sustained across more than 1680 generations (Bowler, 2015). Passing on of stories through oral tradition from elders to emerging leaders is a survival practice that has continued across millennia (Charles, 2020). In 1788, the British Empire invaded and established penal colonies, seizing stolen lands under the inaccurate claim of Terra Nullius or 'no-one's land' (Banner, 2005). Following invasion came significant hardships through exposure to viruses and systematic intentional acts of discrimination and dispossession resulting in decimation of precolonial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations that have had profound impacts on their social and emotional wellbeing to date (Day et al., 2023; Spurway et al., 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples were stripped of their rights, freedoms and not recognized as citizens until the 1967 constitutional referendum (Commonwealth Australia, 1967). Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not recognized as the traditional custodians of these lands until case law established in 1993 (Native Title Act, 1993). Through colonization, many British legislative and political systems were imported such as our representative democracy and constitutional monarchy (Vines, 2009). This included homophobic legislation (Riseman, 2019), including consensual same sex intercourse having life sentences or death sentences until these were decriminalized in South Australia first in the mid-1970s (see Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1975), with all jurisdictions decriminalized same sex relations before the turn of the century (see Criminal Code Amendment Act, 1997).

Gender diversity beyond the female/male binary was recognized by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups prior to colonization (Riseman, 2022; O'Sullivan & Day, 2023). Several language groups had unique terms to recognize gender diverse people such as trans women living in the Tiwi Islands' Northern Territory who were known as *Yimpininni* (Kerry, 2014). Within contemporary society, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the terms Brotherboy and Sistergirl to describe gender diversity, with cultural nuances that are not limited by Westernized constructs of trans identities, experiences, and expressions (Anae, 2020; Riggs & Toone, 2017). Brotherboy is a term used to describe those who have masculine spirits, perform male roles, and engage in men's business, while Sistergirl is used to describe those who have feminine spirits, perform female roles, and engage in women's business (Kerry, 2014; Riseman, 2022, TransHub, 2021). Due to racist policies aiming to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through systematic severing of connections to land, culture, and kin, pervasive indoctrination of Christianity also occurred through the establishment of government-funded missions (Martin, 2022). Within these missions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, who had been forcibly removed, were forbidden from using traditional language, clothing, and customs (Kerry, 2014; Martin, 2022). This has led to devastating impacts and losses to date, with, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reporting experiencing anti-LGBTQA+ discrimination within their own communities and families (Farrell, 2015; Hill et al., 2024; Johnson, 2015).

Like many high-income Westernized countries, Australia has had significant and radical changes in relation to protections from discrimination over the previous four decades, with rapid progress toward health equity and social justice occurring since 2000. Despite the considerable progress LGBTIQA+ communities have experienced within Australia, heteronormative, cisnormative, and endosexist discourses and structures remain dominant, and young queer Australians continue to experience disproportionately high risks related to mental health and suicide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Bretherton et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2024; Strauss et al., 2017).

Paralell to this, this paper was produced during a particularly turbulent time in Australian and global history where many previously won freedoms and health equity strategies are now being critiqued by right-wing political influences. This includes international influences, such as in the U.S. and its erasure of trans research and removal of diversity, inclusion and equity policies negatively affecting broader trans and gender diverse communities (The White House, 2025a, 2025b), and more locally, where all gender-affirming hormonal therapies have been paused for young trans people on a waitlist seeking puberty blockers and hormone therapies in state services (Queensland Government, 2025). The latter is influenced by the 'Cass Review' (Cass, 2024) which has been thoroughly critiqued for methodological flaws and harmful recommendations (Moore et al., 2025); and disregarding evidence of positive influences of gender-affirming hormone therapy on youth and adults (Bretherton et al., 2021; Hughto et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2017; Turban et al., 2025; Windt et al., 2026) in favor of gender-critical perspectives concerning treatment regret and potential long-term health consequences (Sanders et al., 2023). The Australian federal (Australian Government, 2024) and state governments recently produced action plans to support LGBTIQA+ people (Queensland Government, 2024), however, at the time of writing, conservative governments may disregard these previously established plans making LGBTIQA+ communities further vulnerable.

Methods and analytical framework: our ways of doing and our research roots

Our research team members live and work across Jaggera, Turribal, Ugarapul, Jarowair and Giabal lands in Queensland Australia (which are known as the Ipswich, Brisbane and Toowoomba regions) and we respectfully acknowledge the elders of our past, the elders supporting the community presently, and those emerging future leaders, whom some of these participants may be and know. We show deep respect for the stories and oral traditions shared by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the rich insights from their survivorship of colonization that these stories hold. This study belongs to a broader body of research related to

plurisexuality and shares a larger dataset with earlier work with a specific focus on the four nonbinary Indigenous Australians: three Aboriginal Australians and one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian, who gifted their stories for this research. This paper was codesigned and coauthored with a Brotherboy—an Australian Aboriginal trans man and written in a way that respects and pays tribute to Indigenous ways of learning and being through the adoption of Storying (see Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

Positionality: who we are, where we come from, and our ways of being

This research is informed by perspectives of anti-oppressive practice, social justice principles and challenging epistemic injustice. It adopts a relativist ontology, interpretivist epistemology and is part of a broader body of iterative research (Johnson et al., 2024) relating to plurisexual and gender diverse people. Our research team includes trans, nonbinary and cisgender experiences spanning across sexual orientations (bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual) and partnership representations (polyamorous and monogamous). Our racial and ethnic identities include Aboriginal Australian, White Australian with Irish heritage, North African, Native American, and White European descent. We span across class backgrounds (working, middle, upper-middle, upper class), immigration statuses (Australian born, first-generation and immigrant), language statuses (English as an additional language, and English as first language) and professional backgrounds (gender studies, social work, psychology, education). As further contributions to the *Storying* research approach, we locate ourselves, sharing our cultural roots and identities (see Phillips & Bunda, 2018).

Amber: I use She/Her pronouns and I am a non-Indigenous Australian bisexual woman born on Wiradjuri lands (Bathurst New South Wales), currently living on Yagara, Jagera and Ugarapul lands (Ipswich QLD), and I work on Giabal and Jarrowair lands (Toowoomba QLD). I grew up primarily with a single-parent low socio-economic family with intergenerational trauma and mental health histories within my legacy. I am the eldest within a sibship of four and have two siblings who identify within the LGBTIQA+ rainbow. I have a lived and living experience of mental health and neurodiversity and the first within my family to graduate university with a professional background in Social Work. Social Work as a profession is aligned with values of advocacy, social justice and enhancing capacity and I am proud to have the privilege of hearing and walking alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in my clinical and academic work. Having personally experienced upward social mobility from a disadvantaged background I am particularly interested in understanding and sharing the stories of other people who have experienced disadvantages and using my privilege to amplify these voices.

Emerson: As a Murri Brotherboy, I use he/him pronouns and was born and raised on the lands of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples (Brisbane QLD), currently living and working on the lands of the Yagara, Jagera and Ugarapul peoples (Ipswich QLD). I am shaped by a deep commitment to equity and justice. I was a secondary teacher for close to a decade in large, primarily low socio-economic public schools, where I witnessed the barriers faced by First Nations students and queer students alike. These experiences continue to shape my values and the way I show up in research, advocacy, and community work. My professional journey spans teaching, policy and research, with a focus on curriculum, equity and access to education. Where possible, I use my position to privilege those who have been historically excluded and remain committed to creating space for truth-telling, relational accountability, and transformative storytelling.

Amy: I identify as a heterosexual, cis-gender female and use 'she/her' pronouns. I grew up in rural, Northern Minnesota (USA) and moved to Australia permanently in 2001. My ethnic background includes European American and Native American (Oneida Indian Nation) descent. I live and work in Yagara Country (Ipswich region), the lands of the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples. I juggle roles of mother, partner, Professor and Clinical/Health Psychologist, and lead the 'Health Equity' research program at the UniSQ Institute for Health. My passion for social justice and health equity stems from transformative

experiences while studying at the University of St Catherine, including volunteering at a homeless shelter and working as a research assistant with a project at a VA Hospital focused on enhancing healthcare access among Native American and Hispanic American veterans, and during school trips to Guatemala and Spain. From these experiences and contrasting with a 'privileged' childhood, I have cultivated a strong lifelong desire and vocational calling to improve health and wellbeing *for and with* priority communities.

Lorelle: I identify as a heterosexual, cis-gender female and use she/her pronouns. I grew up on the traditional lands of the Barunggam peoples around Dalby, Queensland, and I now live and work on the lands of the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples. I am passionate about social justice for all. I am an internationally recognized psychology educator with 30 years' experience in higher education. I currently serve as Associate Provost at the University of Southern Queensland, and I previously held the role of Dean and Head of the School of Psychology and Wellbeing for six years. I am also a registered psychologist, and the Immediate Past Chair of the Heads of Departments and Schools of Psychology Association (HODSPA). Throughout my career, I have been honored to receive several national teaching awards, including an Australian Carrick Award and the APS President's Award for Distinguished Contribution to Psychology. My research focuses on student transition, community-based learning, and wellbeing, with a strong commitment to using people's stories to strengthen communities and support future pathways.

Annette: I am an endosex, pansexual, nonbinary and Finnish-Algerian-Australian born in Sweden living on the unceded lands of the Giabal and Jarowair Peoples in Toowoomba. I use the pronouns Netta, they/them, and purposefully only engage in research that is based on genuine love, to do no harm, and it is strongly rooted in the ethos and philosophy of academic advocacy to promote health and rights within the LGBTQIA+ space. This genuine love for the research I purposefully embark on, and the people I work with in promoting social change, specifically fall within the areas of corporeal governance, gender and sexuality in health, medical, carceral, education, and sport settings. Specific focus is associated with critical trans discourses and critical intersex studies. I consciously work with ethically and philosophically likeminded scholars and advocates seeking to eradicate harms rooted in endosexism, cisgenderism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, including settler and corporeal colonization.

Life Story Interviewing

Life Story Interviewing (LSI) is an immersive qualitative research method that has emerged within fields of psychology and anthropology. It was developed by Atkinson (1998, 2001) and broadened by Plummer (2001), with acknowledgements that the narrative study of lives pre-dates this method (see Cohler, 1988) and oral traditions of passing down stories of lives has existed for millennia within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies (Bowler, 2015; Charles, 2020; Phillips & Bunda, 2018). This research method is focused on *how* individuals assign meaning to life experiences and particularly how the life trajectory influences identity formation. Researcher immersion and reflexivity is required to shape questions that encourage participants to "share their stories and make discoveries along the way" (Russell, 2022, p. 350). This can illuminate participants' narrative identity and experiences or their "internalized and evolving life story" that incorporates their past experiences and future hopes to convey a sense of self (McAdams & McLean, 2013 p. 233). LSI centers around highlighting and centralizing the voice of the storyteller with highest regard and respect for subjective meaning people carry within their lives, with the interviewer's role to be a "sensitive, respectful listener in guiding the life storyteller's narration" (Atkinson, 2012, p.189). Throughout this research, we also acknowledge that life stories are continuously being written, added to and reauthored. This means that these point-in-time reflections and chapters within their lives may not encompass the whole of an individual's lived and living experiences.

Yarning – respectful similarities and differences

Life Story Interviewing and *Yarning*—an "Aboriginal culturally specified process" and core element of "Aboriginal peoples' ways of understanding and

learning throughout life" (Atkinson et al., 2021, p. 191; Walker et al., 2014), share important methodological and philosophical foundations. Both approaches center relationality, narrative, and participant agency, prioritizing the lived experiences of the participants, enabling participants to guide the storytelling in ways that align with their own values and perspectives (Atkinson, 2021; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Grounded in conversational flow, *yarning* explicitly draws upon culturally respectful practices embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, while *life story interviewing* often adapts to the context of the participant (Kovach, 2009). Each method supports holistic, non-linear narratives that offer rich contextual insights, and both resist rigid interview structures in favor of flexible, responsive dialogue (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, LSI was selected instead of *Yarning* because the broader project includes participants who did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australian. The LSI approach provided a respectful and adaptable framework for engaging diverse voices while maintaining a focus on participant-driven storytelling.

Storying as a research model and approach

Storying is a research approach grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and learning, where "stories are embodied acts of inter-textualized, trans-generational law, and life spoken across and through time and place" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 8). This approach is defined as "the act of making and remaking of stories," recognizing that stories "are alive and in constant fluidity as we story with them" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 23). While Storying acknowledges its connections to narrative inquiry, the use of the term is deliberate. It centers the importance of enabling all voices to be heard—not only those historically situated in positions of power—and commits to language that is accessible "across cultures, ages, classes, disciplines and sectors" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 20). Storying also recognizes the privileged histories of written documentation and embraces story as a decolonizing act that offers rich, complex insights beyond dominant Westernized narratives (Blair, 2019).

Bunda and Phillips (2023) outline five principles of Storying in research and social movements: 1) Storying nourishes thought, body and soul—nourishment may be uncomfortable, yet it strengthens and expands our understanding of others' experiences; 2) Storying claims voice in silenced margins—deep listening to previously unheard voices enables social justice; 3) Storying is embodied relational meaning-making—those privileged to hear stories share responsibility for empathy, understanding, and ethical engagement; 4) Storying intersects past and present as living oral archives—stories carry histories forward, shaping contemporary lives and identities; and 5) Storying enacts collective ownership and authorship—individual and shared narratives together reveal broader meaning.

This piece has been crafted with these principles at its foundation. By sharing the generous contributions of our three Aboriginal Australian and one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian participants, we aim to deepen understanding and foster greater insight into their lived experiences being nonbinary and plurisexual.

Recruitment: ways of seeking stories

As noted in our earlier work (Johnson et al. 2024), participants from the broader data pool which this paper draws from were recruited through purposive sampling techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015) with specific eligibility criteria of (a) being attracted to people of more than one gender (b) aged between 18 and 30 years, (c) residing in Australia, and (d) having spent most of their life, and importantly their adolescence, within Australia. Passive recruitment included a flyer advertising the research *via* several social media forums and groups included Reddit and Facebook pages specific for gender and sexually diverse communities within Australia. This process followed the recommendations and guidelines of social media recruitment of key priority population groups (Gelinas et al., 2017; Waling et al., 2022). Research flyers were advertised on social media pages with group-owner permission and recruitment information was also disseminated to relevant local LGBTIQA+ organizations and mental health community organizations and shared through professional networks (e.g. sexual health and mental health). For the four nonbinary Indigenous Australian participants in this paper,

two received a flyer from a family member and two saw it advertised on a Facebook Group.

Procedure: ways of doing

After screening for eligibility and providing written informed consent, participants were invited to participate in interviews exploring their life experiences as a plurisexual person. Participants were offered a gift card of $50 as an honorarium for their time and as approved by the University of Southern Queensland and consistent with research participant incentives in similar published research (Connell, 2010; Fowler et al., 2024; Neil et al., 2023). Three participant interviews were conducted through the video-conferencing software Microsoft Teams, while one participant requested an in-person interview which was conducted at a local library within a private conference room. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using automatic transcription software within Microsoft Teams. This was then reviewed by the first author *via* listening and reading the transcripts, correcting errors verbatim with removal of vocalized pauses. These interviews produced a large quantity of rich data, some of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

A semi-structured interview guide was collaboratively developed with the research team and submitted within our ethics application. This interview guide, adapted from McAdam's (2008) LSI protocol, focused on key concepts within literature with a focus on experiences and memories related to sexuality, gender, identity formation, family and community perceptions and mental health. Interview length ranged from 55 and 82 min, averaging 65 min. Three participants elected to have one interview each, while a fourth participant engaged in two interviews due to identifying additional narratives to share not captured in their first interview.

Results: gifted stories and knowledge

Demographics: about the people

A demographic table of participant characteristics is found below, de-identified with pseudonyms selected by participants marked with an asterisk. In cases where participants did not select a pseudonym, a gender-neutral name was assigned to them by the first author. For additional de-identification, location of residence is not provided but referred to in metropolitan and regional/rural terms, and cultural backgrounds were broadened (e.g. if a participant identified as French or German this was recorded as 'Central European'). Participants were divided into two similar sized age groups (21–25, and 26–30) to offer further anonymity and confidentiality. Gender, sex assigned/presumed at birth, sexuality and pronouns have not been altered (see Table 1).

Participant summaries: storying lives

Joey

At time of interviewing, Joey was a nonbinary pansexual person in their early 20's from Aboriginal, Central European and Anglo-Australian background. They were working within an apprenticeship while also studying at TAFE. Joey described attraction to all genders although experience a romantic preference toward feminine and nonbinary people due to a connection through similar life experiences and perceived as "safer." Joey reflected on feeling cautious about engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with cis men, due to "horror stories my sisters have told me", including their own sexual abuse history.

Joey grew up within suburbia of a capital city in Australia and although their parents were Catholic, Joey found it interesting that their parents never married, believing this would have gone against both sets of grandparents' beliefs. Joey's

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonyms and Pronouns	Age Range	Self-reported Gender	Sex assigned/ presumed at birth	Sexuality	Cultural Background
Joey* (They/Them)	21–25	Nonbinary	Female	Pansexual	Aboriginal Australian with Central European heritage
Rave* (She/Her & He/Him)	26–30	Genderfluid	Male	Bisexual	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian with South-East Asian heritage
Drew (They/Them)	26–30	Nonbinary Agender	Female	Pansexual	Aboriginal Australian
Avery (They/Them)	21–25	Gender Queer Nonbinary	Female	Queer	Aboriginal Australian

parents had children to other partnerships prior to their birth, and Joey's parents separated in their early teenage years. Joey is in a sibship of six, and five of them were queer. While Joey's older siblings went to Catholic schools, Joey attended a public school. They also described their family "moving around a lot" until their parents had "settled down more" in their lives.

In middle primary school, Joey described an early attraction to girls and the unfortunate experience of being 'outed' by their older sister who had read a note in their phone stating "I think I'm bisexual." Although Joey's sister immediately disclosed this to their other siblings, fortunately Joey felt supported. Upon onset of puberty and the body changes that started to occur, Joey realized they were uncomfortable and had hoped for a more masculinizing puberty experience like their older brother. This was particularly confusing as they knew they "did not want to be a girl", however felt a connection and related to "the female experience," though did not yet have the language for nonbinary identities.

Joey came out to their parents at the same time as their sister and reported that "I was just a nervous teenage kid and was like 'Me too.'" They came out to their mother first, followed by dad and step-mum as they felt mum would be more understanding and "less judgey." Throughout their several 'coming out' experiences through evolving identities, Joey reflected on how it was more challenging to disclose their gender compared to their sexuality "gender identity was definitely a lot harder…the next day I came out was as a trans guy, then eventually I came out as nonbinary." One of the coming out experiences was *via* a family group Zoom call and the response was generally supportive with some questions, not all of which Joey knew the answers for yet. Joey's dad adopted an approach of passive acceptance, however there were times when this felt superficial. Joey described their dad's perspective was "Live your life, but it's a sin." Their mum was more supportive though continued to have a lot of questions, particularly how sexuality and gender intersect such as assuming "If you're like this then does that mean you're straight? Or lesbian?" to which Joey said "I don't know! I just like people!"

In junior years of high school (grade 7—10) Joey reflected on experiences of their peers discussing boys they liked, however when Joey did the same for girls, it was met with confusion, disgust and being shut down and being told "we are talking about boys, not girls." Joey experienced a fear and concern that their attraction to girls was seen as 'wrong' or 'bad' and experienced female peers assuming Joey would be sexually attracted to them or looking at them lustfully and telling Joey to "Stop looking at us like that!" from passing glances. Joey also admitted to suspecting and getting assessed for autism spectrum disorder and felt that their ways of interacting with others and particularly missing social nuances of communication with female peers, impacted their mental health in their teens.

Joey reflected on how changing high schools for their senior years (grade 11–12) was beneficial to be out and proud about their gender and sexuality. Drama class was particularly a positive experience due to having a lot of other neurodiverse and queer peers where they felt a sense of community and belonging. Also present were themes of identity and expression exploration through creative mediums such as drama and writing. Joey started wearing the male uniform and found their peers were curious in a respectful way which Joey found wholesome. Joey graduated high school amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, got a job and moved out with one of their siblings. They spent some time in community theater and LGBT+ writing groups and felt joining these communities was "one of the best things that happened to me. It felt like a family away from family." Joey spoke fondly of other connections to queer communities and events such as attending Mardi Gras and other queer specific youth groups.

Joey shared they experienced a mental health crisis the year prior to recording, requiring hospital admission. Although some time had passed, they described challenges in returning to their pre-morbid mental health and functioning, partially contributed to challenges in accessing appropriate mental health services, even within a city context. Joey's first family health practitioner did not have a good understanding of mental health and the practitioner claimed that "gender dysphoria doesn't exist and [gender incongruence] was

against his culture and religion." It took several changes in doctors, particularly seeking ones that "understood that AFAB experience" due to experiences of going to "male doctors and getting discriminated against." Although Joey did not feel their current mental health clinician "fully understand[s] the queer community, she's never judgmental and she's like 'I should know and need to be educating myself.'"

Ways that Joey found helpful in managing positive mental wellbeing are through playing the drums and creative writing. They also enjoyed talking to people and engaging in research, part of their motivation in sharing their life story as part of this research project. The messages Joey wished to share their younger self was "I wish I had told like my older sisters 'cause… I think it would have been good to tell them that I was into girls. Or there's nothing wrong with you liking girls and boys, there is nothing wrong with wanting to look like a guy wanting to be masculine. Like there's nothing wrong with it." Thus, Joey reflected on the importance of being their authentic self and normalizing their diversity and wishing this was a message they received when they were younger.

Rave

At time of interviewing Rave was a genderfluid bisexual person in their mid-twenties with cultural connections to Torres Strait Islander (maternal), and Aboriginal and South-East Asian (paternal) heritage, including Anglo-Australian background. Rave used she/her and he/him pronouns interchangeably depending on their expression and feeling of the day. For ease of writing the pronouns used throughout are documented as they/them. Rave grew up in a regional city in Australia and experienced a kinship adoption with their maternal great aunt, as their mother was a teenager when Rave was born. Although Rave described having "a complex family system", they always felt "connected" and had relationships with their mother and younger siblings. They were estranged from their father, though in early adulthood connected with paternal extended family.

Rave described their upbringing as "somewhat sheltered yet supportive, inclusive and allowed exploration of identity." They described their environment being very "multicultural and diverse with other kids from all different cultural backgrounds" and they appreciated having this early exposure to diversity as it contrasted with regions with predominantly Anglo-Australian communities. As a child, Rave described themselves as "very flamboyant and colorful" and asked to grow their hair long in grade 1, though was requested by their parents to "wait until high school." Some of Rave's aunties gave them wigs and feminine clothes for birthdays. Rave's gender expression was well received by the family, mostly seen as "a kid having fun, raw and unfiltered; no shun or shame about it which not everyone has that privilege." Rave showed great appreciation and gratitude that their parents were not "strict or conservative."

Rave spoke about developing romantic feelings for multiple genders, primarily to girls from age 9—12 then experienced first attraction to a boy and "was like my world flipped again but it was really cool because none of it was forced or scary, it was just like one day I got this character upgrade." Rave had suspected that they were attracted to males, but "hadn't really thought about it or taken it seriously until that moment. Rave came out to friends in grade 7 and stated, "I think I'm bi or gay" and was met with positive support as peers appeared to suspect or know before Rave did. This was reassuring as at times Rave felt a bit confused or uncertain, and their peers would just reassure them "it's all normal and fine." Rave did not tell their family but suspected "that they already knew" and felt reassured that they would be "fine and accepting" although did admit that "there was a part of me that felt it was taboo to talk about with my parents, even though it was the opposite." Rave described a friend who later identified as a trans woman and felt solidarity and connection in having another person assigned male at birth present as feminine growing up. Although they went to different high schools, it helped Rave normalize their gender experience and expression. They admitted to not having any friends who were openly sexually diverse, "not one that was openly attracted to the same or multiple genders" though some friends came out after high school in early adulthood.

Rave finally grew their hair at ages 12–13 and experienced grief that their adoptive mother had passed away and was unable to see this. Rave reflected that "maybe there was a bit of numbing" to the grief and loss around this time. Rave described their childhood friend group as "the tightest group of friends I'd had up until this point of my life, and they were all girls. I had the typical daily surrounding with a lot of girly things from then on and I loved it." Although Rave experienced some bullying, they generally described a strong resilience "it didn't bother me because I was a wild child" and entered high school at 13 as feminine presenting. Rave's dad warned them to "Be careful going into high school now, like you get bullied like people call you a girl or call you gay like Fagot." Rave felt this was a moment where their dad "freaked out" however due to having a "good relationship, I remember just stating 'It's alright dad.'" Rave kept their long hair for one year before cutting it off and reflected "looking back on that moment, I wonder if there was like any subconscious reasoning behind my choice" as it felt sudden and somewhat impulsive after years of wanting to grow their hair.

Rave experienced approximately a decade from mid teenage years to early twenties where there was a "kinda regression" in their gender expression which they said, "I don't want to say the word ashamed because it wasn't, but I think there was a shyness." They continued and expressed, "I went back in regards to my gender identity, unconscious or not entirely aware of it, just living my teenage years and early adult life as just a guy." Rave reflected on how it was "definitely easier" to present as their assigned gender at birth, particularly during their teenage years, although did not feel ashamed of being feminine. When same sex marriage was legalized, "it felt good stepping into the world as an adult for the first time where queer marriage is now legal." Rave described their approach to navigating their sexuality and gender "just roll with it" throughout the journey. They described, "you are who you are and what are you going to do about it? You can only suppress it if you don't want to do something about it and that's easier said than done so why wouldn't you just wanna live like who you really are." These were values and morals they had learnt from their parents who celebrated and accepted diversity with open arms.

In their early twenties, Rave reconnected with their feminine side also experienced stronger attraction to males, describing "a lot of sexual freedom" and relationship exploration and a meaningful relationship with a woman who accepted that they were "like a little bit 'like honey'" [referring to being effeminate]. More recently Rave experienced a relationship where their partner encouraged them to dress up/try drag which re-awakened and re-affirmed their genderfluidity as "more than just a costume"—initially as nonbinary until settling as genderfluid. They also felt more secure in their sexuality as being bisexual and started to appreciate attraction to many genders at the same time, "so this awakening then came again, like, "OK, well now I'm attracted to more than one gender sexually now. That was really cool because I knew before that moment, I never really saw women sexually."

Rave has felt connections in the queer capital-city scene and feeling safe amongst other queer people. They reported a sense of wondering "are we going to get along or not" as they described themselves as "really gay coded" and felt safer and more accepted in communities with gender and sexuality diverse people, not exclusively cis gay men. "When I step into a space now where it's just gay men, it's fine. It's whatever, like, but now I know inside, like, 'Oh my God, technically, like I'm not in this community anymore,' and internally and refine myself again and to walk through the world with confidence, the way that I did before when I wasn't completely aware of who I was."

Regarding mental health, Rave admitted to experiencing a drug induced psychotic episode in late teenage years which was quite alarming for them. They had engaged in cannabis and noticed a gradual increase in paranoia and withdrawal. They reported "I just started spiraling and people were wondering what was wrong with me and all that." It required an acute admission, and psychiatric support, "a couple of years on heavy medication" though Rave proudly shared the psychosis is completely in remission and they no longer required long-term medication management

"which [wa]s great." Rave acknowledged "the anxiety and the depression that stays around today ties in with gender and my sexuality. The path of where I'm heading in the future is never predictable. It's kind of uncertain in regard to my safety and wellbeing," particularly emphasizing the current political climate of uncertain acceptance of their identity. Rave expressed concern about traveling through the world and worried about their safety in other spaces "I don't have a desire to move and like travel through the world because I generally just don't feel safe. I think that's one of the main things that queer people fear—it's gonna be there for a long time. Even though the world is much better as it is now that, fundamental anxiety is always there."

Rave reported alone time to recharge and reflect was helpful in improving their wellbeing. They were aware that feelings often pass and to just take time to "ride out that wave." Listening to music and being amongst other queer people or people who can validate and understand their experiences, and helped Rave get through challenging times. The messages Rave wanted to share with their younger self were: "there'll be many moments to come where you'll discover something new and that'll freak you out. The most important thing is, just trust me. Just roll with it and ride it, because that riding that rolling with it that's the flow to evolve. you're going from there, you're growing and…you always come up the other side as long as you let it just roll with it, be there for yourself, check in with others, and talk about it." In sharing these messages, Rave reflected on the importance of adapting to change and being open to new experiences as important values they wished to embed within their life.

Drew

At the time of interviewing, Drew identified as an agender, pansexual person in their late twenties who used they/them pronouns. They resided in a state capital city in Australia but grew up within a small regional city in another state. A few years prior to recording, they discovered that their paternal great-grandfather was an Aboriginal Australian but found it incredibly "difficult to connect to culture" because their family, whom they were disconnected to, "definitely knew about it but never even mentioned it or tell me anything about [my] great-grandfather." On their mother's side, Drew had mixed Eastern and Western European influences and strong Roman Catholic spirituality within their family.

Drew had a lifelong awareness of their queer identities and despite growing up in a regional country area with limited exposure, they explained "I don't think I've ever thought I was straight, to be honest. I've always known I'm different. I'm not like all these country kids…. I'm a bit weird…I'm a bit queer." They shared struggling with reactions of particularly boys around the time they were growing up, who they felt fetishized their sexuality. Drew's first relationship was at age fourteen, with a friend whom they were still in close contact with at time of interviewing. Being queer in the country came with its challenges. Drew found a friendship group that was mostly accepting, having "[rounded] up all the other outcasts and we just banded together and just stuck through it" but also described some difficulties with maintaining close, longtime friends, such as their best friend from preschool, who struggled with accepting Drew's identity, resulting in not speaking to Drew for almost a decade. Eventually, they reconnected, and Drew felt this childhood friend was more receptive and accepting to both Drew's gender and sexuality.

Prior to leaving home at 16, Drew described the relationship between their parents as "really volatile" and Drew often adopted a parental role with their younger sister, due to their dad being somewhat absent and their mother being "run-down and exhausted." They maintain a close relationship with their sister today, one of the few family connections they maintain. Drew reflected on the stark difference in upbringing between their sister and themselves "because my youngest sister was premature and had a lot of medical complications and developmental issues growing up" which resulted in their sister being assessed for autism during her childhood, an assessment Drew did not receive until their late twenties. It was particularly challenging leaving their sister behind upon leaving home as Drew "didn't know how she was going" however did not "feel safe or

welcome" so moved further west to another regional country town.

Although the rural country town they moved to was not particularly accepting, Drew described their mum as "surprisingly chill," just wanting Drew to be happy. It was their father who was less accepting, particularly to Drew's friends and, calling their "queer friends slurs to their face." Drew's dad did not want "it" in the house, and would call Drew's partner their "good friend" and telling Drew to "get over it" when challenged. This minimizing and invalidation of Drew's gender and sexuality were part of what led them to move out of home at sixteen. When Drew moved out, they cohabitated with others within a difficult environment, where they became exposed to traumatic events and involved in alcohol and substance use which Drew described "that house was just damaging." Due to their location, Drew was unable to access a lot of health support and reflected that they wish they had had the opportunity to go to the dentist, get their eyes and hearing tested, and have access to confidential mental health support "not just a school counselor [who was] going to tell my parents."

During a period of transience, Drew relocated interstate to the state capital, where they didn't expect to stay for long, however at time of interview, they considered this their home, particularly influenced by being "the first place I finally got actual mental health support." Previously, Drew avoided seeking mental health support due experiences they had as a teen, when "mum used to take me to the mental ward when she couldn't be bothered to deal with me. She would just drop me off there and just leave me there," which they described as being "pretty scary…I was in a hospital with no one to visit me. No way of calling or contacting anyone, not knowing if anyone knew where I was or could pick me up…. I don't know if they believe me. I don't know if mum's just telling them what they want to hear."

Despite an increase in access to mental health care in the city, Drew described ongoing challenges in the public health system, including one occasion of a wait time exceeding 19 h for a mental health crisis. "It was really rough, especially having gender neutral pronouns. A lot of them just not having it. there was discrimination in the health system." They felt further discrimination based on their substance use "then being furthered like ostracized for being an addict and they're like, 'oh, we don't want anything to do with you.'" Drew stressed holistic care as key to good mental health support, "like actually looking at everything…not looking at things situationally," and expressed that this was not always received. Drew described how layered complexities in presenting issues at times excluded them from accessing the support they needed, the eating disorder service "wouldn't see me before I started detoxing from alcohol" while simultaneously, the alcohol and other drug services "wouldn't take me because of my eating disorder not being managed." Drew explained that "there's a lot of discrimination and ostracization", and holistic care that is nonjudgemental, respectful of pronouns and accessible is key for young, queer people to access support they need.

Reflecting on their experiences of interpersonal relationships, Drew explained "I've always been kind of a loner", further explaining that they have always felt like they needed to "censor" themselves. Drew described "people pleasing", as a mechanism to avoid abandonment "I wanted people to know 'how can I help? I'll do anything so you don't leave me.' Yeah, even if that means just sacrificing everything about myself." In relationships with cisgender straight males, Drew felt unable to explore their gender identity, "anytime I would try and explore my gender, it was just shut down and told 'you're going to be a woman.'" Eventually, Drew took a break from romantic relationships to take the time to learn who they were, stating "it took a while to actually come to terms with the fact that I'm not a woman and I should probably learn about who I am." During this period, Drew had a lot of questions about themselves that they weren't able to explore during adolescence due to the trauma they had experienced "I know I'm not straight. I know that much. What else do I know? What do I like to do? What are my morals? Do I have any of those?" As a result of asking these questions, Drew found themselves involved in activism, specifically involving refugees, as well as every Invasion Day protest. On reflection, they attributed this influence to their Aunt, who Drew described as a "feminist and also passionate about animal rights", and

took Drew to their first protest when they were younger, as well as their close friend, whose parents were refugees, so Drew witnessed their challenges firsthand. Social justice, fairness, equity and equality were important to Drew.

Messages Drew wanted to tell their younger self were "Thank God you're still gonna be alive. You're gonna get through, you're gonna still be here. You're gonna actually thrive. It's gonna be a bit rough, but you're gonna make it. Just be patient with yourself. Show yourself kindness, especially how you show kindness to other people because you deserve it. You're not as useless as you think." In these messages, Drew reflected about survivorship of adversity and the value of self-compassion they wished to gift their younger self.

Avery

At the time of interviewing, Avery was a nonbinary Aboriginal person in their early twenties who used they/them pronouns and identified their sexual attraction as queer. Avery worked in an administrative assistant role within a government department and resided in one of the largest cities in Australia, having lived in several suburbs in this city their whole life. Avery was "trying to figure out" their ancestry and cultural connections "because my family was connected with the stolen generation and we were kind of removed from everything." They had only discovered they were Aboriginal within two years of time of interviewing, when their nan advised they had been exploring genealogy, and there was significant grief "because I didn't get to grow up with my culture and my mob and my upbringing was very white-washed."

Avery's parents separated prior to commencing school, so their childhood was marked by "living back and forth between the households." Avery's sibling-order and positioning varied between the two households, being the eldest in their dad and stepmother's household and middle child in their mother and stepfather's household. As both blended households had been established before school age, Avery described "not really knowing a life without each other" regarding their relationship with their stepsiblings as they would visit every second weekend. As Avery approached high school, their stepsiblings mostly resided with their mother and so it was a shift having all six siblings live full time at their stepfather's home.

Avery spent most of their time at their mum's home as they described "not liking" being at their dad's house as much due to their father's challenges with high alcohol use and the relationship between their parents being tense and "not on good terms." This resulted in Avery feeling like "the middle person" which was highly stressful. It was difficult having to pack up everything and move between the houses every weekend, especially as their father wouldn't let Avery take things that were things from his household including their clothes and toys which Avery described was "like I had to live 2 separate lives."

Regarding their queer experience, Avery reported not being aware until later in life, though added "if I look back now, with hindsight, I can see different things that really indicated being queer." Examples provided included in grade 4 or 5 (approximate age 9 –11) having a very affectionate female friend in a "very not just friends" manner. Avery described themselves as a "very romantically inclined kid" though not being fully aware of being queer until grade 11 (approximate age 15–17). They reflected that "back in high school I wanna go down that road but right now, I'm going to stick with what's comfy" indicating a sense of cis-het normality and pausing on identity exploration and external 'out-ness' as a queer person due to this.

Avery reported limited exposure to gender and sexually diverse identities and experiences during their childhood and felt that "people kept that thing kind of close to their chest." One exception was "my best friend's mum was actually queer… she was sleeping with women on the weekends… [the parents] had an arrangement that she was allowed to do…that was very weird in the suburbs is very monogamous. It was very straighty-180 like you don't do that, and if you do like there's something wrong with your marriage."

Avery discovered this ethically non-monogamous relationship in grade 7–8 (approx. age 12–14) and they were curious about this and felt like an ally, "I wasn't ever really like hateful or anything like that. I was very much an ally as a kid, I was a big, big ally. I wasn't judgmental at all." Though they were aware that their friend was uncomfortable or

appeared to have a sense of shame about their parents having an open relationship, "because I think at that age you just want to fit in… so, if anything is gonna threaten the safety of fitting in…it can be uncomfortable." Avery described meeting and becoming close with "the resident lesbian of the school" who was proudly queer, despite how this was received at the school they attended. At this school the girls were described as "very boy crazy and if you weren't like that, something was wrong with you." Although other queer people started dating this girl, suggesting other queer kids, this was often tried to be kept secret or discrete and seen as "a big scandal" when a popular girl was dating "the resident lesbian." The school was a public school with approximately 600 students.

Following changing schools in grades 11–12, Avery became aware of plurisexual identities such as bisexual and pansexual as other students also started to identify with these labels. This was a helpful and educational experience a larger and more diverse peer cohort as Avery was not as familiar with things such as being "unlabeled." Although greater exposure was present, Avery did acknowledge "there was a lot of biphobia, just like if you're dating a woman, then you're a 'big lesbian' or if you're dating a man, then you know you're 'being greedy' bisexual was just like 'make a decision.' There was definitely that rhetoric that was going around for sure."

Eventually Avery dated their friend which they describe as a "typical queer" experience "dating your friends" and initially the couple kept their relationship discrete. Avery reported "I wasn't stressed about coming out. I was just more 'figure it out for us the first before having everybody's eyes on us' I just wanted to figure out how I felt in this before making it officially public." They did note that their ex-boyfriend appeared very offended and upset by Avery's new dating partner as he felt it meant that "what we had wasn't real" and then Avery experienced a sense of ostracization from many people "because I hurt him so badly."

Avery described dating their first girlfriend as "a really lovely experience of queer love until it wasn't" reporting that post graduating high school, the relationship became "really abusive and it was the worst anxiety I've ever had in my life." Avery attributed the breakup to growing apart with "a lot of outside influences and even temptation with other girls as well like she was definitely cheating on me." Though in hindsight, Avery reflected "I'm glad that I had that experience when I did because. I feel like it's shaped me too not getting into things super-fast with people and because I know how you can lose yourself in that." Avery's coming out experience to their parents "went horribly" which entrenched a greater enmeshment with the relationship Avery had with their girlfriend. They explained, "I just felt so isolated and it kind of pushed me more into my—I don't know what you would call it—but just the closeness of me and [girlfriend], just always together. Coming from a family perspective, I was just being pushed away out of my family…I was feeling isolated and then over the years, [girlfriend] and I broke off, and I went through really horrible, horrible break up." Although Avery's mother was not initially supportive of them coming out, she did "come to terms with it" and noted that most of their siblings "are also queer so it has become more normalized and accepted within the household." While Avery had the experience of being the first of the sibship to come out which was difficult, this ultimately paved the way for their other siblings to do so in a safer and more prepared context.

Following the breakup, Avery described "I started to really come into myself more because of spirituality and just really reconnecting with my intuition and just like who I am, what I wanna do and getting much more into activism." They described how growing up it was not normalized to be "outspoken about policies and politics" however in early adulthood it helped find a purpose and cause finding feminism and helped shape their identity, however this was also coinciding with the COVID-19 lockdowns and feeling "restricted in the growth I was able to do living under my mum's judgy gaze." After moving out independently during COVID, they were "really able to spread my wings" and grow more in their queer identity and grew their "own queer community and found their place in lots of different social circles that complement different parts of me", reflecting that previously, "there was a lot of

shame around it because I didn't know how my mum would react if I was to bring a girl home."

Avery has enjoyed attending three different Mardi Gras but also was very grateful to the exposures and experiences they had growing up, particularly their best friend's mum who ended up having a divorce and dating another woman. Avery was able to spend time with "this big queer group of older lesbians and it just feels nice to be part of that, like there is something to look forward to…I think being queer, it's like, where do I fit in? like marriage and getting having kids and all of this traditionally heterosexual expectations of what your life can look like." Avery acknowledged the power of queer-specific spaces and event as "those have really made me feel like I belong and it's not even that specific people make me feel like that. It's just like the energy of being amongst it all and having a shared experience."

Regarding mental health, Avery was diagnosed with Anxiety at the age of 15 and depression at 17, and at the time of interviewing was exploring an ADHD diagnosis. They had been seeing therapists since the age of 10 and found the one they had been working with for the past three years particularly helpful in navigating several "mental health crises and low points." This support was especially significant during the COVID-19 lockdown, a period when they had only recently begun living independently after feeling "so suffocated in that house that I couldn't grow anymore, specifically in my queer identity." Avery expressed feeling "very isolated, especially after living with so many siblings prior", which they described as "building the relationship with myself, really enjoying my alone time and…valuing it quite intensely."

Avery felt important attributes of mental health clinicians include relatability, advocacy, and committed to ongoing professional development. They described their current therapist as someone "I really relate to a lot. She's a very intense advocate in her position. She will go against the system if she doesn't agree [and]will push for me to have extra support. If she knows that's what I need, even if the program I'm on or her agency doesn't allow for this, she will push for me to have the access to healthcare." Including making accessing therapy more affordable through bulk billing. Avery also discussed that their therapist is "super validating, super knowing about the world and never makes me feel like I'm on suicide watch."

Avery reflected that her first therapist was helpful in providing support for anxiety and "I still use some of the coping tools that she gave me," though it was not affordable longer term to keep attending and there were stricter policies regarding nonattendance and billing which made it difficult, particularly in the pre-telehealth COVID context. Avery discussed the publicly funded youth mental health model, and how most clinicians "generally only stay for 1 year or less before moving on. I was just kind of thrown to the next person. I just felt like that was so impersonal and I don't like the way that headspace does that. Because it allows for people to not come back and fall through the cracks of mental health." Avery strongly encouraged mental health clinicians to be "active advocates" and if seeing things that do not align with values to challenge this, and to try and change oppressive systems. Avery disclosed that mental health gaps and lack of comprehensive support led to a real impact of losing someone close to them by suicide "the mental health system didn't really support her through that and she ended up taking her own life and we don't have her anymore, so it's always the hope to have mental health being accessible and advocating for people reaching out."

Avery provided reflection on the formative and critical impact social media has had on their identity formation due to having the ability to "have dialogue and discussions about experiences in the queer community" and helping find language for experiences and identities through exposure to queer content creators, reflecting "figuring out that other people don't have the need to call themselves one particular thing. You can just use a blanket statement like queer, if bisexual or pansexual or anything else doesn't feel like it fits, you can use whatever you want. I think the normalization of my experience that I've seen online is like invaluable to who I am today." This emphasized the importance of access to visibility of diverse identities, mediating their own understanding of gender and sexuality and added "knowledge really is power… and that's why I think like being on social media and

actively like sharing things and trying to educate people. It just changes everything. I literally would not be who I am without the knowledge that I've learned through so many people, creating content for people."

The messages Avery would share with their younger self was "I know that it looks really hard right now and your feelings are extremely valid because this is a really hard thing that you're going through, but you will get through this. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. You deserve to feel like there's hope in this identity, and it doesn't have to be something that holds you back. It's actually something that really makes you beautifully unique and different, worth knowing and worthy. You're worthy Just the way that you are. You don't have to change. Trust that this is the right direction, no matter what, you choose." Avery's messages to their younger self highlighted values of hope, living authentically, and intrinsic self-worth without having to conform to others' expectations.

Discussion: meaning making

As we crafted this piece we were drawn to the metaphor of weaving threads into a vessel—like a basket—where each strand strengthens and connects with others to hold something precious. Across these four narratives, some of the strongest threads include shared identities and experiences as nonbinary and plurisexual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who move beyond binaries. These multitude of layered identities are not always acknowledged within the nuances of queer indigenous intersectionality (Day, 2024), leaving many who identify between binaries feeling unseen (Bennett & Gates, 2019; Farrell, 2015). Additional threads of commonality emerge through experiences of mental health challenges, identity exploration, and resilience in the face of hardship (Day et al., 2023; Dudgeon et al., 2025; Riggs & Toone, 2017).

Joey's story reflects multiple relocations and shifting family structures, including separations and re-partnering throughout their life. Their narrative highlights an early awareness of sexuality, with puberty acting as a catalyst for gender incongruence and greater recognition of their gender identity—a common experience among gender diverse young people (Turban et al., 2023). Like Rave, Joey experienced generally supportive family responses when coming out, which has been linked to reduced mental health risks (Day et al., 2023; Riggs & Toone, 2017; Strauss et al., 2017). However, Joey, Drew, and Avery all described high school environments where gender non-conformity and queer attraction was viewed as "weird" or "wrong," consistent with the experiences of many trans and bisexual individuals (Day & Brömdal, 2026; Johnson et al., 2024; Manley et al., 2024; McInnis et al., 2022; Turton & Brömdal, 2025; Watts & Brömdal, 2026). Creative outlets such as drama, writing, and music became an important space for Joey's identity expression, a thread shared by Avery and echoed within Australia's largest survey of young trans people (Strauss et al., 2017) and other scholarly work (Apps et al., 2025; Farrell, 2016).

Rave's narrative demonstrates a nuanced journey of gender and sexuality within a culturally diverse and largely supportive family and community context, identified as protective factors for social and emotional wellbeing (Day et al., 2023). Despite this, they experienced moments of internal uncertainty. Their reflections—including emotional 'numbing' following the loss of their mother, masculine presentation during adolescence, and the emergence of genderfluid experiences– can be interpreted through Westerman and Dear's (2023) lens as adaptive responses to relational environments and shifting identity formation. Rave's sense of belonging within queer spaces, and their evolving understanding of bisexuality and genderfluidity, aligns with calls for culturally safe environments that affirm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities in all their complexity (Farrell, 2015; Westerman & Dear, 2023).

Drew's story centers on early disconnection from their cultural identity due to ruptured family relationships and withheld ancestral knowledge—a loss known to affect the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Liddelow-Hunt et al., 2025; Tiwari et al., 2019; Yashadhana et al., 2023). Like Rave, Drew recognized differences in their gender and sexuality early in life and formed friendships with other marginalized peers. Yet growing up queer in the rural community brought challenges, including discrimination

and stigma, consistent with broader research in regional Australia (Farmer et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2020, 2021; Phillips et al., 2024; Sanders et al., 2025). These experiences likely contribute to finding a greater queer community within city contexts (Anae, 2020; Lewis et al., 2023). Within their family, Drew's father invalidated their identity while their mother pathologized their mental health, resulting in limited emotional support. After leaving home as a teenager, Drew faced significant trauma and restricted access to appropriate health services and identified discrimination within health services, something many other queer Indigenous Australian people experience (Liddelow-Hunt et al., 2025; Spurway et al., 2023; Uink et al., 2024). This included health practitioner knowledge gaps in using correct pronouns (Bretherton et al., 2021) and how assumptions of heterogeneity within LGBTQA+ communities can be harmful (Fowler et al., 2026). Relocating to a major city later enabled Drew access to community and care, and with distance from earlier adversity, Drew was able to further consolidate their sense of self in adulthood (Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene et al., 2020; Waterman, 2020).

Avery's story portrays life split between two households, with strong sibling bonds across a blended family. Their family history has been shaped by the Stolen Generations–government-sanctioned forced removals that caused intergenerational disruption to identity, culture, kinship, and connection to Country (Liddelow-Hunt et al., 2025; Tiwari et al., 2019; Yashadhana et al., 2023). Similar to Drew, Avery was unaware of their Indigenous and cultural background until adulthood, likely contributed to historical forced removals and having impacts on understanding of themselves and what it means to identify as Aboriginal (Smallwood, 2023). They also did not recognize their queer identity until mid-adolescence, though can retrospectively identify early signs. Limited exposure to positive queer representation and negative peer attitudes contributed to hesitancy in exploring their identity at school, an experience which is shared across other queer people within the literature who have emphasized the importance of relatable queer representation (Fowler et al., 2026; Johnson et al., 2024). When Avery did come out, the experience "went horribly" intensifying reliance on a relationship later identified as emotionally abusive, and compounding feelings of family disconnection. Like Drew, Avery described a period of renewal once distanced from these circumstances, gaining confidence in identity exploration, consolidation, and engagement with activism.

In conclusion, the four stories shared in this study deepen our understanding and appreciation of the intricate journeys they navigated. Their narratives reveal an ongoing process of queer identity exploration and affirmation, and the powerful role of relationships—including the contrasts between environments where identities are celebrated and supported, and those where they are stigmatized or "pushed away." The nuances and interwoven intersecting identities across culture, gender, and sexuality cannot be understated, as they produce rich lived realities.

Limitations and future research: where to from here?

This study has several limitations. Life Stories are dynamic and continually evolving; therefore, the narratives shared here represent only one moment in time. Given the relatively young age of participants in the context of a typical lifespan, their reflections are necessarily provisional and may shift as their identities and experiences develop. The findings are also shaped by the methodological choices and interpretive lens of the research team. Additionally, the broader age range—up to 30 years—limits the ability to generalize findings to a more narrowly defined 'youth' cohort (18–24 years). The sample size of four participants is also too small to infer conclusions about the experiences of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in Australia with liminal gender and sexuality identities and experiences. As LSI positions participants as authors of their own narratives, it is possible that some experiences were underrepresented or omitted. Finally, although a semi-structured interview format was used with guiding questions, participants primarily directed the conversation, which resulted in some variability across interviews.

This study highlights several opportunities for future research. Our findings reinforce the value of centering participant voices and lived experiences, encouraging future scholars to engage in consultation and co-design approaches. They may

also prompt expanded inquiry into LSI research more broadly. Future research could build on this study by refining recruitment parameters, such as focusing specifically on pansexual trans people, and by exploring further dimensions of diversity, such as cultural and linguistic background, [dis]ability, and gender diversity. Examining how these intersect with multi-gender attraction would deepen understanding and representation across the cohort.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This study was granted ethics approval through University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee Ethics Approval Number: ETH2023-0895. All study activities were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Southern Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee, and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments, including the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)—Updated 2018.

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Data availability statement

Given the sensitive nature of this research, supporting data cannot be made publicly available. While participants provided written consent for selected excerpts from their Life Story narratives to be published, the full transcripts contain identifiable information that cannot be sufficiently de-identified for wider distribution.

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