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‘We Are Australia’: Unpacking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Understandings and Experiences of Australian Identity

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ABSTRACT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the oldest living custodians in the world. However, Australian identity has been purposefully established to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, contributing to systemic oppression and harmful consequences. Understanding the perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding Australian identity is imperative for guiding genuinely beneficial strategies aimed at fostering inclusivity. This research employed hermeneutic phenomenology and unstructured interviews to explore the conceptualisations, lived experiences, and preferences for Australian identity among five Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander participants. Four key themes emerged: ‘walking in two worlds’, ‘Australian identity is racist’, ‘journey to finding connection’, and ‘truth-telling is a necessity’. These findings highlight that participants viewed truth-telling, national treaty-making, and policy reform as important for addressing systemic racism. Their perspectives emphasise the value of self-determination in shaping a more inclusive Australian identity and point to the need for continued efforts toward reconciliation.

1 | Introduction

Historically, Australian identity has been purposefully constructed to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Austin and Fozdar 2016; Farrugia and Bullen 2024). The consequences of this exclusion include systemic oppression through discriminatory policies, ongoing racism, and significant disparities in health and wellbeing compared to the general population (Dunn et al. 2004; Falls and Anderson 2022). Despite this, Australian identity research continues to marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by excluding their participation, voices, and experiences. Exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ understanding and experiences regarding Australian identity is essential for fostering an authentically inclusive Australian identity. These insights are critical for addressing the evolving nature of these issues and ensuring that

strategies for inclusivity are both effective and meaningful. To achieve this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices must be placed at the forefront of discussions about Australian identity. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s conceptualisations of Australian identity, lived experiences with Australian identity, and preferences for Australian identity.

2 | Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the world’s oldest custodians, and their cultures have been established for over 60,000 years, and prior to colonisation, it is presumed that 500 unique language groups existed (Moses 2004). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have their own customs,

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traditions, spirituality, laws, education and societal systems, and a tenet of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is the close relationship with land and Country (van den Berg 2021).

Australia's colonial history, including the genocide and systemic oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, has shaped an Australian identity founded upon exclusion (Elder 2020; Elias et al. 2021; van den Berg 2021). Since federation in 1901, Australian identity has evolved from exclusive definitions rooted in colonialism and exemplified by the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Cth), commonly associated with the White Australia Policy, and, in Western Australia, the Aborigines Act 1905 (WA) (Bottomley 1988; Elder 2020; Maddison 2012). Initially characterised by traits such as mateship and a fair go, this identity perpetuated white supremacy and normalised violence (Elder 2020; Purdie and Craven 2006). After the White Australia Policy ended in the 1960s, Australia adopted multiculturalism, promoting the integration of diverse migrant communities and an 'achieved' identity valuing inclusivity and diversity (Koleth 2010; Moran 2011).

Australian identity is often associated with characteristics from these constructions, including hard work, mateship, the fair go ethos, acceptance of diversity, and appreciation of multiculturalism (Farrugia and Bullen 2024; Pakulski and Tranter 2000). However, these constructions typically ignore the history of genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the long-lasting impacts of the Stolen Generation and racism fuelled by the White Australia policy (Maddison 2012; Scorrano 2012). While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander iconography is often used in depictions of Australian identity (Wilczyńska 2019), it is often presented through a colonial lens with intentions to present Australia as superficially including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while ignoring continued injustices experienced by them (Scorrano 2012).

National identity significantly influences how people interact with different social groups (Billig 1995). According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), national identity integrates with individuals' identities and shapes their interactions with others. In Australia, constructions of national identity derive from individuals' lived experiences and socio-cultural contexts which define who is considered part of the in-group (Louis et al. 2012; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Exclusive constructions of Australian identity, often favouring ancestry and the traditional White Australian male (Elder 2020; Purdie and Craven 2006), can create negative intergroup dynamics, leading to ongoing racism and adversity experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Falls and Anderson 2022). Conversely, inclusive definitions of Australian identity promote flexibility for in-group membership, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to embrace societal values and inclusive norms to be considered Australian (Austin and Fozdar 2016; Louis et al. 2012).

National identity is shaped by historical laws and policies impacting daily life (Billig 1995). Critical race theory offers insights into how systemic racism constructs Australian identity and social inequalities (Crenshaw 2010; Delgado 2017; Treviño et al. 2008). Despite the abolition of policies such as the White Australia Policy, the Aborigines Act 1905 (WA), and the

Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Cth) in the 1960s and 1970s, their legacy persists in contemporary legal and societal structures resulting in systemic inequalities (Dunstan et al. 2020; Maddison 2022; Paradies 2016). Examples include the celebration of Australia Day on 26 January (Lipscombe et al. 2019), entrenched racism within the police and justice systems where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 30% of the prisoner population despite comprising only 3.3% of the population (Cunneen and Porter 2017; Doherty 2021), and the omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mistreatment from Australia's history education curriculum (O'Dowd 2011). Researchers argue that until these structural issues are addressed, Australian identity will remain exclusive and health disparities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be perpetuated (Davis 2015; Farrugia and Bullen 2024; Lipscombe et al. 2019; Paradies and Cunningham 2009).

Research on Australian identity has increased over time, as shown in two reviews by Phillips (1998) and Austin and Fozdar (2016), which found that conceptualisations of Australian identity are gradually becoming more inclusive, although some exclusive beliefs persist. Since these reviews, further empirical research has examined contemporary Australian identity. For example, Farrugia et al. (2018) found that young people navigate the tension of identifying as Australian while recognising ongoing discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, balancing traditional colonial views with aspirations for inclusivity. More recently, Farrugia and Bullen (2024) highlighted Australians questioning conventional Australian identity traits, such as mateship and the fair go, suggesting these ideals may not reflect diversity and can exclude those experiencing systemic disadvantage. Collectively, this work demonstrates a gradual shift toward inclusive identity narratives, yet significant gaps remain, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives remain largely excluded. The most recent study explicitly examining this, Purdie and Craven (2006), found strong identification with Australia, pride in cultural identity, and a desire to pass this on to future generations, though its age and limited sample restrict generalisability. More recently, Kamp et al. (2018) found strong support for diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while some participants expressed concerns about slow policy progress and limited engagement on issues such as a national treaty and constitutional recognition. These findings provide insight into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on multiculturalism and Australian identity, but further research is needed to explore their contemporary experiences and the systemic issues affecting their health and wellbeing.

3 | Materials and Methods

3.1 | Methodology

The aim of this research is to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's conceptualisations of Australian identity, lived experiences with Australian identity, and preferences for Australian identity. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used, which involves analysing individuals' personal stories to uncover essential meanings of an experienced phenomenon (Lindseth and Norberg 2004). Hermeneutic phenomenology honours

and considers individuals' socio-cultural influences and personal relationships to the world they live (Fuster Guillen 2019). Unstructured interviews are used in hermeneutic phenomenology to explore and foster participants' understanding and reflection upon their experiences with the phenomena (Laverty 2003). In this research, Australian identity is the phenomena of interest. Critical realism epistemological position was adopted and acknowledges that reality is subjective and only accessible through individuals' perspectives as shaped by their behaviours, experiences, and contexts (Collier 1994). Examining Australian identity as a construct that requires exploration within individual contexts and experiences aligns with tenets of critical realism and hermeneutic phenomenology.

Methodological decisions presented in this article reflect the adoption of principles outlined in the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC's) *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders* (NHMRC 2018), as well as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (AIATSIS's 2020) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*. Principles of decolonising methodologies also guided this research which aim to decentre Western worldviews and prioritise non-Western perspectives in exploring phenomena and challenging dominant colonial and Western ideologies (Smith 2012; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021). This approach recognises the influence of power and privilege, acknowledging the potential harm caused to marginalised and othered groups (Smith 2012). The choice of using hermeneutic phenomenology methodology reflects commitment to responsibility to engage culturally secure methodologies, and for self-determination through choosing an approach that allows for the authentic presentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and experiences (AIATSIS; 2020; NHMRC 2018).

3.2 | Positionality

Research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers has often resulted in exploitation, adverse outcomes, minimal tangible benefit, and the reinforcement of colonial ideals, particularly when conducted on rather than with them (Bainbridge et al. 2015; Smith 2012). Recognising this history, both authors are committed to conducting research that prioritises the survival and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and avoids harm or disadvantage (NHMRC 2018). This research was conducted by a Caucasian Australian man (first author) and a Nyungar man with connections to both Yamatji country and Wardandi country (second author). The first author acknowledges their Caucasian, White positionality, their privilege in conducting this research, and the potential limitations in fully engaging with decolonising practices (Tuck and Yang 2012). The second author played an integral role in shaping the study design and ensuring adherence to culturally safe research practices at all stages, including the framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, recruitment procedures, analysis, and interpretation of findings. This active decision-making process, which centres the values and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, reflects a

commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership (AIATSIS 2020).

3.3 | Participants

Participants were required to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and over the age 18. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used, with recruitment adhering to cultural safety requirements. Meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often involves the use of cultural brokers to facilitate relationships and foster genuine collaboration (Maru and Davies 2011). In this study, the second author acted as a cultural broker, connecting the first author (who conducted the interviews) with potential participants. The second author shared the recruitment materials with his networks, and they were also posted in general Australian online discussion forums and on social media, resulting in five individuals agreeing to participate. While the sample size may appear limited, it aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology's emphasis on depth of narrative over breadth of coverage (Starks and Trinidad 2007). This approach is also consistent with Indigenous methodologies, which prioritise relationality, cultural safety, and authenticity over traditional metrics of research power and generalisability (Bainbridge et al. 2015; Reid et al. 2024; Smith 2012). Participants were aged between 31 and 64 ($M = 47.6$, $SD = 11.2$), identified as female, and lived in metropolitan Western Australia. Two participants identified as Aboriginal, one as Torres Strait Islander, and one as Yamtji-Widi. In addition to identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, two participants also identified as Australian. All participants were reimbursed with a voucher for their time.

3.4 | Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (2019-0541) prior to recruitment. The second author promoted the study within their networks, and interested individuals contacted the first author via email. Participants were then provided with the information and consent form, completed a demographics form, and arranged a suitable interview time. Four interviews were conducted online, and one in person. Unstructured interviews employed a hermeneutic phenomenology approach, guided by principles of decolonisation and ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AIATSIS 2020; Bednall 2006; NHMRC 2018). The first author adopted a naïve learner position, using bracketing, journaling, self-reflection, and consultation with the second author to avoid assumptions or judgements (Bednall 2006). Emphasising safety, respect, and participant protection (NHMRC 2018), the first author built rapport, clarified written consent, and obtained verbal consent. The only predetermined question was, 'What does Australian identity mean to you?' The first author allowed natural tangents and explored participants' experiences without interruption. In line with the double hermeneutic approach, the first author actively listened, probed for deeper meanings, and encouraged interpretation using neutral prompts. Member checking was offered to participants to validate the summarised findings. Notes on tone and key information were documented to aid analysis. Audio

recordings were transcribed verbatim using NVivo transcription services (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018) and reviewed for accuracy. Interviews averaged 44.4 min (SD = 10.74).

3.5 | Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a four-step hermeneutic phenomenology approach (Lindseth and Norberg 2004). The first author led the analysis, with the second author providing guidance, reviewing interpretations, and refining themes to ensure accuracy and cultural integrity. Transcripts were read multiple times to understand meanings, and meaning units were identified, grouped, and labelled in everyday language before being condensed into sub-themes and main themes. Reflexive processes, including the naïve learner approach and member checking, were used to validate interpretations and uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership principles (AIATSIS 2020). Adjustments were made based on feedback from three participants, all agreeing the interpretations accurately reflected their meanings, aligning with the reciprocity principle (NHMRC 2018). Finally, themes were written in everyday language to ensure equity and accessibility (NHMRC 2018).

3.6 | Quality Procedure

In addition to upholding relevant guidelines and principles (AIATSIS; 2020; NHMRC 2018), quality procedures specific to qualitative and hermeneutic phenomenological research were employed to ensure rigour. Throughout the research, reflexive journaling and discussions among the authors were maintained to mitigate subjectivity and navigate the positionality of the first author (Creswell 2014; Laverty 2003). Additionally, a methodological audit trail was maintained to document decisions made at each research step and ensure trustworthiness (Creswell 2014). In adhering to the respect principle (NHMRC 2018), it was recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait groups are internally diverse and not homogeneous.

4 | Results

The thematic structural analysis revealed four themes, supported by participant quotes with their ages. Rich and long quotes conveyed participants' stories and accompanied by descriptive summaries and researcher interpretations, adhering to hermeneutic phenomenology requirements. Some quotes maintained the spoken racial slurs to avoid silencing participants and to maintain authenticity. Gender-neutral pronouns were used to avoid assuming pronouns based on gender identity. The thematic map (Figure 1) shows the themes and their aspects on separate lines, along with their relationships, with dotted lines indicating indirect influences.

4.1 | Theme One: Walking in Two Worlds

Participants discussed how their personal identity was influenced by walking in two worlds. In one world, they engage in their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage.

In another world they engage in an Australia that excludes them. One participant said:

We say walking in both worlds. So, all along the way we have to code-switch. So, we come out in society, we come to work, we go to events, it's mainstream. You know, we put in our standard Australian English. But all the way alongside it's my culture, my story. Everything that I want to know about my family, heritage and cultural history, knowledge, and sharing it. Yeah, so it's amazing, and it's still going, and it won't ever stop.

(53)

Participants described code-switching as an everyday strategy to manage safety, acceptance, and visibility in predominantly non-Indigenous spaces. They felt pressure to conform while maintaining strong connections to culture, family, history, and knowledge. The term 'mainstream' reflected a society in which non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ways are considered the norm. Walking in these two worlds illustrates ongoing expectations for assimilation.

Participants discussed the importance of their cultures to their own identity, for example:

Knowing my family history, my family connection, where we come from, that connection to Country. That's all part of my identity. So, I guess that's it. Along with family, and kinship and community, but also, I guess, responsibility and accountability.

(50)

Connection to Country, family, history, kinship, and community were important aspects of this participant's identity, as well as accountability to the land and community. They further stated, 'I think it's not just an Australian identity, it's an Australian Aboriginal identity,' indicating that these characteristics appear to be unique to them, and where their identity is layered and not subsumed under the broader Australian identity.

Participants discussed how in an Australia that excludes them, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to be disadvantaged and oppressed. One participant said:

The social ladder of acceptance for society. You know, if you're looking at how people are accepted and treated and viewed in society, then you as a White male are on the top of the ladder. Then we go down: a White woman, and then you would probably have people from European countries, then you'd have probably Asian countries. Then you would have maybe Middle Eastern countries and then possibly even have African countries before an Aboriginal woman and an Aboriginal man even step up on the ladder.

(64)

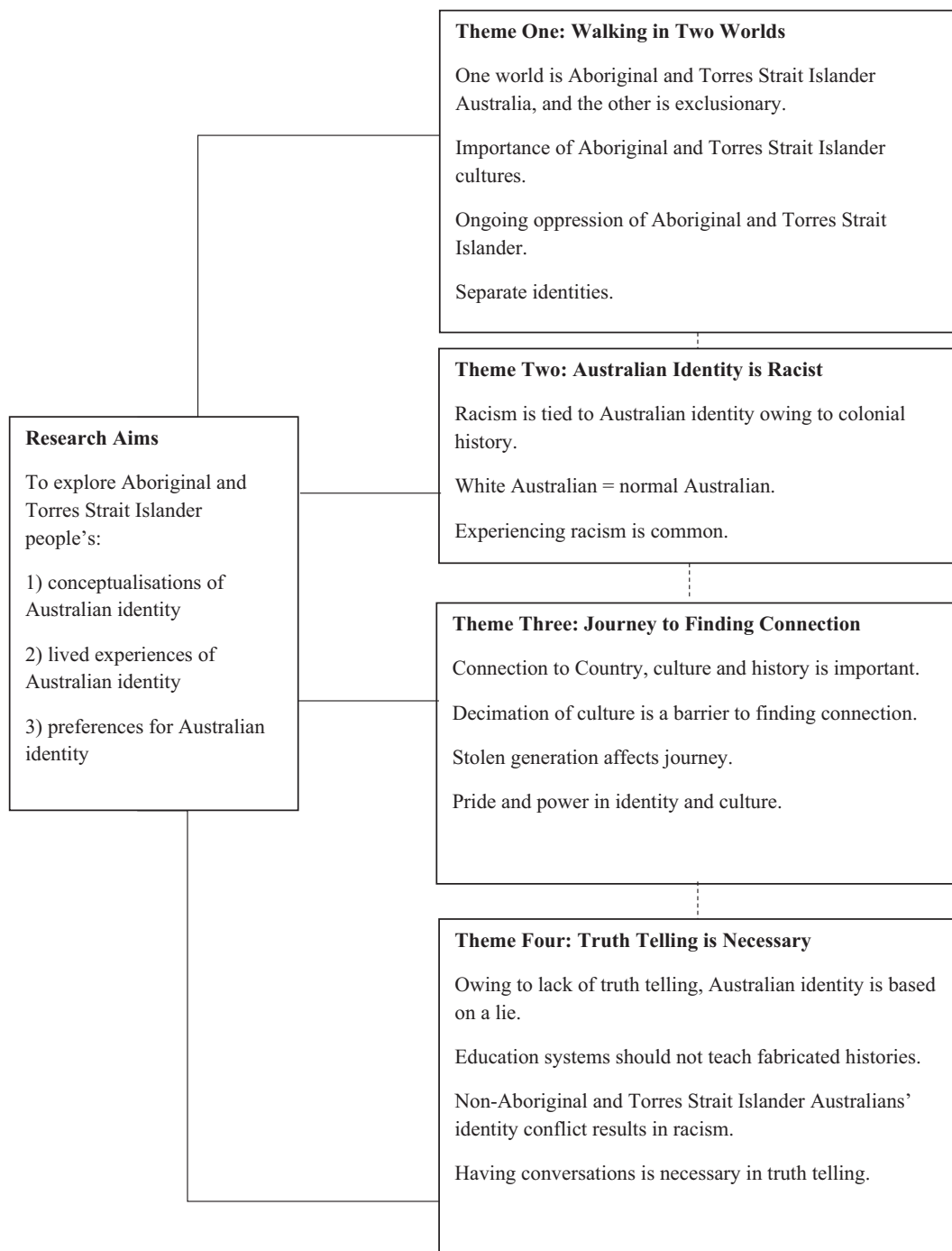


FIGURE 1 | Thematic map of the findings.

In using the 'social ladder' example, this participant explained that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the lowest on the ladder and the least accepted within Australia. The significance of this placement was demonstrated through the participant listing groups of people, many of whom have heritage in other countries, as higher, with White men, who are reflective of the coloniser, placed highest. This ladder reflects the perception of Whiteness as the archetypal norm in Australia, affording White individuals power and privilege to perpetuate oppression across various groups. Consequently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people emerge as the most discriminated and oppressed within the country.

4.2 | Theme Two: Australian Identity Is Racist

Participants believed that racism is inherently core to Australian identity because of Australia's history of colonisation and because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience racism today. One participant stated, 'If I was to describe an Australian, it would be a racist alcoholic' (64), indicating that their perception of a typical Australian is directly associated with racism, as well as an excessive drinking culture. The participant also stated, 'So those laws made Australia a racist country, the White Australia policy and the 1905 Act'. This participant referenced law and policy in

Australia's history that were implemented to oppress and eradicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which they believed were foundational to the construction of Australia as a racist country. Another participant said, 'We don't have a treaty in Australia. We're so behind. Australia is very racist,' illustrating how greater progress is needed to work toward equity. Lack of progress toward a national treaty also seems to relate to ongoing systemic issues, wherein oppressive Australian society is perpetuated by continuation of law and policy that excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

All participants told stories of experiencing racism in Australia. One participant said: 'By being a person of White skin, you aren't actually overlooked, you know. You are viewed as the norm, and a person of dark colour, or Aboriginal, or Black, or whatever is seen as bad. Just from history' (64). This participant discussed how the normalisation of racism in Australia causes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be perceived as 'less than,' and White Australians to be perceived as inherently right, good and the Australian norm. Another participant discussed experiencing racism growing up in Australia: 'I endured a lot of racism. You know, we're always called boongs and niggers, coons. 'Nigger, nigger, pull the trigger'. All that kind of stuff' (50). For this participant, being verbally attacked with harmful racial slurs was something that 'always' happened and was salient in their recollection of experiencing living in Australia. The recurrence and vividness of these memories in several interviews pointed to racism as a cumulative, lived burden rather than a set of isolated events. Participants' enduring experiences of receiving verbal racial abuse is indicative of common and 'acceptable' mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whereby perpetrators are seemingly comfortable being overtly racist given their granted position of White superiority in Australia.

Participants called for Australia and Australian identity to be inclusive,

Australian identity really needs to be more inclusive of Aboriginal people. We are Australia. It's not that man standing out there with a pair of jocks on and a spear or boomerang. It's not that, it's the people of everyday life. You know, we don't all have dysfunctional families... an Aboriginal person is just a normal person, you know, an Australian.

(50)

In addition to advocating for an inclusive Australian identity, this participant speaks to the need for understandings outside of damaging stereotypical conceptualisations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to normalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australians.

4.3 | Theme Three: Journey to Finding Connection

Participants' deep connection to Country, culture, family, history, and community defined their identity and they shared personal stories of discovery and pride in this identity. However, historical injustices like the Stolen Generation and cultural

suppression hindered individuals from fully exploring their ancestry and cultural heritage. One participant said:

I want some more information. I think just to help me and also because I've got kids, so I want to be able to explain to them—[pause]. I don't want to be, like, 'Oh, no, we couldn't, I tried to contact someone about that, but nothing, so we just gave up'.

(31)

This participant was determined to learn more about their family history to pass down their culture and heritage to their children. However, it appears they were struggling because of a lack of access to resources or support. Across interviews, participants described structural barriers (e.g., limited archival access, fragmented family knowledge) and personal barriers (e.g., emotional distress, intergenerational trauma) that complicated cultural recovery efforts. This decimation of culture and history appeared to be a barrier to exploring their identity, and their journey demonstrates the impacts of colonisation and being from the Stolen Generation are lasting today.

Another participant discussed their own journey to understand more about their culture and history in attempts to explore their identity:

It's all about everything that's happened in my family, my nan and my mum. I have to actually leave for a couple of days to process it and then I'm right. I get upset and I can't touch it, but then I think I'm even more determined now. Number one, doing it for myself. But then I do it for my granddaughter, my mum, my nan, my great gran, for them. We're still here, we're so resilient.

(53)

Learning about their family history appeared distressing for the participant due to Australia's violent genocidal past and the Stolen Generation. However, the participant remained determined to preserve their culture and pass it on to future generations. The participant described themselves and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as resilient, which is reflected in their dedication to continuing culture.

All participants, regardless of where they were in their journey to finding connection, expressed pride in being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, as one participant said:

I tell people 'I would never... There's not enough money in the world to come back as a White person'. If I am ever reincarnated, I want to be Black. At least I know where my Country is, where my identity is, where my culture is, and hopefully language.

(64)

This participant expressed immense pride in their Black and Aboriginal heritage, which is grounded in their connection to Country and identity. It is notable that the participant expressed

they would ‘hopefully’ know their language, seemingly referring to the destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages owing to colonisation, which is again indicative of decimation of culture and history.

4.4 | Theme Four: Truth-Telling Is a Necessity

Participants emphasised the importance of truth-telling for Australians, discussing the need to understand the experiences and injustices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in ongoing colonisation, accurately document Australia’s history, and foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sharing of their culture, heritage, and history with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One participant challenged the construction of Australian identity, stating it was influenced by a lack of truth-telling:

Well, the identity of Australia is based on a lie. So, until we address that, until we have a constitution, until we have a treaty, until the history books are rewritten, then the identity of Australia is basically built on a lie. And I don’t know how that goes for non-Aboriginal people, but it’s just really something that’s fundamental in having a nationally cohesive cultural country. You actually have us to tell the truth and we actually have to be a part of the truth-telling.

(64)

The participant argued that Australian identity is built on a lie, shaped by inaccurate histories and an education system that erases genocide, slavery, and the Stolen Generation. They linked this lack of truth-telling to the absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the Constitution and the absence of a national treaty, which undermines social cohesion. The participant emphasised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead truth-telling efforts, including reforming education systems, to address ongoing injustices. Centring Indigenous leadership in these processes is essential for acknowledging history and fostering a more inclusive and equitable Australian identity.

Another participant addressed how a lack of truth-telling creates uncertainty for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in identifying as Australian:

Identity is really about where your place is, or where you fit in the whole scheme of things. And if that’s [identity] not clear in your heart and in your head, then that’s when things like racism and aggressive type behaviour happens because you’re not grounded, you’re not centred. You feel a little bit scared of the unknown... I think a lot of our history hasn’t been told and a lot of the themes of reconciliation have been truth-telling. And I think it’s so rocky because people don’t want to think their ancestors, or where they come from, were people a part of massacres. Or

that they were part of taking land that rightfully was somebody else’s.

(31)

This participant observed that due to a lack of truth-telling, non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people struggle to confront the possibility of their ancestors’ involvement in massacres and land theft. This discomfort often leads to defensive reactions and conscious ignorance to avoid feeling accountable for historical and ongoing injustices. They suggested that this lack of truth-telling contributes to insecurity and guilt among non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, indicative of White fragility. It is implied that reconstructing the narrative of Australia’s history is necessary to promote collective acknowledgment of past injustices and confidence among non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their personal identification with Australia.

Participants expressed that for people to engage in truth-telling, they must have conversations about issues pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One participant said:

If there is a bit of ignorance, I will ask them ‘Why? Why did you say that?’ And ask them to explain where they’re coming from because then you get them to stop and think. ‘What are you talking about? Have I been offensive? Have I, you know, have I said something wrong?’ And then you say, ‘Well, for me that’s actually racist. That’s a racist statement’. And then they’re so apologetic, and they realise that there’s a lesson to be learned. Otherwise, if you don’t call it out, silence is violence.

(64)

The importance of challenging people, having conversations about racism and holding people accountable for what they say was expressed through the term ‘silence is violence’. This term implies that violence toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is not just perpetuated by acts of discrimination, but also by people not engaging in truth-telling and remaining complicit in and ignorant about ongoing injustices and systemic racism in Australia. The importance of conversation as part of truth-telling was expressed by another participant:

They might have a conversation with me and be, like, ‘Whatever, I don’t care what you’re saying’. But then they might down the track, somebody else they would meet would be saying something else and it might then feed that seed that’s already been planted. It might be slow, but it’s hope.

(40)

This participant believed that starting conversations about issues pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is important to begin change. They refer to educating someone on these issues as ‘planting the seed’ that needs to be fed to grow into what is seemingly greater awareness of injustices faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It seems

that engaging in conversations is required to continue to ‘feed the seed’ and support someone to think more about these issues. Therefore, the participant believed conversations are important and necessary in order to engage in truth-telling and encourage changed perspectives.

5 | Discussion

The findings from this research highlighted that unresolved systemic racism continues to perpetuate injustices against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, contributing to an Australian identity that privileges White and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Participants’ perspectives emphasised the importance of truth-telling, national treaty-making, and broader systemic reform as potential pathways toward addressing historical injustices, fostering inclusion, and strengthening an Australian identity that better reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and self-determination.

Viewing these findings through lenses of critical race theory and social identity theory helps reveal how participants understood systemic racism as shaping exclusive constructions of Australian identity and influencing intergroup dynamics. Participants expressed feeling marginalised and ‘othered’, attributing this to an Australian identity that privileges Caucasian White men (Louis et al. 2012; Phillips 1998). They identified these exclusions as grounded in experiencing historical legal frameworks such as the *Aborigines Act 1905 (WA)* which was implemented to oppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Elias et al. 2021; Elder 2020; Purdie and Craven 2006). The stories shared exemplified intergenerational trauma and cultural devastation, demonstrating how racism is not only experienced socially and structurally but also manifests in profound impacts on health and wellbeing (Dunn et al. 2004; Falls and Anderson 2022). Participants described the ongoing effects of discrimination, exclusion, and cultural loss on their sense of safety, mental health, and connection to identity and community, reflecting the well-established relationship between racism and poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dunn et al. 2004; Falls and Anderson 2022). Despite current intentions for Australian identity to embrace cultural diversity and achieved in-group membership rather than inherited traits, the stories shared indicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may continue to be positioned as outsiders due to their skin colour and cultural identity. Further, participants detailed the pressures to conform behaviourally (‘code-switching’) to fit mainstream norms, yet their identity often excludes them from the in-group. These experiences suggest that, for the participants in this study, Australianness remains narrowly associated with being non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and White.

Participants criticised what they perceived as the Australian Government’s inadequate efforts to reform harmful systems, advance reconciliation, and address the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Reform efforts reject colonial frameworks and policies, and instead embrace agonistic reconciliation to dismantle systems designed to maintain oppression (Maddison 2022). For example, participants highlighted the absence of a national

treaty recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s occupation of the land prior to colonisation and the injustices they have endured. This absence remains salient in the context of the failed 2023 Referendum, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples expressing that despite long-standing efforts, meaningful reform is difficult to achieve in a society shaped by racism (Anderson et al. 2023; Biddle et al. 2023). A national treaty could facilitate meaningful collaboration to address these harms and support reconciliation efforts led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Anderson et al. 2023; Biddle et al. 2023). Participants also noted that measures such as reparations, land return, and self-determination through a national treaty could improve relationships and reconciliation, avoiding superficial actions that perpetuate colonial injustices (McMillan and Rigney 2017; Maddison 2022). Additionally, they highlighted the lack of representation in the Constitution, a document historically designed to deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their rights and enable systemic racism (Williams et al. 2004). Together, these perspectives highlight how the participants in this study understood systemic and policy-level reforms as necessary for creating a version of Australian identity that recognises, values, and meaningfully includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Participants also criticised what they described as Australia’s lack of truth-telling, which refers to acknowledging and communicating the injustices faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout Australia’s history due to colonial conflict and dispossession (Daley 2018). Depictions and narratives in the media, education systems, and public discourse often deny or ignore these injustices, instead fabricating Australia’s colonial, violent, and racist history to focus on the successes of the coloniser (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016; Elias et al. 2021). Consistent with recommendations by scholars (O’Dowd 2011; Paradies 2016), participants emphasised that truth-telling and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s acknowledgment of historical wrongs are essential for reconciliation and for a unified national identity that genuinely includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

However, many non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people resist discussing this history due to guilt and a lack of clarity in their Australian identity when confronted with these issues, reflective of White fragility. This discomfort may manifest as defensiveness, avoidance, or uncertainty, and participants’ observations suggest it can act as a barrier to engaging in conversations about history and identity (Farrugia et al. 2018). Such dynamics also resonate with settler-colonial critiques, which highlight how some White Australians may struggle to feel secure in their sense of Australianness when confronted with the realities of colonial violence and systemic racism (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Faulkner 2016). According to participants, these dynamics demonstrate why conversations about racism and history, alongside structural reforms led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are necessary for improving relationships and fostering a more inclusive society (Lipscombe et al. 2019; O’Dowd 2011; Paradies 2016). These conversations may also support non-Aboriginal people in developing greater clarity and confidence in their own Australian identity (Farrugia and Bullen 2024).

Participants' stories highlighted that their identity as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander was deeply important to them, with connections to history, culture, language, and Country described as central to their sense of self. The importance of these connections emerging in the interviews was somewhat anticipated given the well-established literature documenting this importance (Bamblett et al. 2019; Wexler 2009). Participants expressed a strong desire to learn about their heritage and pass down culture, which is closely tied to reclaiming history and culture lost through dispossession, the Stolen Generation, and trauma from Australia's violent history (Menzies 2019; Rabbitt 2013). Furthermore, research indicates that feeling connected to culture and Country improves socio-emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2021). These insights suggest the importance of further exploring how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities develop and access supports for cultural learning and identity exploration, including the barriers that may constrain these processes.

6 | Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

This research furthers Australian identity literature by including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's stories and experiences, often omitted in existing research (Austin and Fozdar 2016; Phillips 1998). While the sample size aligns with the recommendations of hermeneutic phenomenology and Indigenous methodological principles (Bainbridge et al. 2015; Smith 2012; Starks and Trinidad 2007), it is acknowledged that a larger and more diverse sample (beyond women residing solely in metropolitan WA) could offer a more comprehensive perspective. Although this limits generalisability, the study's strength lies in its methodological commitment to privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and centring their experiences and perspectives.

This study's adherence to AIATSIS (2020) and NHMRC (2018) ethical guidelines reflects a commitment to cultural safety and self-determination. For example, the involvement of the second author, as well as the commitment to member checking, highlights the importance of these practices and enhances the credibility of the findings in decolonising research practices in Australia. However, it is recognised that greater collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would have further strengthened the cultural suitability and relevance of this research.

These interviews occurred in 2020, before the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum (Biddle et al. 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people criticised the referendum process and outcome, viewing it as harmful to their future and reconciliation (Sculthorpe 2023). Thus, the stories were not influenced by the referendum, and future research should consider its implications on Australian identity. Additionally, all participants were based in Western Australia, where there is currently no state-based treaty process. This context may have shaped participants' reflections regarding treaty, which could differ markedly from those in jurisdictions such as Victoria that have formal treaty processes underway.

7 | Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's conceptualisations, lived experiences, and preferences for Australian identity. Participants' accounts indicated that systemic racism continues to shape exclusionary constructions of Australian identity, often positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as outsiders and reinforcing harmful intergroup dynamics. Their stories pointed to the importance of truth-telling, treaty processes, and policy reform as pathways they believe could address historical injustices and support an Australian identity more inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Participants also emphasised the central role of self-determination in shaping systems and identities that genuinely respect and reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This research indicates that without systematic change, Australian identity is likely to remain shaped by structures that marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Author Contributions

Jack Farrugia: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration, data curation, resources. **Jonathan Bullen:** conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, data curation, resources.

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Disclosure

Content Warning: This manuscript contains verbatim quotes that include racial slurs. These have been retained to accurately represent participants' accounts. The authors apologise for any distress caused.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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