

Our relationships, our values, our culture – Aboriginal young men’s perspectives about sex, relationships and gender stereotypes in Australia

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Background Studies of Aboriginal young people have often adopted a deficit approach depicting them as ‘risky’ and in need of help. In contrast, this study took a strengths-based approach and focussed on what Aboriginal young people value, how they stay safe and how their culture impacts their lives.

Methods: 16 Aboriginal men aged 16 to 24 years were interviewed in western Sydney, Australia. We examined Aboriginal young men’s perspectives about relationships, sex and gender. We used peer-led interviewing because it focused on existing social networks where rapport had already been established. Interviews were conducted by young Aboriginal men in December 2019 and August 2020. The study had an Aboriginal Advisory Committee which was chaired by an Aboriginal Chief Investigator. Each participant received \$50 for their time.

Results: The 16 men self-identified as Aboriginal only and a third were high school students. Overall, four features of positive sexual and romantic relationships were discussed: (1) love, connection and support; (2) enjoyment and fun; (3) responsibility, safety and consent; and 4) honesty, respect and trust. Additionally, three topics related to gender roles were shared: (1) becoming a man; (2) sex as a masculine achievement; and (3) inequality and gender stereotypes. Some of the participants had negative views of other men who bragged about their sexual encounters and saw this behaviour as a show performed for other men.

Conclusion: Study findings suggest that although Aboriginal young men value enjoyment and fun, they are acutely aware of broader issues such as consent and respect but need practical tools to successfully gain consent. Young men acknowledged the gender stereotypes faced by young women and said that it was men’s role to prevent derogatory statements made towards women. Our findings can be used by future school safe sex education programmes to better meet the needs of Aboriginal young men.

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