Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’

Preliminary Report to Community
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We would also like to thank and acknowledge the young, Australian First Nations LGBTIQ+A Peoples whose stories appear in this paper. Their strength and resolve to overcome is an inspiration.

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Recommended citation


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Abstract
This report provides the preliminary findings drawing upon indepth qualitative interviews with young Indigenous LGBTIQA+ people (14 - 25 years) and their experiences of growing up Queer across NSW and the eastern seaboard. Over a period of 12 months (September 2019 - September 2020) 15 young Indigenous people who self-identified as LGBTIQA+ were interviewed across four primary areas including: What it means to be young, Indigenous, LGBTIQA+ for their emotional and social wellbeing; how they navigated family and community to maintain social and emotional wellbeing; what aspects of their journeys were supportive and respectful; and finally, what areas would they recommend for improvement to increase social and emotional wellbeing and the transition to young adulthood. The primary objectives of this project were to better understand how the experience of being Indigenous, LGBTIQA+ and young impacts upon their social and emotional wellbeing. The aim was that this will also enable the development of targetted supports and services to effectively support young Indigenous LGBTIQA+ people. The interviews are Phase 1 of the NSW component of a national study. This work was supported by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) under its Targeted Call 2018 Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing funding round (Grant ID: 1157377).
Introduction

This preliminary report is the first written for community on the findings of a research project into the social, cultural and emotional wellbeing (SCEWB) of young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples in Australia. Participants for the purpose of the project were 14-25 years of age. The three year project is funded by Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) under its Targeted Call 2018 Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing funding round (Grant ID: 1157377).

This report summarises the themes from 15 interviews held with First Nations LGBTIQA+ young people from eastern Australia. The participants were connected with many different First Nations communities from across Australia including: Birpai, Bundjalung, Djangadi, Gumbayngirr, Kamilaroi, Meriam, Murri, Muruwari, Mineng, Noongar, Nunukul, Wakka Wakka, Wiradjuri, Wuthathi and Yuin. Participants’ identities were also very diverse, and they identified as one or more of the following: Bisexual, Fluid, Gay, Lesbian, Non-Binary, Omnisexual, Pansexual, Queer, Trans and Unsure. Two participants identified as Trans, the rest as cis-women or cis-men.

The report focuses on the voices of young participants who participated in the study. It first sets out the relevant (if any) international and national laws and policies that affect or aim to protect young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples. The methodology is then briefly discussed. The findings are based on themes that were found in the interviews under the headings: Culture and Identity; Cultivating Wellbeing: Challenges, Resistance and Moving On; and Employment, Education and Support Services. Some preliminary conclusions are discussed with implications for further research and Australian policy and practice.

First Nations LGBTIQA+ people in Australia

Little is known about Australian First Nations’ understandings of sexuality and gender diverse people before the invasion and attempted destruction of their cultures and communities by the British empire in 1788. However, some information exists about pre-invasion Australian First Nations cultures and sexuality and gender diverse peoples. What little we know generally comes from three sources: First Nations Peoples and their cultures; Anthropologists; and White Settler accounts. These last two are potentially tainted by Euro-centric biases and based on colonial value systems that denigrated sexuality and gender diverse peoples. Bayliss (2014),
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rightly says that, “The sexual and gender diversity of Aboriginal peoples remains mostly absent in the recordings and interpretations of histories, and these absences reinforce a heterocentric reading of Aboriginal culture”. He goes on to discuss the Mimi Spirits depicted in rock paintings in northern Australia. Bayliss (2014) pinpoints their "subversive nature” as they are “genderless spirits” that challenge “colonial depiction of Aboriginality” and are associated with language, rock art and “speak back to dominant culture”. However, unlike other British colonised countries such as New Zealand, the USA and Canada, there has not been extensive research into pre- and post-invasion First Nations Peoples’ sexuality and gender diversity in Australia.

The lack of understanding of gender and sexuality diversity across Australian First Nations Peoples has implications for their daily lives. One thing this research highlights is the importance of having out and proud First Nations LGBTIQA+ peoples as role models. Isolation and disconnection come out of feeling like you are the only one experiencing discrimination, racism and queer-phobia on a daily basis. So, it is important to know that there are others like you out there and that your struggles are similar to theirs. Also, it is important that service providers know how to provide sexual, mental and physical health services to young First Nations LGBTIQA+ peoples. At present, we don’t know enough to provide targeted, appropriate services that meet First Nations LGBTIQA+ youth’s needs. Even though this report and others like it, provides a first step forward, there is much more that can be done to build appropriate service and support responses.

Policies and Legal Frameworks

This section discusses relevant laws at the global, national and state levels in Australia that affect young First Nations LGBTIQA+ peoples. This is a very short summary and more information can be obtained from the relevant websites cited below. It should be noted that international Treaties, Declarations and Conventions are only useful at the national level if a country has signed up to and agreed to abide by them including their incorporation into domestic laws.
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International

First Nations Peoples

Several decades of activism by First Nations Peoples led to the creation of the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295) (UN DESA 2020). This Declaration sets out the “minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security and well-being of Indigenous Peoples worldwide” (AHRC 2020). The Declaration is pronounced as “... the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples” (UN DESA 2020). Australia, Canada, the USA and New Zealand all initially voted against UNDRIP, although all countries have now signed the Declaration (UN DESA 2020). Regrettably many provisions remain unachieved.

Two older global conventions are also important regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ rights: the 1969 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (OHCHR 2020) and the 1989 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO No. 169) (ILO 2020). ILO 169 recognises, “the aspirations of these (Indigenous) peoples to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the framework of the States in which they live” … and “that in many parts of the world these peoples are unable to enjoy their fundamental human rights to the same degree as the rest of the population of the States within which they live, and that their laws, values, customs and perspectives have often been eroded” (ILO 2020). CERD calls for the elimination of all forms of racism and for the rapid removal of all laws and practices that discriminate against peoples of different races (OHCHR 2020a). As with all UN laws, these declarations and conventions are ‘non-binding’ and their success relies on whether, first of all, countries sign them and, second, how they put them into law, policy and practice.

LGBTIQA+ People

In the UN and the human rights system, LGBTIQA+ people’s rights come under the term Sexual Orientation Gender and Intersex Identity (SOGII) (AHRC 2020b). LGBTIQA+/SOGII rights have only fairly recently been recognised within the international human rights system.
Unlike Indigenous peoples, LGBTIQA+/SOGII rights do not have a specific treaty or convention that sets out their rights with duty bearer responsibilities (ILGA 2016). Basic LGBTIQA+/SOGII rights are covered by mainstream international laws and conventions such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. LGBTIQA+/SOGII rights are also covered by several conventions such as those covering women, children, people with disabilities, torture, disability and racial discrimination (ILGA 2016).

Over time, there have been more mentions of LGBTIQA+ peoples within the UN Committees that oversee the different treaties and conventions and language has become more inclusive of sexuality and gender diversity (ILGA 2016). As well as the UN LGBTI Core Group (2020), the best source of information about LGBTIQA+/SOGII rights is the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA 2020) that monitors the international system and provides regular updates on how LGBTIQA+ rights are trending globally (ILGA 2020). Support for the idea that human rights applies to sexuality and gender diverse people can be found in several statements from the UN, the most important being the UN Human Rights Council’s Joint Statement on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (AHRC 2014b). Another important statement was the 2006 Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, which sets out that, “Persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities shall enjoy legal capacity in all aspects of life’ and they should enjoy the full rights of all other people of ‘self-determination, dignity and freedom’” (AHRC 2014b: 9).

Young People
In the UN and international system, children are defined as being under the age of 18 years (OHCHR 2020b). There is an international law that covers young people and children up to the age of 18 years called Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC). The CRC promotes respect for the best interests of the child; children’s right to live and develop; their right to express their ideas on everything that affects them and the right to enjoy those rights in the CRC without discrimination (AHRC 2020c). Young people in this project were aged between 14 and 25 years of age and people aged 19-25 years are considered adults under international law. Although young people over the age of 18 years are covered by mainstream UN human rights laws, the UN also recognises that, “Young people face discrimination and obstacles to the enjoyment of their rights by virtue of their age, limiting their potential. The human rights
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of youth therefore refer to the full enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms by young people” (OHCRC 2020c).

The UN Human Rights Council promotes the rights of young people through activities such as research into the current trends regarding young people worldwide. A key 2018 report from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on youth and human rights (OHCHR 2020d), for example, outlines the ways governments implement human rights for young people, discrimination against young people and ‘best practices’ when young people are empowered and enjoy full rights (OHCHR 2020d). The report finds that young people face discrimination and challenges in participating in politics and public decision-making; finding work after finishing education; access to health services; conscientious objection to military service and in special contexts such as migration, the law and disability (OHCHR 2020d).

Australia

The laws at international level are much stronger than those in place in Australia. If and when Australia signed these Conventions and Declarations, it was supposed to put them into policies and practices that work in everyday life. Unfortunately, this has often not been the case and the federal and state governments are constantly weakening these kinds of laws and policies. For example, the Australian Human Rights Commission no longer produces reports that show the progress on issues of social justice and Native Title for First Nations Peoples after changes to the Human Rights Legislation Amendment Act in 2017 (AHRC 2020a). Despite this environment, many First Nations Peoples, LGBTIQA+ individuals and their organisations have successfully used international law to bring about change in Australia. Participation by Australia at the The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is another mechanism to influence laws policies and practices.

First Nations Peoples

Unlike at the international level, there is no specific law that sets out the rights of Australian First Nations Peoples. There is no treaty and no mention of the sovereignty and custodianship over lands and waters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution. The Uluru Statement from the Heart sets this out clearly: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs … With substantive
constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood” (cited in Commonwealth of Australia 2017). Under provisions of the Australian Constitution, Australian First Nations Peoples were not even counted until a referendum held in 1967. And the ongoing colonisation of lands and waters by the Australian and state governments means that First Nations Peoples’ rights such as Native Title can be overturned whenever the non-Indigenous state believes it necessary.

A human rights charter is generally thought to strengthen the rights of First Nations Peoples. Despite signing the UNDRIP and other international human rights laws, unlike other countries deemed to be liberal democracies, Australia does not have a national legislation that sets out the rights of any of its citizens, despite an extensive national consultation on the topic in 2009. At state level, Victoria has the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter Act) (Victorian Justice and Community Safety 2020). Preceding Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory introduced a Human Rights Act in 2004. The WA Aboriginal Legal Service, “believes a Human Rights Act is needed to change the mindset of governments intent on introducing new laws without any consideration of their disproportionate impact on vulnerable members of the community such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in particular children and young people” (ALSWA 2020).

There are also state and federal mainstream Anti-Discrimination laws. Currently, the most relevant federal law for First Nations Peoples is the federal Racial Discrimination Act (RDA). The main objectives of the Act are to promote equality before the law for all people, regardless of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin, and make discrimination against people on the basis of their race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin unlawful (AHRC 2014a). The RDA was set up in 1975 after Australia signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and is the most important law promoting equality and the removal of all forms of racial discrimination (AHRC 2014a). In recent years, however, the Australian federal government has suspended a number of the RDA’s provisions, weakening its objectives, most clearly during and after the infamous Northern Territory ‘intervention’ of 2007. At state level, New South Wales, for example, has the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977. This law applies to the general population and has a lot of overlap with federal laws about the types of discrimination covered (AHRC 2014a).
LGBTIQA+ People
There are no targeted laws covering LGBTIQA+ people in Australia either. Along with First Nations Peoples, LGBTIQA+ people are supposed to be protected from discrimination and violence by state and federal Anti-Discrimination Acts and common law. Australian states inherited British colonial laws that criminalised sexual activity between two men and queer-phobia, discrimination and violence against the LGBTIQA+ communities were commonplace. The federal and state governments either ignored the issues or scapegoated the LGBTIQA+ communities for issues such as HIV/AIDS. South Australia was the first state to legalise sex between two men in 1975, and by 1991, all states except Tasmania had repealed laws criminalising men who have sex with men. Tasmania was the last state to do so, only being forced to repeal its laws by the federal government in 1994 after a concerted public campaign involving the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Toonen v Australia). Since then, LGBTIQA+ rights have progressively improved with the legal recognition of same sex relationships and marriage. LGBTIQA+ rights are now considered part of the Australian government’s human rights standards and the AHRC aims at, “building a culture of respect for SOGII rights among the Australian community” (AHRC 2014b: 3). However, there is still much to do to eliminate queer-phobia, violence and discrimination.

Young People
Again there are no targeted laws covering young people in Australia specifically promoting their rights enshrined within international children human rights conventions and treaties. Young people’s rights are considered protected under common law and Anti-Discrimination Acts at state and federal levels. The Australian Human Rights Commission does promote the rights of children and young people, however. The AHRC (2020e) has found that the main issues facing young people include:

- Inadequate access to education
- Homelessness
- Too many First Nations Peoples in the child protection system
- Immigration detention
- Limited opportunities to participate in legal and political decisions
- Child abuse and neglect
- Poor conditions in juvenile detention
- Low wages
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- Limited use of public spaces

The AHRC also highlights the limited protections in place for young people at present and the lack of consideration given to young people in government decisions and policymaking (AHRC 2020e). The AHRC argues that a Human Rights Act or Charter that, “includes the rights to adequate housing, health, education and social security could make a difference to the lives of children and young people in Australia. It would improve the policies, procedures and services that many children and young people encounter daily. It could help prevent human rights breaches from happening, and could provide ways of resolving those breaches that were not prevented” (AHRC 2020e).

Methodology

This community report is part of a series of papers based on interviews with First Nations LGBTIQ+ people aged 14-25 years living in eastern Australia. These interviews are part of a project investigating the SCEWB of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ young people, one of the first in Australia. The aim of the study is to understand the experiences of First Nations LGBTIQ+ young people to enable development of supportive programs and service provision. The project takes a strengths-based approach focusing on the resistance, successes, voices and perspectives of First Nations LGBTIQ+ youth in overcoming challenges to their SCEWB.

The in-depth interviews with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ people living in urban centres were part of the first phase of the study. These interviews will inform the content of phase two, a NSW-wide online survey of First Nations LGBTIQ+ young people about their wellbeing, risk and protective factors, and experiences of health services, including sexual health services such as AIDS Council of NSW (ACON). A final phase will work with First Nations LGBTIQ+ young people, their organisations, relevant service providers and stakeholders to co-design programs that can support young people’s SCEWB. All phases of the research process have been guided by an Advisory Group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ young people and service providers, including BlaQ Aboriginal Organisation and ACON.
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Prior to submission, this report was reviewed by members of the Advisory Group Members as identified above and the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Committee’s Human Research Ethics Committee. All quotes used were verified and cleared for publication with each of the participants in acknowledgement of their ownership and control of their stories. The project took a Dharug name to reflect this: Dalarinji or ‘Your Story’.

**Findings**

In this section we discuss the three key themes that the participants raised with us. The three key themes are culture and identity; cultivating wellbeing; and everyday life around work, education and support services.

**Culture and Identity**

Despite the disconnection created by colonisation, all participants identified as proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Participants revealed a range of sexuality and gender diversity. The challenges they encountered in their daily lives were not only about identity but also about a struggle to be accepted for who they were. Participants spoke about how certain people, events and places made them feel uncomfortable with their Indigeneity, sexuality and gender orientation.

People were proud of both their First Nations identity and sexuality and gender diversity. An issue that arose was acceptance within different communities. Many of the participants described that they felt more comfortable living in urban city areas because this enabled their LGBTIQA+ side to flourish. However, they also talked about how this reduced their connection to extended families, country and community. They also discussed the racism they experienced in urban settings from non-Indigenous mainstream and LGBTIQA+ communities.

Participants spoke of the importance of being connected to community and culture. The ongoing importance of being connected to their First Nations culture gave them strength to maintain social and emotional wellbeing when faced with racism and queer-phobia in the mainstream and LGBTIQA+ communities.
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*First Nations Peoples, out and proud*

Participants felt proud to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and ‘out’. They saw that both of these made them strong:

My sexuality and gender and my cultural heritage are such positives that I can be grounded in and as a strength rather than these negative connotations that I have been taught in the past or being shunned or felt ashamed for or being guilty (Participant 9).

Yet, struggles with identity formation were commonplace:

I’ve always thought I liked girls throughout high school, but I’ve always thought ‘well maybe all girls are like this’. So, I ignored it and suppressed it for a few years. And then in Year 12, I was going through my HSC (Higher School Certificate) and stuff and I just had a big breakdown. And one of my friends is a gay male and I said “I think I’m gay. I don’t know what to do”. And even he was like “Oh it could be a phase” (Participant 1).

I was uneducated about the existence of people like me, which as you can imagine is really isolating for a young person. Probably had an impact on my mental health as I didn’t see anyone like me. And then as a young person, you’re like “Oh my God! Something is wrong with me”. And then you worry about that…(Participant 6).

I had feelings of sadness and I guess dysphoria from around the age of three and four. And noticing the difference in my body to little boys’ bodies or my cousin boy. That’s when I noticed how I identified more with how they were playing and acting and socialising and I was being put into a different box. Move forward to the ages of 11 and 10 as I go in for puberty and started to get really more feelings of depression about going through female puberty (Participant 7).

I think one of the things that I feel with my grandparents is that one of my grandfathers was stolen and he’s got a lot of trauma and he’s quite homophobic (Participant 3).

Identity is not always straightforward and can result in hesitation when judged by others:

Because even though I identify as lesbian, I’m still a bit confused. I don’t know…..(Participant 7).
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I identify as a queer male. I guess my sexuality is on a spectrum between being gay and bisexual and so, I feel like queer is a good kind of umbrella term for not just stating straight. So, I identify as a queer male (Participant 8).

So – well, I am a gay male. I’m a little bit flamboyant. I’ll go through days that I will just be obsessed with female clothes and just love it. And then the next day I feel like a total butch and just wanna wear trackies, sweat shirts. But out of all that, it’s really cos I do identify as gay…but I don’t know what I’ll be further down the line. I could totally be a different sexuality in long run. I don’t know yet, but hopefully when I get into my 30s or late-mid 20s I’ll definitely settle down with something (Participant 13).

Even if …[friend’s name] I say to her “I’m not gay, I just like you”. She says “It doesn’t make sense. You’re dating girls, you have to be gay.” But I’m not. I don’t look at other girls like “Oh yeah, I would date them. It was literally you as a person”. I can’t really explain that. (Participant 14).

Of importance to one participant were the experiences of other people:

I guess as a young person navigating the world, I looked to other people that have had similar lived experience to me…I like to try and find Aboriginal people that are queer and bisexual people…I think being Aboriginal, being Torres Strait Islander, also being someone who identifies bisexual is a minority within a minority. So yeah, I think that can make it hard to find people that have had the same experiences as me (Participant 3).

Identity has its own issues, as one participant explained:

People ask me if I’m a lesbian this and lesbian that, but I say “No” and then they ask me if I’m bisexual and I’d say “No”. I had a boyfriend at 14 as well. So then I went back to dating girls around 15 and 16. And then around the age of 16, I came out as a lesbian because it really got the boys off my back (Participant 7).

For women participants with children this could be particularly challenging because of the ex-partners/fathers of their children could have particularly strong views about the impact on their children of their sexual expression. For example, one of the participants who was a mother
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spoke of the reaction of her son’s father, her ex-partner, who said “Our son’s going to get bullied because he has a gay mum” (Participant 5).

For a church-going participant, the decision was made never to return when hearing a sermon that “we needed to vote ‘no’ on same sex marriage, adding that “You lost me, You always had me, and now you lost me” (Participant 2).

**Racism and Queer-phobia combined**

Participants discussed the challenges of experiencing both racism and queer-phobia:

> When I’m back home in Wagga in community, the first thing that is seen of me is my Aboriginality even though I am a pale Indigenous person because people know my family name, people know my community and people know my grandparents. But when I’m here in Sydney, I found it easier to connect with the LGBT community because it was easier to blend into the community (Participant 6).

> I definitely identify as a queer person but also as Aboriginal person. I feel there’s just a bunch of different aspects to one thing to one person. And I guess they’re separate for me at the moment (Participant 4).

> Growing up, I had to get told that both of my identities were invalid. I wasn’t Black cos I was white and being gay is bad. So, it kind of had adverse effects on your mental health, which I’m still coping and struggling with but thriving today. But I guess you could say that’s how my cultural identity and my sexual identity intersect (Participant 10).

> I find being Aboriginal within Australia is its own issue but then being gay within Australia has its own issue. But then to be Aboriginal and gay within Australia is like a whole other ball game. You’re not only being criticised and ridiculed for who you fancy and who you’re attracted to sexually, you’re also made fun of because of your race and these are two things you can’t control at all (Participant 11).
When people were trying come out to family, friends and community, some participants felt that for their own safety it was best to deny their identity:

Growing up, I was always a tomboy, then I went real girly, then a tomboy, then real girly, and I think I remember my grandma and my aunties would sit me down and be like, “Are you gay? Come on, just tell us, we know,” and it’s like, “No, I’m not. I’m not gay,” and I did. I was like, “No, I’m not.” (Participant 15).

To feel safe and protected against racism and queer-phobia, participants actively pursued strategies of ‘passing’ as white or heterosexual and sometimes both:

I don’t know how to have that conversation with other Aboriginal people, especially if I hear them making homophobic comments. It was, “I’m not gonna bring that up to them if I’m here for them, they’re not here for me.” …it just made me uncomfortable….(Participant 2).

I felt like I was always trying to play to the straight white people…to try and safeguard myself and protect myself and so I never really was truly who I was…. (Participant 9).

I am white passing and you could say that my Aboriginality like my sexuality was invisible, therefore it was easy to suppress growing up… I’ve always known being Black and being gay – always knew I was different, couldn’t really put a finger on it until I was older, but being able to pass as a white person and growing up in high school realising that people are pretty conservative and that gay was a bad thing. It was very easy to suppress that as well, to pass as a white hetero-cis man, but eventually, that just got too much physically and emotionally to keep suppressing that (Participant 10).

I used to get hickies from my friends that were girls because they – my best friend knew about me being gay and she was like – just would give me hickies so I could go back home and back to school to tell people that I hooked up with this girl…And I think that’s what hurt me the most was that I couldn’t be true to myself and I had to lie and build a lot of walls…. (Participant 13).
Cultivating Wellbeing: Challenges, Resistance and Moving On

This section looks at some of the struggles told to us by participants. These are important to help understand how discrimination, racism and queer-phobia affects the lives of young people. Experiences show how young people sustain and cultivate wellbeing outside the formal service context. The participants stressed the importance of family and community as well as formal service contexts to maintain and cultivate wellbeing.

Challenges of sustaining social, cultural and emotional wellbeing

The strain of racism and homophobia resulted in depression, anxiety, distress, suicidal thoughts and alcohol use for some participants. Some of this came from reliving previous trauma, “you’re always going to have like a cycle of when that part of the year comes around, you’re gonna feel it more and so it’s a constant push for me. And sometimes I fuck up” (Participant 9).

At times participants spoke of the impact of a lack of connection with like-minded First Nations Queer people: “I was really depressed, and I was self-harming ‘cos I didn’t have many friends.” (Participant 7).

The importance of mothers and families

The most consistent view expressed was the importance of mothers, who were essential to feeling supported and safe:

My mum and I have a very personal relationship. She’s more like a friend and a sister to me as more than a mother, if that makes any sense. So, my coming out process was very, very easy and I’m very blessed to have had that…If I wanted to dance around in the lounge and sing Hanna Montana or High School Musical, she was more than supportive of that and she knew I was different from a young age. I remember the day that when she said “I know you are gay”, that was a big moment cos it was a thing that we knew, but I didn’t really address (Participant 11).

I didn’t know how to start. I was sitting there for five minutes, probably just thinking “how do I voice it”. And I just said, “Hey mum, would you care if I was into men?” She said, “No I don’t care”, like “doesn’t concern me” like “you’re still my son”. And she welcomed me with open arms and she just said, “Yeah, kind of figured” (Participant 8).
And then I think my mum was the first person I told and she knew since I was young. I stood to her in the kitchen and I said, “Mum, what would you do if one of your kids was gay?” and she’s like, “Why? Are you gay?” and she was like, “I’ve known since you were 13,” and then she just gave me a big cuddle and said, “I’ll always love you just the same as all your other brothers and sisters, so don’t worry about me not loving you as much” (Participant 1).

Wider family relationships proved to be more complex. For example, participants described their experiences with other family members:

In my dad’s side, there was a bit of adjustment. They’re a little bit funny at first but they’re alright now (Participant 1).

It took them maybe six months to get their heads around it, especially my dad, he was pretty bad (Participant 2).

…but the immediate mum, dad, aunty, cousins, and grandma on dad’s side are all well receiving, but there is fear from my mum’s mum and my mum’s brothers, my uncles. I don’t know, just cos I guess they’re super traditional in a heteronormative way and have heard them make queer-phobic remarks before. So, I’m reluctant to be myself around them (Participant 10).

I think one of the things that I feel with my grandparents is that one of my grandfathers was stolen and he’s got a lot of trauma and he’s quite homophobic. I guess the thing that – I never talked to him about being queer ‘cause that would make our relationship even worse that it already is. I think we don’t have a good relationship already (Participant 3).

**Social networks**

Aside from family, social networks featured as being sources of support. The participants talked about the importance of sharing their journeys of coming out as a First Nations Queer young person:
I guess knowing that you’re not the only one that felt that or is feeling that is comforting, you’re not the only one that’s felt confused about who you are, and it’s okay to be not quite sure, but exploring it, like exploring is fine, I think (Participant 2).

Well fortunately, I haven’t needed to go anywhere for help. I’ve been pretty lucky in that sense to be surrounded by positive people or accepting people. So if I ever had an issue, just talk to my friends about any situation (Participant 5).

I’ve had such lovely people in my life since all have seen something in me that I have made them wanna be around me and support – be part of my journey in some way (Participant 9).

I think the most important for me and I think that keeps me strong and keeps me going is having a sense of security, in terms of everything, every domain, my housing, my employment, my social support networks. That’s security for me and that’s wellbeing, that connection…that’s what I find wellness, having all of those main social determinants of health, being upheld and supported (Participant 7).

Participants described being part of First Nations queer networks made them stronger:

I mean it’s still got the negative side of it, which is the very heteronormative way of living, so does everywhere but I feel because it is such a condensed space, you have more of free thinkers and people who are open to understanding sexuality and gender, and not conforming (Participant 9).

Despite feeling comfortable and welcomed in queer communities, some participants described experiences of racism within the LGBTIQA+ communities:

I don’t like going out to the gay clubs in Sydney because you hear so many racist, disgusting things, also very misogynistic things as well, and sometimes it’s not even racist things towards my own people, it’s towards other races, but because I don’t like that, I don’t wanna hear that and, especially from people who are in a community that’s so marginalised against, it just goes beyond my brain, it’s like beating down those who are already beaten enough to the point where they can’t get up, like you’re beating on the even more and you don’t even have a leg to stand on (Participant 11).
…it was like a lesbian party and I was there and then this girl came up to me and she was just like, “Oh, you’re so brave to come here. Your skin is so beautiful,” it was really weird. She was just talking about my skin and making me feel really uncomfortable. She obviously thought it was weird that I was there (Participant 3).

**Role models and positive images**

Participants described the importance of role models in their life. They talked about the importance of the presence and visibility of out and proud First Nations Queer people, both within and outside their families. Participants discussed the need for positive role models and for their sexuality and gender diversity to be recognised and accepted within their families, at service providers but also in activities like sport:

I’ve been in the footy community since I was fifteen, and even been surrounded by gay people, that’s helped a lot (Participant 5).

I didn't have role model. I didn't have no one in – I mean my uncle is a gay and my grandfather is a gay but they’re at my pop side but I didn't see them ever. Honest to God, I don’t have a role – my mum is my role model but I don't have a gay role model. I just went day by day ... I mean seeing now, I've had no training or – I never had someone to speak to about my sexuality never ever. (Participant 4).

**Employment, Education and Support Services**

This section focuses on more concrete aspects of everyday life. Participants discussed their experiences of racism and queer-phobia in education, work and health services.

**Education**

Participants spoke of difficulties with primary and secondary education, where there were struggles with identity as well as bullying, violence, racism and queer-phobia from other students and teachers:

I think it was more the fact that in school, you get picked on for being Black, you get picked on for being Aboriginal, and I think that’s why I made fun of my own culture at school, was because I didn’t want people to think that I got everything for free. And I had a job at school. So I was proving people that I was paying for stuff, that I wasn’t
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getting stuff from the government for free, and I used to be called ‘Black’. I used to be picked on like, “Oh, you’re getting stuff for free because you’re Aboriginal. You get free schooling”. No, it’s not like that. It is not like that at all. I work from everything from bottom to top. But it was the fact that I hurt myself more and that I had to make my culture a joke to myself so people didn’t have to pick on me. So, I wish that was one thing I changed about myself in high school, that I was proud to be a proud little black gay kid, but was the fact that I didn’t wanna be picked on by kids at school for being black and getting stuff for free and being gay (Participant 13).

And then I got to high school and, oh my God, everyone was so – putting so much pressure on what sexuality is and so it was such a hard time and that’s when I knew it, it was a definitive thing for me then … I just found school so traumatic, honestly. I found it the worst place for a gay person. Everyone’s trying to grow and find who they are and, especially in rural community. I felt like I was just hiding the entire time and living a lie and so it was just really shit and traumatic (Participant 9).

Participants described negative experiences at school with sex education as it did not discuss being queer nor how to have healthy sexual relationships as a queer person:

It was compulsory sex education. That was mostly focused on male and female, cis-male and female partners (Participant 3).

When I was in high school we had one day of just learning about the reproductive system and stuff like that, and then the next day, learning about same sex by someone else, because when I was starting to get sexually active, I didn’t know what to do… I didn’t know how to do it and what was the safest way to do it. I was always doing it because porn taught me, nothing that the school taught me (Participant 13).

There were generally more positive experiences at university, although there were problems at times with queer-phobia:

But I’d say that what I’m aware of is that a lot of the kids at – students at uni and college, all the Black ones, especially the queer ones, I am all aware of their mental health issues. So, I had to cut myself from all those people, it would have just been a cycle of going back and forward (Participant 10).
I’m a young professional. I need education but I haven’t finished uni, so even having an access in a university that’s gonna accept me for my little differences like being transgendered. Before, it was really hard to access uni because I had a different birth name, and I had identity (Participant 7).

Work
Participants spoke of the difficulties of being First Nations peoples and out and proud in the workplace. Some participants talked about resigning or losing their jobs either because of being Aboriginal or queer. At times, participants were unsure whether it was racism, queer-phobia or both:

And with employment now, I don’t even tell them I’m trans. I just go with it because young men, they need young men in the industry I’m working in. So I’m just gonna be a young man, let’s not complicate it (Participant 7).

I started a job, and I found it really hard because the job that I was doing was a support worker, and I couldn’t tell any clients about my gender or stuff (Participant 2).

Working at AMS since I’ve been gay. I’ve never dreamt of a better job…I’ve had a couple of jobs that some people were a little bit one-minded (Participant 13).

So I learnt to avoid at work, at the hospital. I learnt to avoid wards and things like that. They're a little bit funny with older patients and things like that… Yeah, the patients, just some shit they're saying, like “Oh God, I don’t wanna hear you,” they’ll say stuff about gay people and Aboriginals and there’s a bit about it (Participant 1).

Service provision
Participants talked about the difficulties of finding Aboriginal and/or queer-friendly physical, sexual or mental health support. One participant spoke of the need to be ‘picky’ and to test what was available to find a suitable therapist, counsellor, general practitioner or medical service (Participant 1). Other participants talked about their experiences with queer counsellors, therapists and psychologists. Comments on Aboriginal Medical Services drew mixed experiences. Some were considered queer-friendly, while others not.
Participants said that there was no one perfect service. Each discussed finding a service that met their individual needs. Relationships were important. Some participants described First Nations community-based health services favourably for general health and some others used mainstream health services such as their GPs. Participants also spoke of LGBTIQA+ service providers such as ACON and Twenty 10 in a positive way, that they were private and confidential, providing opportunities to learn about sexual health and safer sex.

Participants talked about positive and negative experiences that depended on the person they were seeing:

So I find sexual health check-ups can be really tricky because they either ask a lot of questions and they’re usually pretty heteronormative. Actually, I think I prefer it when they don’t ask any questions at all. I’ve been to a doctors once, and she was so confused ‘cos she’s like, “Tell me about your partner” and I have to be like “Well there was a cis-man, a cis-woman”. “Did you have unprotected sex?” And I was like, “I don’t know what that means in this context. I think you have to be more specific than that?” So when I go to a doctor, I either want them to be more open about different gender identities and not being so heteronormative in the questions that they’re asking me (Participant 3).

So I started having sessions with her. She’s very accommodating to Black and queer people, so I felt safe. I don’t think she has any cultural training though. But my problems weren’t with culture. It was mainly just emotional wellbeing. So I felt safe with her and we got to the root of the problem and I’m on medication now and I’m thriving (Participant 10).

I’m a bit of a prickly person. So when it comes to me venting and telling someone my problems, I don’t necessarily want it just to be random. I obviously want it be somewhat of a professional. So for me, it does take a bit of time just to find that right person. The general services are there, don’t get me wrong, they’re obviously there, there’s someone to talk to, but whether or not it’s a good quality and it’s a good person to talk to, and sometimes the services you’re offered like counselling and stuff, sometimes they don’t necessarily understand cultural issues and cultural backgrounds as well (Participant 11).
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Generally, participants spoke most about the value of LGBTQIA+ services providers:
They were more specific than, “Did you have sex?” It was like, “Did you have penetrative penis and vagina sex?” I think it’s much more easy for me to talk to the doctors if they’re using that language cos then I feel like my health is better looked after (Participant 3).

I’d done counselling services through ACON and my counsellor was a lesbian woman, which of all the mental health professionals I’d seen in the whole four years, I felt the most growth from. Seeing someone who was from the community and I was talking about relationship issues. So I can only imagine what that would have been if there was lesbian, an Aboriginal person or an Indigenous mental health professional that I was receiving that support from cos it was incredible to have those conversations with someone who genuinely did get it, rather than talking to a professional who they just say they do (Participant 6).

There were mixed views about Aboriginal community controlled health services:
I have been to some queer services, but I find that Aboriginal medical centres are quite inclusive and visible, and all the nurses and doctors there are well-versed in LGBT health issues of health – you know. I haven’t had to really ask much or learn much because they would already be talking about it (Participant 9).

So I do understand that there is a bit of a sense of shame going to the AMS. I know I felt like that, just purely because although I’m a proud Aboriginal man, I do know within our Indigenous community, there’s a lot of homophobia and transphobia that still does go on and so going into it and being, “Oh yeah”, to me it’s a little disrespectful as well, that’s just my opinion. So I do definitely get the whole being more comfortable going to a queer-based one because they’re people like you, they share the same stories, so I definitely get that (Participant 11).

I think they (AMS) just cared more, that centre has cared a lot, they – when I was filling out my registration form for the service, it had gender, and then it had a line that we fill in your gender, whereas at the other centres, it was male or female, and I was, “Oh, none”. I mean I tick neither of them, and then they’d be, “So why didn’t you,” and I’m, “Because it’s neither,” so that first thing was, “Oh that’s really nice” (Participant 2).
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It’s good that I’m working there [AMS], but I wish that we had more LGBT stuff around in the building. That’s my – personal request. The only thing we’ve got is pregnancies, make sure you get like an STI check-up. There’s nothing about same sex in the building (Participant 13).

Participants also had mixed experiences of mental health services: I was part of the youth reference group they [headspace] had, and all that kind of thing. I just did everything with them just because they were the only place in the town that I knew supported LGBT people and Aboriginal people. I was, “This fits well.” So yeah, I spent much time there. I gave them lots of my time, which no regrets, it was really fun (Participant 2).

I was 17, I cut my hair off, wanting to get on hormones. So I went back to my GP and I cried – not I cried but I just whined about how shit the psychologist was and he was like, “Well, we’ll just do informed consent. We’ll start you today” and so I walk out of the GP office smiling from ear to ear and got my first shot of testosterone and then I come out after that (Participant 7).

I just feel like some doctors are not educated that much with same sex. Just happy to know the doctor that I seen was in the LGBT, so she definitely knew what I was going through and what medication I should be taking and stuff like that. So she was very – such a big ally and that’s the only doctor I see there at work now, is just her because she just has so much history about me and she just gets me as a person (Participant 13).

Some participants offered suggestions for improved service delivery: Maybe a bit more specific at least for LGBT and make it broad and then have people trained and to deal with Aboriginal people and stuff like that would be good too I think (Participant 2).

Trans people don’t have many people that they can rely on in that way. So they need those sorts of foundations to hold themselves up. If there’s more support there for trans people, it would be better, better health outcomes (Participant 7).
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Maybe like a support group or something for queers. I don’t know. A more modernised Aboriginal health centre with younger workers, like younger health workers and stuff to help with that kind of stuff with the coming out process and bringing in family interventions. I think that’s what I needed at the time (Participant 1).

Concluding Discussion

This paper has outlined some of the key findings of one of the first projects to investigate the wellbeing of young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples in Australia. The report shows the need to understand the perspectives of young people as they meet the challenges of living in a neo-colonial state such as Australia. Other people’s discriminatory, racist and queer-phobic attitudes and behaviour at collective (culture, community, family) and individual levels are shown to affect their wellbeing. Although participants spoke of being depressed or anxious or unsafe in some situations, they also spoke of their pride in being First Nations and LGBTIQA+ Peoples and of their ability to sustain and cultivate wellbeing.

Despite these challenges, young people spoke of the importance of family, social networks and role models. Overwhelmingly, young people spoke of how important the support and acceptance of their mothers was to their feelings of wellbeing. Mothers were their best friends, protectors and advocates especially within community. Other members of the extended family were not seen as being as central with some family members from rural areas being seen as being less open to their LGBTIQA+ identities. Some of this lack of acceptance also relates to the age of family members, their generational experiences such as being part of the Stolen Generations and whether their religious values conflicted with being out and proud. However, friends and social networks were also very important for many participants, having a strong set of friends and safe places where they felt comfortable was critical. Having strong role models that were out and proud in either their families, in education or in service provision, was also said to be important as it gave them at times much needed strength and support.

Unfortunately, young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples were less positive about places within the public domain. Education was difficult, with bullying, discrimination, racism and queer-phobia reported as being very prevalent especially in primary and secondary schools. Some participants reported that universities were at least a bit better. Working life was also at times difficult to navigate as some places were unsafe and young people were unable to be out and
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proud about being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and/or LGBTIQA+. Young people developed strategies to hide these identities in order to feel safe and be able to continue to earn a living. Participant stories about service providers were mixed. Finding a good mental, sexual or physical health provider was very much trial and error. Participants trialled GPs, counsellors, service providers and organisations as to whether they were LGBTIQA+ allies and culturally appropriate. However, participants demonstrated a strong ability to use the current systems and to assert their mental, physical and sexual health needs to service providers.

This preliminary report shows the need to understand the experiences and perspectives of young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples living in Australia. In many ways, they encounter and live with many of the challenges of older First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples in Australia, affected by centuries of colonial policies that denigrate and attempt to eliminate community, culture and people. This has led to collective intergenerational trauma that affects young First Nations Peoples as much as older First Nations Peoples. Young First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples also acknowledge the hard work and difficult life experiences of their older peers, living through criminalisation and HIV/AIDS. Even though they recognise the gains made by older First Nations LGBTIQA+ Peoples and the benefits of living out and proud in the present time, they also still face specific challenges to their wellbeing. Understanding more about these challenges and how young people resist and overcome them, is important to break down some of the isolation of young people as well as to improve the areas of education, work and health service provision.
References


**Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’**


