

Agency and the positive role of community and culture in fostering sexual wellbeing for Aboriginal young women

Martin K¹, Wilms J¹⁰, Bryant J¹, Bolt R², Aggleton P¹, Beetson K⁸, Graham S³, Doyle M⁴, Murphy D⁵, Newman C¹, Bell S⁶, Treloar C¹, Browne A⁷, Briggs T⁸, Brooks M⁸, Botfield J⁹, Davis B⁹, Leece B¹⁰, Stanbury L¹⁰

¹Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW

²Charles Darwin University

³Department of Infectious Diseases, University of Melbourne, at the Peter Doherty Institute

⁴The University of Sydney

⁵The Kirby Institute UNSW

⁶The Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, University of Queensland

⁷The University of British Columbia

⁸South Western Sydney Local Health District

⁹Family Planning NSW

¹⁰Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District

Presentation type: research-based oral presentation

Keywords: Priority populations, Intersectionality, Social sciences

Theme: Social political and cultural aspects

Background: Much existing literature on Aboriginal women's sexual health focuses on risks and problems and/or frames sexuality in terms of victimisation. Adopting a strengths-based focus, this presentation explores how Aboriginal young women develop sexual agency, how their understandings of sex and relationships help cultivate sexual wellbeing, and how community and culture support this.

Methods: Data were collected using a participatory peer researcher method whereby 9 young Aboriginal women were supported and employed to conduct interviews with other young Aboriginal women in their networks. A total of 35 Aboriginal women, aged 16-26 and residing in Western Sydney, were interviewed.

Results: Participants were deeply aware of sexual stigma and sexual and gendered shame were experienced in racialised ways. In response, participants promoted more accepting attitudes about sex and challenged shame discourses, drawing on culture and community to counter problematic views which they asserted as being rooted in Western colonialism. Participants used their knowledge of social norms and relationships to consciously navigate risks and assert control over sexual narratives. Friendships with other young women functioned as 'safe spaces' in which participants could explore collective understandings, share information, and exchange personal advice about sex. Participants described how family, community and culture contributed to positive understandings of sexual relationships. Some participants saw themselves as playing key roles in facilitating positive change within their families and communities regarding sex and gender.

Conclusion: These findings challenge assumptions that young people are inherently 'risky' when it comes to sex, emphasising Aboriginal young women's agency and framing Aboriginal young people as being capable of responsible and respectful sexual decision-making. Young women's accounts suggest that culture and community play a positive role in supporting Aboriginal young people to cultivate sexual wellbeing for themselves and others.

Disclosure of interest: none

Acknowledgement of funding: This research is part of the Australian Research Council Linkage Project LP170100190 'Fostering the sexual well-being of Aboriginal young people by building on social, cultural and personal strengths and resources'. The project is a partnership between UNSW, Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District, South Western Sydney Local Health District and Family Planning NSW, together with investigators from the University of Sydney, University of Melbourne, University of British Columbia and Charles Darwin University. The project investigators include Joanne Bryant, Reuben Bolt, Michael Doyle, Dean Murphy, Carla Treloar, Stephen Bell, Simon Graham, Christy Newman, Annette Browne, Peter Aggleton, Jessica Botfield, Robert Hardy, Ben Davis, Bronwyn Leece, Linda Stanbury, Elizabeth Brown, Karen Beetson, Voula Kougelos, and Megan Brooks. We are grateful for the excellent assistance of Kacey Martin, Kim Beadman, Mitchell Beadman, Jessica Wilms, Tamika Briggs, and Kristy Gardner. National Health & Medical Research Council Investigator grant supports the salary of Simon Graham (number: 2009727).