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Background

Sex and relationship studies in Aboriginal communities, particularly for young people, often adopt deficit approaches. In contrast, this study took a strengths-based approach (Bryant et al. 2021) and focused on the values of Aboriginal young people, ways to engage and practice safe relationships and how their culture shaped their practice.

Methods

Researchers examined Aboriginal young men's perspectives about relationships, sex and gender using peer-led interviews, as it focussed on existing social networks, the Aboriginal cultural practice of yarning (Murrup-Stewart et al. 2020) and interviewees responding in the third person narrative. 16 Aboriginal young men, aged 16 to 24 years were interviewed in Western Sydney, Australia. Interviews were conducted by young Aboriginal men in December 2019 and August 2020. Peer interviewers were paid at the UNSW student researcher rate and each interviewee received \$50.

Results

Overall, the features of positive sexual and romantic relationships were discussed:

Love, Connection and Support;

Young Aboriginal men spoke about the positive aspects of a sexual relationship that can be fostered when they feel comfortable and the ability to receive support, such as being able to talk to partners about their problems and give or receive care:

"I think sex brings people closer together and builds a sort of relationship with the other person, and a trust"

(Tyler, 20 years)

Enjoyment and Fun;

Positive emotions, like happiness and enjoyment, were associated with good and healthy relationships:

"Yeah. like I said, it makes them feel better or makes them feel good, like it brings happiness to them"

(Seb, 18 years).

Responsibility, Safety and Consent;

Participants highlighted the importance of consent.

"You might be together. You might have done it a million times. One day, they might not want to and it's just as easy as, "no", and move on. So consent... it's a big thing"

(Will, 18 years).

Reference

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Additionally, topics related to gender roles were shared:

Sex as a Masculine Achievement;

Young Aboriginal men talked about frequent sex being framed as an achievement for young men, but not necessarily for young women:

"Maybe they make you out to be like a player. Maybe they encourage you to do that, like have fun while you're young.

They encourage you. Well, as a male..."

(Frank, 18 years).

Inequality and gender stereotypes.

Participants spoke about problematic views and behaviours towards women:

"I feel like that's passed down and engrained into people, I feel like society as a whole, how we treat women sometimes, everyone makes jokes about that in a negative way. They can be joking, but it happens so many times it gets engrained into our generation and that can be a problem, how males may treat women."

(Frank, 18 years)

Conclusion

Whilst Aboriginal young men base their sexual relationships on foundations of love, connection and support and value enjoyment and fun, they advocate changing culture and attitudes towards critical issues such as consent and respect. Young men acknowledged the gender stereotypes faced by young women and advocated for men to be accountable for such derogatory statements made toward women to discontinue the cycle. Our findings can be used by future school safe sex education programmes to better meet the needs of Aboriginal young people.