

‘Boys mostly just want to have sex’: Young Indigenous people talk about relationships and sexual intimacy in remote, rural and regional Australia

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand Indigenous Australian young people’s relationships and their experiences of sexual intimacy. A cohort of Indigenous 16–25-year-olds from urban, rural and remote communities were invited to participate in a collaborative method involving scenario-based body mapping. In these activities, young people discussed the range and complexity of their relationships and how constructions and interpretations of relationships contribute to both positive and negative experiences. These rich understandings provide important insights into adolescent sexuality as ‘multidimensional, socially constructed and negotiated’. However, they also point to the continued gendered power inequalities that subordinate young women’s lives to the desires and control of young men.

Keywords

Adolescent health, Indigenous Australian, love, relationships, sexuality

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Having sexual relations is not a big deal anymore; it's as good as shaking hands or hugging. It's more; 'whatever'. Before it would be like intimacy, but now no-one cares, it's not a big deal anymore. (Indigenous female Alice Springs)

Introduction: Discourses of risk versus desire

This article seeks to understand Indigenous young people's relationships and their experiences of sexual intimacy. A cohort of Indigenous 16–25-year olds from urban, rural and remote communities was invited to participate in a collaborative method involving scenario-based body mapping (Chenhall et al., 2013; Senior and Chenhall, 2008). In these activities, young people discussed the range and complexity of their relationships and how constructions and interpretations of relationships contribute to both positive and negative experiences. While young people discussed the fun and excitement of casual encounters, this study found that experiences and beliefs about relationships and sexual intimacy were gendered, with sex defined in relation to young men's pursuit of pleasure. While these understandings provide important insights into adolescent sexuality as 'multidimensional, socially constructed and negotiated', they also point to the continued gendered power inequalities that subordinate young women's lives to the desires and control of young men (MacPhail and McKay, 2018: 2).

The public health literature on youth sexuality often presents a discourse about risk, danger and disease (see Arabena, 2016; Shoveller and Johnson, 2006). This is particularly true for Indigenous Australian youth, where health-related research has discussed the higher rates of various sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (Bell et al., 2017; Bowden et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2001, 2003; Panaretto et al., 2006; Wand et al., 2018). In attempts to understand these high rates, more recent qualitative research has examined the beliefs and behaviour of young Indigenous Australians in relation to sexual health (Ireland et al., 2015; Larkins et al., 2007; Senior et al., 2016; Senior and Chenhall, 2017). In a recent systematic review of the social determinants of adolescent Aboriginal Australian sexual health, MacPhail and McKay (2018) recommended that the development and implementation of sexual health prevention programmes need to be informed by a deeper understanding around the meaning of casual sex and how this transitions to trusting relationships among Indigenous young people. The focus is often still on the problematic aspects of negotiating sex and the risks afforded by young people, creating a discourse of shame around sexual practices.

The discourses of danger and risk presented in the academic literature (Aggleton and Campbell, 2010: 284) are often reproduced in the interactions between providers of sexual health services and young people, and in turn internalized by young people themselves (Senior et al., 2014). Young people's sexually transmitted infections and their teenage pregnancies become the focus of attention, rather than the dynamics of their relationships or any sense of pleasure. Similarly, for queer youth, vulnerability and the potential to be victimized have become a focus of attention

(Marshall, 2010). This reflects a general paucity of literature about subjects such as desire, love and intimacy between young people. Brown et al. (1999) argue that due to the rapid rise in sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy and abortion in recent decades, most research has focused on sexual activity rather than the romantic liaisons or relationships that are an important context of this activity. Of concern, they argue, is that romance and love is often equated with sex and subsumed under sexual activity. They argue that if we are to understand why and when young people engage in various forms of sexual activity, the nature of their relationships needs to be explored. Allen's (2010) qualitative research with New Zealand youth has provided an important refocus on young people's sexuality research. In this work, Allen explores the discursive formation of young people's subjectivities, describing their resistance to dominant discourses of sexuality that articulate gendered views of sex and love. Such discourses, Allen argues, have failed to capture the complexity and context-bound nature of young people's own definitions, experiences and expectations of their sexual selves. Allen (2010: 464) states:

The pursuit of pleasure has been seen as the archenemy of sexual health promotion, when in the heat of the moment the condom is forgotten. I wish to propose that the positives and pleasures of young people's relationships can offer an equally insightful window through which to understand their behavior and inform safer sex promotion.

This perspective is also highlighted by the work of Tolman (2002, 2012), in her work exploring young women's sexual desires, and Lees (1993) in her discussion of adolescent sexuality. Other research has sought to investigate the gendered aspects of adolescent sexual intimacy. Regan and Dryer (1999) found that for college students in the US, young men more than young women placed emphasis on social environmental reasons (e.g. status enhancement, normative peer group behaviour) for engaging in sexual encounters. For young women, interpersonal reasons, such as increased probability of long-term commitment from a sexual partner, were important motivations.

This research contributes to work developed in the 1990s and early 2000s where key theorists examined transformations in sexual intimacy and love in the post-industrial individualized society. In understanding young people's values, norms and knowledge of intimacy and sexual practices, engaging with the theoretical frameworks that account for socio-political and structural contexts of society and social change is important. In his book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens (1992) explores the idea of 'plastic sexuality' as a defining feature of late modern society. Plastic intimacy is sexuality which is freed from the 'needs of reproduction' (Giddens, 1992: 2). Plastic sexuality, he argues, reduces inequality between the sexes and frees sexuality from the 'rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of the male sexual experience' (Giddens, 1992: 2):

For most women, in most cultures, and throughout most periods of history, sexual pleasure where possible, was intrinsically bound up with fear of repetitive pregnancies,

and therefore of death, given the substantial proportion of women who perished in childbirth and the very high rates of infant mortality which prevailed. The breaking of these connections was thus a phenomenon with truly radical implications. (Giddens, 1992: 27)

This freeing of sexuality from social, political and economic realms can be compared with Bauman's (2003) related concept of 'liquid love'. In his arguments about the liquid states of modernity, Bauman (2000) describes that individuals in the current age are caught in a world of continuing uncertainty, where the enduring bonds formed by the structures and traditions of modernity have liquefied, no longer providing clear reference points for human actions and plan making. Individuals have to be adaptable and flexible, constantly ready to change and adjust their connections to others and things. In *Liquid Love*, individuals are caught between the desire for security in their connection to others but wanting the freedom to enter into social bonds when circumstances change, as they do frequently in liquid modernity. The result of liquid love is that social relationships are commodified and easily disposed of, leading to the isolation of individuals from their local communities.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) also discuss the changing nature of love and discuss that with the increases in individualism caused by the modern welfare state and the free market, individuals have to remain mobile, homeless and flexible to meet the needs of modernity. With the fading influences of community and tradition, love offers up the potential for a replaced intimacy. However, the ties that love brings also threaten the very individualism required by the market state, the new desire to protect self-interest and be competitive. As self-providers, partners must bargain and contend about domestic chores, activities and geographic relocations, creating a 'chaos of love'. This theoretical context encourages researchers to understand the social, political and economic context of love and intimacy when discussing youth sexuality. From a public health viewpoint, this means that love is not merely a window into a discourse of risk posed by physical and emotional intimacy, but involves complex experiences and feelings that are co-constructed within broader structures and traditions. As Allen (2010) notes, an understanding of relationships, desire and power is essential to inform sexual health interventions with young people. As noted earlier, this point is echoed by McKay (2018), who have argued for a 'deeper' understanding around the meaning of sexual intimacy amongst Indigenous youth.

Indigenous sexual health research

Current research has documented the higher rates of sexually transmitted infection rates for young Indigenous Australians throughout Australia, with notifications for diseases higher than in the non-Indigenous population – by four times and 18 times respectively for chlamydia and gonorrhoea (Wand et al., 2018). Various explanations have been proposed for these high rates, including high-risk sexual

behaviours, increased mobility and drug and alcohol use, combined with service issues related to low levels of STI testing and access to health care (Wand et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2016). A recent self-reported survey of 2320 Indigenous 16–29 years olds, recruited at community sporting events, found that those who engaged in sexual activity earlier in life had lower levels of education, engaged in riskier sexual behaviours and were more likely to participate in illicit drug use (Wand et al., 2018). The researchers of this work urged for the inclusion of screening for drug and alcohol use in STI prevention programmes and for community and school education programmes to focus on interventions that delay sexual debut.

In gaining a deeper understanding of Indigenous young people's experiences, research has also documented the influence of cultural beliefs on sexual perceptions and practices and has investigated the impacts of STIs on Indigenous young people's lives. In a remote Indigenous community in Northern Australia, Ireland et al. (2015) discussed a range of cultural factors that impacted on young women's sexual perceptions and experiences. This included the role of the traditional age-grade system in determining the socially accepted age when a young woman could commence sexual activity and the different conceptual frameworks used to understand sexual organs and the reproductive process. In this study, young women also discussed behaviours that contributed to risk, such as their preference to engage in sexual intimacy away from the family home (and usually outside), due to a range of factors including the overcrowded houses in this community. These activities were framed by gender-based power relationships, including sexual coercion, harassment, condom-use refusal, violence and substance use.

In 2008, we published the results of our ethnographic research on a remote community in the Northern Territory of Australia, which explored Indigenous young women's lives and the decisions they made about their relationships and sexuality. Young women were active in their efforts to meet and secure a relationship with young men, and they employed a range of tactics to ensure their success, including cooperation within their friend groups and competition and rivalry between the groups (Senior and Chenhall, 2008: 275). In their quest to 'hold on to a boy', young women were neither passive nor 'reluctant recipients of male desires' (Allen, 2003: 220). By 2015, when we conducted further research in the community, the name for the activity 'walkin' around at night' had been replaced by the more aggressive term 'prowling' (anonymous field notes, 2015). These girls did not define themselves as 'looking for love'; they were looking for sex, and through sex they were aiming to engage a young man in a relationship. Achieving a relationship and demonstrating this relationship to one's peer group was an important indicator of adolescent success in a sphere where few other opportunities for personal achievement were possible (Senior and Chenhall, 2008). As one young woman (age 14) pointed out, 'You can have a nice boyfriend, boyfriends take you for a walk, they buy you clothes and jewelry, earrings and drinks. They talk to me and make me feel like I am free' (Senior and Chenhall, 2008: 275). Love and intimacy in this context were increasingly becoming sites for competition within peer groups, where young women actively sought out sexual

relationships as a means to escape a community context that offered few opportunities for advancement. The ethnographic study in the community provided important insights into how relationships were conceptualized and enacted in remote Aboriginal communities. We highlighted the efforts that young women would go to in order to secure a relationship, and the sense of achievement they obtained when they were able to show off their relationship to their peers. Despite this, once the relationship was achieved and demonstrated to their peers, the young women remained vulnerable, with the knowledge that a young man may choose to move on to another young woman.

In this article, we document the findings from a research project exploring the themes of Indigenous experiences of intimacy and relationships within a broader sample of young Indigenous people drawn from three States and Territories in regional and remote Australia. This study also involved young people from a much wider range of circumstances, including a school-aged group of 15–18 years and a post-school-aged group of 18–25 years.

In our early consultations with Indigenous health organizations, we were asked in our project to avoid making sexual health ‘a problem’ for only Indigenous youth and to recognize the peer groups and relationships of young people. We sought to explore how young men and women consider and define their relationships, how they describe their sexual experiences and their understanding of gender roles. The theoretical perspective informing our study is one that places emphasis on the ‘liquidity’ of love and intimate relationships and the interaction between the rise of individualism within postcolonial Indigenous contexts and the adherence to culture and tradition (see also McIntyre-Mills et al., 2017). The young people with whom we worked were drawn from a wide variety of circumstances, including remote Indigenous communities, towns with large Indigenous populations and highly multicultural urban centres. The accounts of relationships provided by the young people only describe heterosexual relationships. Non-heterosexual identity was never discussed, possibly due to the sensitivity of raising this subject in the small-group setting (Chenhall et al., 2013) and because a socially allowable discourse of sexuality for young people remains one of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Burns et al., 2011).

We need to highlight that sexuality for some young Aboriginal people, particularly those living in remote communities of the Northern Territory, may be affected by circumstances very different from young people living elsewhere in Australia. The Northern Territory Emergency Intervention was implemented by the Australian Government in the Northern Territory in 2008 in response to allegations of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities. As part of this, large signs were erected at the border of every Indigenous community warning of the prohibition on alcohol and pornography. Rassmussen (2015: 186) argues that ‘spaces inhabited by Indigenous people living in remote communities have been sexualized in very specific ways in the context of “The Intervention”’. Specifically, sexuality is both public and shameful (see also Sandy and Clapham, 2011).

Exploring relationships: Methods

The Our Lives project was designed to explore young people's relationships and sexual decision-making in communities in the Northern Territory (Darwin, Alice Springs and two remote communities), Western Australia (Broome) and South Australia (Ceduna). The urban centres and towns are characterized by a highly transient population and a great deal of movement between these places and smaller regional towns and remote communities. The research involved 171 Indigenous young people aged between 16 and 25.

We wanted to explore how relationships were conceptualized by young people and how they worked. In order to gain a deep understanding of young people's perceptions of relationships and sexual decision-making, it was important to avoid the impact of any social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985). Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, this study was designed to support young people's discussion about their own ideas, thoughts and feelings concerning relationships and intimacy, without necessarily revealing personal events or experiences that could be uncomfortable or sensitive. We developed a series of scenarios about different sorts of relationships, including one-night stands, marriage, planned consensual sex and unplanned sex under the influence of alcohol (see Appendix 1 for examples). The themes for these scenarios were developed out of our extensive ethnographic work with young people and work-shopped with young people themselves (see Chenhall et al., 2013; Senior and Chenhall, 2008). Following an adapted body mapping methodology (De Jager et al., 2016; Solomon, 2007), young people were asked to create a character in the scenario on a large piece of paper (see Chenhall et al., 2013 for examples of body maps).

Young people were approached through their high schools (usually through a health class, and through specific groups catering for them such as young mothers' groups and youth groups. This was essential to reach the older post-school age group). As a result of the targeted focus of these groups (such as young mothers' groups), our sample in this age group involved more young women than young men. The young people worked in self-selected groups with no more than six people each group. Eight sessions were held, with eight in Darwin, three in Ceduna, five in Alice Springs and five in Broome. The body mapping sessions occurred over a two-year period and required intensive liaison with schools and health services prior to their delivery. At a body mapping session, we always had a senior anthropologist providing oversight, with either a youth researcher and/or Indigenous research assistant conducting the workshops. The research assistants had extensive experience of working with young people, and the young people felt comfortable discussing the scenarios in their presence. A nurse was on hand if young people had specific health-related questions.

During the activity, the young people were each given a human-sized piece of canvas which had a simple outline of a body pre-drawn on it. They were asked to decorate the body of their character in response to the events outlined in the scenario. For example, in one scenario Sarah is getting ready to spend the weekend with Steve, where it will be her first sexual experience. As they decorated their body

maps, the group built the story and talked about how their particular character is feeling about their relationship. Young people were able to draw on their own experiences; however, this was depersonalized given that they were talking about scenarios that had been identified as meaningful and important by other young people. Young people commented that they were able to discuss more openly what the characters would be feeling without necessarily identifying specific details of their own experiences and without fear that they would be judged by their peers or the researchers.

This approach was chosen in preference to individual interviews in order to create a fun activity where young people could build ideas off those of their peers. As with any group activity, there is the chance that young people modified their responses to ensure that they remained within a set of desirable responses and in some cases young people may have used the opportunity to show off to their peers and thus exaggerated their responses (this may especially be the case with the young men). Despite this, the method still tapped into the beliefs about sexuality and sexual decision-making that characterized the group.

We worked with young people in a range of settings including schools and community groups, which had both young mothers' groups and youth groups. The process was a collaborative one, with researchers working alongside participants in the creation of the images, supporting a reflective process combining visual knowledge, group discussion and ethnographic knowledge (Pink, 2007). Young people were asked to work in small groups on their body map and self-selected who they wanted to work with. Usually they worked with members of their own gender, but we also had two mixed-gender groups. At the end of each session, the groups were asked to present their character and their story to the group, and the facilitators were able to steer the conversation towards the sorts of supports and services that might be available and encourage the young people to think about how they might support a friend in a similar situation. The facilitators were also able to challenge any beliefs that might have been problematic, such as the commonly occurring sentiment that young people were not vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (Senior et al., 2014). Ethical clearances for the project were granted by the Menzies School of Health Research Human Ethics Committee.

The activity produced rich visual data as well as a multi-layered group narrative about how the character in their body map was thinking and feeling. The visual data was analysed in its own right; for example, how was the body portrayed, what words or labels were written upon it? However, it was also used to contextualize the verbal narrative that arose. Attention was paid to the dynamics of the group discussion where various issues arose related to power differences between group members, allowing for quieter individuals to raise their opinions and to respectfully solve disagreements when they occurred. It was also vital to keep a written log of observations, including documentation of how the groups worked together to create the image and develop their story, noting points of both consensus and disagreement. In close consultation with the visual narrative that was produced,

at least two team members worked through each of the verbal narratives to identify key themes.

What is a relationship?

Allen (2003: 477) highlighted the complexity of defining young people's sexual relationships, with her research indicating that young people used fluid categories such as 'one-night stands', short term relationships, casual relationships and 'going out'. In this study, we attempted to understand how young people defined a relationship.

Although the word 'relationship' was commonly used by the young people in our study, it was clear that it was a catch-all term that encompassing a variety of meanings. For example, in the following narrative, a young woman begins her story with the use of the word 'relationship'. When prompted, she begins to question the meaning of the word herself. At first, she attempts to define relationships by a sense of exclusivity, but then finds that this does not really capture what she means:

They will not use condoms since they are in a relationship.

Q: What do you mean by in a relationship?

Being in a relationship means you do not hook up with anyone else, but each other.

I would not really call it a relationship these days. It's more like seeing each other. They hook up every now and then, they have fun and get with someone else and then back to you. (Body map discussion involving four Indigenous women aged 16–25, Darwin)

The question 'What do you mean by in a relationship?' was difficult to answer, and was complicated by the fact that young women sometimes expected young men to have different perceptions. The young women also produced narratives in which they developed explanations about the reasons why young men did not want to engage in relationships. These emphasized male involvement in important activities that they did not want to compromise, as in this comment provided by a post-school group of young women in Darwin: 'The girls might want it to be serious but the boys will probably be like "no I'm not ready, I don't want to be tied down, I've got to concentrate on my sports"' (body map discussion involving three Indigenous women aged 15–18, Darwin).

The legitimacy of relationships was also described on the basis of age. The young women in our study were scornful of the relationships of those people younger than them. For example, young post-school-aged women attending a youth group in Ceduna commented that: 'Most relationships at 14–16 are one-night stands, and lots of them' (body map discussion involving five Indigenous women aged 18–25, Ceduna). This was echoed by young women in the post-school

category in Darwin, who looked back on their younger experiences from their position of relative maturity: 'A relationship in school is not about being in love; it is about having sex' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous women aged 18–25, Darwin). Young women also commented that youthful relationships may be more about cementing a position within one's peer group: 'A lot of girls have relationships just because their friends have relationships... they have sex because they want to be tough, they think they are older than they are' (body map discussion involving three Indigenous women aged 15–18, Alice Springs). The same group of young women also commented that this group may also be engaging in transactional sex for drugs, alcohol and money.

As young people move towards more committed relationships, they consider that boys and girls may have very different expectations. Accounts from both males and females were strongly gendered, with the expectations that girls will aspire to a committed relationship and that boys will resist all attempts to tie them down. This difference was clearly articulated by a post-school-aged group of young men in a remote community as part of an extended conversation about the importance of 'strong men' having multiple partners: 'Relationships are different for boys and girls. Boys just want to have sex' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous men aged 18–15, Ngukurr). Young women, however, worked to counter the 'boys just want to have sex' idea, by offering examples of when a relationship might be considered 'more than just sex' for a young man. One group commented that if the girl was desirable, or 'hot' enough, the boy may be tempted to consider himself 'in a relationship': 'Maybe if she was hot, he'd even ring her the next day. Maybe he'd tell his friends that she was "the love of his life"' (all laugh perhaps at the irony of this statement) (body map discussion involving three Indigenous women aged 15–18, Darwin). The statement 'the love of his life' demonstrates a very rare use of the word love in young people's discourses. The young women who made this statement put it in the context of a seemingly impossible situation: that the young woman was 'so hot' that the male would be captivated by her. While the idea of love was raised by young people, there were differences in the way in which young men and women depicted love. For young women, love was often discussed in terms of loss and sadness. For men, love was to be avoided, but was an important sign of their desirability. For young men and women, body maps were covered with hearts that had been broken. When love was mentioned, it was in terms of love that had failed, or a person being hurt. Who hurts and who gets hurt was again gendered in the young people's depictions. A group of boys drew Frank, who they described as 'a player, I reckon he can get any girl that he wants' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous males aged 15–18, Darwin). He was depicted smiling through a background of broken hearts; he has successfully avoided the trappings of love but is imminently desirable. Tanya, who is trapped in an abusive relationship in the scenario, was nearly always depicted by the young women as having a broken heart. None of the scenarios were ended by any of the groups with the young women being in love and happy. Many of the

young men, however, were depicted as being happy with the outcome of the relationship, which paradoxically was the status of 'not being in a relationship'.

Young women talked about watching for subtle clues to determine the status of their relationships and about social media having an important role in their ongoing research. The young women said that they would watch the 'boy's Facebook page' to see if he changed his status to 'in a relationship'. The social prestige associated with a boy publicly changing his status to 'in a relationship' appeared to be intense. Other young women talked about other clues, such as one group of school-aged young women in Broome: 'Interviewer: How do you know if you are in a relationship? Young woman: When he says: "hey babe"' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous young women aged 18–25, Broome). This particular group went on to try and tease out some parameters of how a relationship could be defined: 'Young woman: But if they had their lives planned out like they want to have kids themselves, you wouldn't be worried. A relationship is probably like a couple of months. All: Yeah. Young woman: Maybe a month or something'. The change in status from 'just seeing each other' to being a publicly acknowledged boyfriend and girlfriend was considered by many of the young women to have important implications for sexual decision-making, particularly in regards to safe sex. A common theme that emerged through the narratives was that young women who considered that they were boyfriend and girlfriend would no longer need to use condoms, as described by a post-school group of young women in Darwin: 'If you are just seeing each other, you might use condoms because you do not know if it will last, but once he is your boyfriend you just stay on the pill and it doesn't matter' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous women aged 18–25, Darwin). The young women talked about the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship being based on trust and that not using condoms was a sign and acknowledgement of intimacy and trust, rather than being in a relationship defined by casual sex and unfaithfulness. But the importance they placed on trust as a defining feature of these relationships appeared to be manipulated by the young men to avoid having to use condoms: 'Boys... they don't like using condoms and when you ask them they say "why don't you trust me?"' (body map discussion involving three Indigenous women aged 15–18, Alice Springs). Throughout their discussions, the young women talked about exclusivity being the characteristic of adult relationships, but underpinning this discourse is a concern that young men are unlikely to be faithful to them. Young women in Broome commented: 'They say, "I'm only with you, I love you", but you know they are out cheating' (body map discussion involving six Indigenous women aged 15–18, Broome).

Desire

In her seminal study of anti-sex rhetoric around sex education in schools, Fine (1998) described the missing discourse of desire in her work with adolescent girls. In discussing sex, young women talked about victimization, morality and disease, but not about why they wanted to have sex and notions of fun and pleasure. Fine comments that attempts on behalf of participants to talk about such things were

usually silenced by their companions, indicating a need to conform to group expectations. Nearly 20 years later, the issue of engaging young people in discussions about pleasure or desire rather than a public health discourse of disease as part of their sexuality education remains challenging (McGeeney, 2017).

Our results showed a strong inclination on the part of both young men and women to sensationalize the undesirable outcomes of sexuality (getting an STI, getting pregnant and being labelled a slut) and to not discuss the positive feelings of intimacy and pleasure (see also Senior et al., 2014). In our scenario-based body mapping, we explored a range of different stories, including getting a STI, getting pregnant and being involved in domestic violence, but we also included stories of young people just deciding to have sex together. There were no stories produced by the young people with whom we worked which were framed positively. This response is perhaps unsurprising, given that the young people knew that the research was being conducted from within a public health setting, and that their previous education had largely focused on the biology and pathology of sexual health (Senior et al., 2016).

A discourse of desire, however, is not entirely absent from our material, although it was the focus of discussion for women, rather than men, as in the following discussion about ‘loving the feeling’ told by a group of post-school-aged young women in Broome:

I don't know how it is these days but if you hook up with someone and you know you get like [laughter]. If you get straight into it then most probably you won't use a condom. But if you just touching yourself [laughter] you just forget all about it, so concentrating on the feeling. Like I feel so good you know. You know you don't think to get a condom, loving that feeling. Yeah [all agree]. (Body map discussion involving four Indigenous women aged 18–25, Broome)

This discussion was led by one young woman and is interrupted at two points by the embarrassed laughter of her friends. Ultimately, however, they agreed that the feeling is so good that they will forget about everything else (including safe sex). Desire and the disinhibition as a result of drinking were also strongly associated, as described by a group of school-aged young women in Ceduna: ‘When you are drunk, you get like larken ... you know horny. Afterwards you would go back to the club, drink some more and separate’ (body map discussion involving five Indigenous women aged 18–25, Ceduna). The following is a response to a scenario about a 16-year-old girl and 18-year-old boy and their first sexual encounter. In their response to the story, a group of young women from Darwin decided that both had been drinking and that alcohol would affect their decision-making. There is no sense of coercion or reluctance on the part of the young woman. Furthermore, it is the young woman in this story, rather than the young man, who boasts about her sexual conquest:

I think they will both be into it [Other young women: Yeah definitely]

Just because of the alcohol, your decision making...

And she will be like he is 18 and he is so hot and she would want to impress her friends so she could go back and brag. (Body map session involving four Indigenous women aged 18–25, Darwin)

It is in the discourse of one-night stands that the language of fun emerged; however, when we delved deeper, this was also gendered and young people presented concerning beliefs regarding their risk of contracting STIs. There were numerous accounts of consenting relationships between teenagers which appeared to be based on experimentation and fun. These sorts of relationships were aligned with the idea of ‘friends with benefits’ or ‘sex friends’ (see also Allen, 2010: 469), which is a concept that permeates contemporary thinking of youth sexuality (Bisson and Levine, 2007). Several of the body maps (both male and female) were emblazoned with the letters DTF, standing for ‘Down to Fuck’, interpreted as someone who was available for sex rather than a relationship. The depictions of people who were DTF were, however, varied. It was often depicted as a positive value for the young men, but less so for the young women. For example, on one of the male bodies the letters DTF were drawn like a tattoo on his muscled stomach. However, on one of the body maps of a young woman, the letters were written over a picture that described her ‘stinking’ STI. One group of young men also described wondering if the young woman they were depicting was DTF and added a large question mark next to the letters. The young woman they depicted was naked, enhancing the perception of sexual availability, but she was also very unhappy and ‘confused’ about the situation she was in.

One-night stands were described by young people as fun because they were associated with being with friends, being out late at night and drinking, and could be seen as an extension of their social lives. Some of the young women also used the word fun to imply that one-night stands had little meaning or long-term consequences, ‘just like shaking hands’, because they were not affected by emotional commitment or anxieties about sexual health. A young woman (in the school-aged group) from Alice Springs received agreement from her group of friends when she commented that ‘STIs are common in older people and not with us young people who are out to have flings with no strings attached’ (body map discussion involving three Indigenous women aged 15–18, Alice Springs). Her statement implies that for this group of young women, STIs and emotional baggage were compartmentalized as being very undesirable aspects of older people’s relationships.

‘We know boys’: Girls’ talk and boys’ talk

In a study of intimate violence in young people’s relationships in South Australia, Chung argues that a strategy used by young women to equalize their relationships with men is to argue that they understand the way that men think: ‘young women saw this strategy as giving them equality with young men as understanding men’s behavior provided immunity from its sexist and unequal impacts’

(Chung, 2005: 450). This strategy was clearly used by many of the young women in our study. For example, when a group of girls were asked if they wanted to draw the male or female character in response to a scenario, they commented: 'It is easier to draw the boy instead of the girl, because boys are much simpler and only think about one thing, sex' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous women aged 15–18, Darwin). The perception of boys being only interested in sex was in some cases re-affirmed by the boys themselves, for example in their response to a scenario about a boy who sleeps with as many girls as he can: 'We put a red brain and a little heart near his crotch, because he likes to think with his dick . . .' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous men, 15–18, Darwin). In the following account, male dominance is not only affirmed but is admired and seen as something to aspire to. As the boys continued to draw their character, ensuring that he was accessorized with 'cool sunglasses; just like mine', they talked about how the character was feeling: 'He's proud of himself, I'd feel pretty good about myself if I were him. He'd be pretty popular at school' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous men aged 15–18, Darwin).

At one point in the conversation, one of the boys said that the character's womanizing showed a lack of respect, both for the young women and himself, and he wrote 'no self-respect' on the character's right leg. This was immediately countered by other members of the group, who said, 'No, this character is cool' and wrote 'I do what I want' on his left leg in a statement of defiance. Other boys' groups responded to the scenario with similar levels of disrespect, saying things like 'He just takes girls behind the shed' (body map discussion involving Indigenous men aged 15–18, Darwin), 'He's a real larrikin who just has any girl he likes' (body map discussion involving Indigenous men aged 15–18, Alice Springs) or, in response to a boy persuading a girl to have sex, 'Yes score! Something like that, legend!' (body map discussion involving four Indigenous men aged 15–18, Darwin).

Some of the young men's responses were more complex. For example, a Darwin school-aged group comprising one young man and one young woman responded to the story about Steve and Sarah negotiating their first sexual relationship. The young woman began by commenting that she considered that this story was unrealistic, and that there was 'no way' that 16-year-olds would be negotiating their first relationship because 'this sort of thing happens when people are 13 or 14, not 16'. The young woman thus positioned herself as both experienced and knowledgeable about sex and relationships. She began the body mapping exercise by drawing two thinking clouds next to Steve's head. One was bigger than the other. In the bigger one she wrote 'Sex', and in the smaller one 'Sarah'. She explained: 'This is because Steve thinks a little bit about Sarah but more about sex. Relationships are different for boys and girls; boys mostly just want to have sex'. Later in the discussion she went on to comment that 'It's OK for Sarah and Steve to have sex because they have a relationship together'. When we asked her what she meant by a relationship, she commented: 'They have been together for one or two weeks; it's OK for them to have sex'. The young man, however, did not share this idea. He considered that

they ‘were only going out’ and that this length of association did not imply that they were having or should have a sexual relationship: ‘They have only been going out together for two weeks; it’s a little bit too early’.

In this example, the young woman insisted that ‘she knows about boys’ and actively reinforced heterosexual gendered roles: ‘Steve is not in love with Sarah, but Sarah might be in love with Steve’. This, however, is not the stance of the young man, who emphasized that it was too early for Steve and Sarah to have sex and that they should wait. There was also a clear difference in what each understood to be a relationship, with the girl considering that they are in ‘a relationship’, implying at least the expectation of a long-term commitment, and the boy considering the relationship to be less committed, that they were merely ‘going out’. In the young woman’s depictions, love and sex are part of the relationship. The young man, however, did not consider that sex, love or a relationship was part of this story, not because these were unimportant, but because it was just ‘too early’.

Discussion

In a recent systematic review of the social determinants of the sexual health of adolescent Aboriginal Australians, MacPhail and Kay (2018: 143) argue that a:

deeper understanding around the meaning of casual sex among Indigenous young people, and how casual relationships transition to trusting ones would... benefit the development and implementation of sexual health prevention programmes.

This study sought to provide such a deeper understanding of relationships and sexual intimacy in the understandings and beliefs of Indigenous young people. It was conducted in a variety of settings across three different States and Territories and encompassed young people from two distinct groups: a school-aged group of 15–18 years old and a post-school group aged 18–25. Despite this, the responses demonstrated a strong degree of consistency, particularly in young people’s struggle to define what a relationship was. The only difference in young people’s accounts was the level of detail and consideration that the older groups (who were often young women with children) gave to the issues. This appears to be the result of their personal experience and their perceptions of the current generation of young people as they negotiate their first sexual relationships.

Gender inequity was a pervasive theme that framed the narratives of young men and women in this study (see also Tolman, 2012; Tolman et al., 2016). Discussions about sex were defined wholly in terms of young men’s pleasure, and were centred on penetrative sex rather than any other form of sexual encounter. Young people’s accounts revealed that it is up to young men to initiate encounters with young women and to decide whether this will lead to a relationship or not. Young women emphasized that it is only by entering into a relationship that they gain social status. Depictions of young women in the body maps as naked or in clothes that provided little concealment of skin presented stereotypical portrayals of women’s

bodies as often found in the media or in movies. However, none of the young people discussed specific depictions of bodies in the media, nor did they discuss pornography when referring to desirable bodies or sex. That young women think about sexual empowerment through the desirability of their bodies demonstrates the power of the male 'gaze', where young women are 'dressed for and consumed by male sexual desire' (Tolman, 2012). A young woman who is 'hot' simultaneously fends off competitors and exerts some hold over her partner. In the scenario discussed by the young women in Darwin, the stakes were very low; they talked about a young man ringing the next day if she was desirable enough, but suggestions that he may even feel affection for her were dismissed with an ironic 'she may even be the love of his life'.

In this study, young men resisted being tied down and manipulated young women into agreeing to sex without a condom as a sign of trust. Young men were expected to break hearts and not experience love, whereas women were understood to search for love but be frequently disappointed. While a young man may be interested in a young woman as a 'girlfriend' if she is 'hot' and has sexual currency, social status from their male peers was gained by having a lot of sex with different young women. Conversely, young women's sexuality was controlled through wanting to avoid being labelled a 'slut', leaving them enmeshed in negotiations about the status of their relationships with young men. Safe sex and condom use were also implicated with young women's validation of trust necessary for securing long-term commitment from a young man. Condoms were sometimes avoided in the moment, so as not to disrupt a sexual encounter, pointing to the limited power and experience young women have in negotiating safe sex (see also MacPhail and Kay, 2018: 142).

Young male power lay in their ability to move on from a relationship that was not fulfilling their needs (see also Senior and Chenhall, 2008). As a result, the best and most manageable relationships may have been one-night stands, described by a young woman as 'flings with no strings'. This engendered an understanding of a different type of safe relationship where there was no emotional commitment, where no expectations were made of either partner and where no hearts were broken. In these sorts of relationships a young woman could not be let down by a young man leaving her, betraying her or having sex with someone else.

While Allen (2003) points out that the simple dichotomy between a young women's search for love and a young man's search for sex is outdated and distorts the complexity of young people's beliefs, we found that young Indigenous men and women in this study often presented these dichotomous beliefs. This must be viewed in the context of the young people's lives in this study, where the construction of social status and prestige was related to the maintenance of relationships (for young women) and sex (for young men). This points to gendered asymmetries of power and dependence, but also to different motivations for engaging in sex. Similar to previous research exploring young people's motives for engaging in casual sex, this study found that young men emphasized environmental reasons, such as status improvement and normative peer group behaviour, whereas women

described interpersonal reasons, such as increased probability of gaining a long-term partner (Regan and Dreyer, 1999). This also points to an important socio-cultural context in Indigenous society, as noted by MacPhail and McKay (2018), where early teenage pregnancy leading to motherhood (and adulthood) can be transformative and positively received by the community. This is particularly relevant for Indigenous families who continue to experience social disadvantage as a result of historical inequalities and colonial ideologies (MacPhail and McKay, 2018: 142).

For young women particularly, there was an emphasis on external validation of the 'relationship' through such markers as changing of Facebook status to indicate that they were in a relationship. It is in the area of the publicly acknowledged boyfriend/girlfriend relationship where the greatest degree of complexity occurs. Young women talked about these as more mature relationships, and as something that they aspired to, but it is in this process that they became vulnerable as they waited for young men to publicly declare their status. Once acknowledged, the young women emphasized a set of values that they considered important in relationships, including a notion of trust and exclusivity. As shown in Senior et al. (2016), however, young women can put such an emphasis on holding onto their relationships that they are prepared to tolerate mistreatment, including violence from their partners. In a study of young women from the east of England, Siege (2007) described how young women experience a significant gap between their desires for how they will be treated in a relationship and their experiences. A key contributor to this gap is their ideas about romance and being treated well by their partner (Siege, 2007: 179). A discourse about romance is notably absent in the material produced by young men and women in this study. Some young women talked about love, but only in that being in love sanctions a sexual relationship. More often, love was positioned as a difficult or sometimes impossible emotion and was usually depicted as a love that has faded, or a broken heart.

Referring to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), cited earlier in this article, the young people's relationships in this study were, from one perspective, 'chaotic' as they balanced the needs for individualism and intimacy. This was negotiated in conditions of relative disadvantage, where such things as 'holding on' to a boy might be the only visible marker of success for a young person (Senior and Chenhall, 2008). This study demonstrated that young Indigenous men and women not only engage in various processes to assert their control over their relationships, but that they do so with significant thought and negotiation. While love and relationships are both a site of uncertainty and a place of refuge (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), they also create opportunities for young people in a context where Indigenous young people's lives are being framed through discourses related to the importance of education, training and employment (Fogarty et al., 2015). Gender is a significant factor in educational outcomes, and previous research has demonstrated the relatively low career aspirations of Indigenous young women (Sikora and Biddle, 2015). Future aspirations are formulated

through Indigenous young people's relationship to family but also in their relationships with peers.

Giddens' (1992: 3) imagined future of intimacy as a 'a transactional negotiation of personal ties between equals' is far from realized in the accounts of Indigenous young people in this study. The construction of intimacy and sex was heavily influenced by the gendered power inequalities experienced by young women in their accounts. Far from the sexual freedoms of Giddens' 'plastic sexuality', pleasure was pushed aside in young women's stories of committed relationships, where the emphasis was on 'holding on' to their partners (see also Senior and Chenhall, 2008; Senior et al., 2014). It is tempting also to return to Bauman's concept of 'liquid love', which could potentially help us explain the instrumental use of the narratives of love and the commodification of sex by young people. Yet the very gendered nature of the accounts and the subservience of young women's desire and hopes to young men's pursuit of pleasure and status in the eyes of their peers render such an analysis problematic. An understanding of relationships and intimacy in this study has required an understanding the role of power in constructing the relationships between young men and women (Allen, 2010).

Conclusions

This research explored the meaning of relationships for young Indigenous people from their perspectives. We wanted to move beyond a simple acceptance of the word 'relationship' to explore the range of meanings that this word encompassed. The scenario-based body mapping method allowed us to see into the complex worlds of young people's understandings of relationships. Although this method had some limitations, it was able to provide us with a rich visual and verbal language of young people's relationships. Furthermore, the images themselves often moved beyond what was easy to discuss, and the broken hearts and the ubiquitous DTF inscriptions depicted on people's bodies provided us with prompts to question meanings and behaviours.

MacPhail and McKay (2018: 2) argue that for meaningful STI/HIV reductions in Indigenous adolescent populations to occur, there is a requirement for a richer understanding of adolescent sexuality as 'multidimensional, socially constructed and negotiated'. This research has demonstrated something of the range and complexity of young people's relationships and how constructions and interpretations of relationships contribute to the difficulties experienced by young people. Sexual health interventions need to be cognizant of these issues for messages to be meaningful for their youthful audience, but, perhaps more importantly, as young people have repeatedly told us in our research (Senior et al., 2016), we need to develop a more nuanced way of talking about relationships with young people and allow for opportunities for this sort of discussion to be a key part of sexuality education. The idea articulated by the young people in this study that a relationship is protective against STIs needs to be challenged, as does the perception that condom use is too

difficult to negotiate in short-term relationships. This reinforces the need for appropriate and meaningful sexual health education for Indigenous youth, in addition to enabling and supporting families to discuss sexual health issues. Our approach to sexual health research using the body mapping methodology has supported the possibility for peer education as a viable strategy for delivering sexual health prevention programmes (see McKay, 2018). Importantly, such programmes need to focus on gender equality, sexual health rights and safer sex relationships. These were key issues that underlined the gender inequities faced by young women in this study.

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Appendix I: Example body mapping scenarios

Scenario 1

Sarah and Steve go to school together and they are both 16 years old. They have been going out together for two weeks now. Sarah really likes Steve; he is her first boyfriend. Her friends think Steve is really hot.

Q: What does Sarah want to happen in the relationship?

Q: What does Steve want to happen in the relationship?

Steve tells Sarah that his parents are going away for the weekend. He asks Sarah if she would like to go and stay with him.

Q: What does Sarah think about this?

Q: What does she want to happen?

Q: What does Steve want to happen?

Sarah talks to her friends because she thinks that she and Steve may have sex.

Q: What do her friends say?

Q: What does Sarah do to get ready for the weekend?

Q: What does Steve do to get ready for the weekend?

Q: Did Sarah and Steve talk together about safe sex?

Q: What did they decide to do?

Sarah and Steve spent the weekend together and they had sex.

Q: How does Sarah feel now?

Q: What does she tell her friends?

Q: How does Steve feel now?

Q: What does he tell his friends?

Scenario 2

Rebecca is 16. She goes away to a party and she meets Dylan; he is 18. They both have a few drinks. They sneak away to have sex.

Q: How does Rebecca feel?

Q: How does Dylan feel?

Then they go back to their homes.

Q: How does Rebecca feel when she wakes up the next day?

Q: How does Dylan feel when he wakes up the next day?

Rebecca is freaking out because she didn't use a condom.

Q. What does Rebecca decide to do?

Q. What does Rebecca feel about going to the clinic?

Q. What will happen to Rebecca at the clinic?

Rebecca finds out theta she has Gonorrhoea. The nurse says that Rebecca should tell Dylan that she has Gonorrhoea.

Q. What happens to Rebecca next?

Q. Who does she tell?

Q. Someone puts a comment on Facebook. What would it be and how does she feel?