Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’

Final Report to Community
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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Burramattagal People of the Dharug Nation who are the Traditional Owners of the country upon which we work in Parramatta. We honour and celebrate their Elders and the Elders of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations past and present. The lands were, are and will always be the lands of First Nations Peoples. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded. We also recognise the deep wounds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ Peoples which come from colonisation, racism, queer-phobia and the subjugation of First Nations Peoples and Knowledges.

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

This project would not have been possible without the tireless support and guidance of BlaQ Aboriginal Organisation and the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON).

We would also like to extend our thanks to Aunty Esther Montgomery who gave us the benefit of her wisdom and years of experience.

This three year project was 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).

Recommended citation


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DOI: https://doi.org/10.26183/ms23-7v92
Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’

Abstract
This report provides the final findings of a research project called Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’. The project worked with First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in NSW to capture their experiences and needs regarding their social, cultural and emotional wellbeing. This report draws upon two sources of information: a small community survey (people aged 14 years and older) and indepth qualitative interviews with Indigenous LGBTIQ+ people aged 14-25 years. The survey and interviews looked at experiences of growing up as First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in New South Wales (NSW). The project was interested in four primary areas including: What their experiences were of being First Nations and LGBTIQ+ for overall wellbeing; how people navigated family and community to maintain their wellbeing; what aspects of their journeys were supportive and respectful; what their experiences of service provision were and what they would recommend changing. The overarching goal was the development of targeted supports and services to effectively support First Nations LGBTIQ+ people.
Introduction

Little is known about Australian First Nations’ understandings of sexuality and gender diverse people in the settler colonial country now known as Australia. Bayliss (2014), 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 and highlights Mimis Spirits’ “subversive nature” as “genderless spirits” that challenge “colonial depiction of Aboriginality” and “speak back to dominant culture”.

The lack of understanding of gender and sexuality diversity across Australian First Nations peoples has implications for their daily lives. Isolation and disconnection come out of feeling that you are the only one experiencing discrimination, racism, abuse and LGBTIQ+-phobia on a daily basis. Sharing stories also means sharing struggles and achievements, connecting with the stories of other First Nations LGBTIQ+ people. In addition, knowing more means that service providers better know how to provide sexual, mental and physical health services to First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples. At present, we don’t know enough to provide targeted, appropriate services that meet First Nations LGBTIQ+ youth’s needs. Even though this report and others like it, provide a first step forward, there is much more that can be done to build culturally and gender/sexuality appropriate community, service and support responses.

This is the final report for community on the findings of a research project into the social, cultural and emotional wellbeing of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in the state now known as NSW. The project took a Gadigal name, Dalarinji: Your Story. Initially targeting participants aged 14-25 years of age for the first round of interviews, the project expanded its scope upon the request of community to include all people aged 14 years and over. This broader scope of people were included in the later stage of the project that included a community survey. This report summarises the findings from the community survey and interviews.

Survey and interview participants were connected with many different First Nations communities from across Australia including: Birpai, Bundjalung, Dharug, Djangadi, Dunghutti/Gumabayngirr, Gamilaraay, Gamilaroi, Gomeroi, Gumbayngirr, Gundungurra, Kamilaroi, Meriam, Murri, Muruwari, Mineng, Noongar, Nunukul, Tharawal, Wakka Wakka, Wiradjuri, Wiradjuri/Walbanja, Wuthathi and Yuin. Participants’ identities were also very diverse, and they identified as one or more of the following: Bisexual, Bisexual/Pansexual/Trans/Non-binary, Fluid, Gay, Lemon, Lesbian, Non-Binary, Nonbinary Lesbian, Omnisexual, Pansexual, Questioning/Pansexual, Queer, Trans, Transman/Bisexual, Trans/Queer and Unsure.

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This report focuses on the voices of participants who participated in the study. The report is structured as follows: after this introduction, we introduce the relevant Human Rights Frameworks that apply to First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in Australia and NSW. We then provide a brief overview of the project’s research approach. The report is then divided into two sections that discuss project findings. The first of these summarises key findings based on responses to an online survey and interviews run with the support of BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation. The section on the survey describes the kinds of people who took the survey; places where people feel safe and comfortable or unsafe/uncomfortable; experiences of coming out; intergenerational experiences; experiences of discrimination, abuse, racism and LGBTIQ+ phobia; pre-invasion stories of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people and people’s experiences and needs regarding service provision. The final findings section summarises themes emerging from face to face interviews: Culture and Identity; Cultivating Wellbeing: Challenges, Resistance and Moving On; and Employment, Education and Support Services.

The survey findings support and add to the stories told in the interviews, demonstrating the need for stronger legislation and rights based frameworks to protect the rights of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in both the private and public domains. The report highlights the numerous failures of government at all levels to protect the rights of participants either as First Nations peoples or as members of the LGBTIQ+ community. Australian governments do not in any real sense apply rights based principles from key international conventions such as the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In a similar way to the wider First Nations and LGBTIQ+ populations, First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples in NSW do not have much control over key institutions and everyday events that cause distress and negative experience. First Nations LGBTIQ+ people demonstrate how they have developed strategies to avoid or navigate the personal and public spaces that cause them distress. However, the need to implement real changes at all levels of government and within service provision are discussed. Some preliminary conclusions regarding strategies for wellbeing, the need for culturally and gender/sexuality appropriate service provision and effective rights based legislation and policy frameworks are discussed with implications for further research and Australian policy and practice.

**Human Rights Frameworks**

This section discusses relevant frameworks at the global, national and state levels that affect First Nations LGBTIQ+ 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. Australia has often signed and even ratified (i.e. agreed to pass them into law and implement them) but has not actually, in any real sense, done so. Some of the Discrimination Laws set up in the 1970s
and 1980s, are now very outdated and have not been subjected to modernisation or consistent review. There are currently calls from experts, service providers and community for the Anti-Discrimination Act in NSW to be updated, for example².

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). Unfortunately, many provisions remain unachieved.

Two older global conventions are also important regarding Aboriginal and/or 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.

LGBTIQ+ People

In the UN and the human rights system, LGBTIQ+ people’s rights come under the term Sexual Orientation Gender and Intersex Identity (SOGII) (AHRC 2020b). LGBTIQ+/SOGII rights have only fairly recently been recognised within the international human rights system. Unlike Indigenous peoples, LGBTIQ+/SOGII rights do not have a specific treaty or convention that specifically and clearly sets out our rights (ILGA 2016). Basic LGBTIQ+/SOGII rights are

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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. LGBTIQ+/SOGII rights are also covered by several conventions such as those covering women, children, people with disabilities, torture, disability and racial discrimination (ILGA 2016).

Despite this, over time there have been more mentions of LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+/SOGII rights is the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA 2020) that monitors the international system and provides regular updates on how LGBTIQ+ 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; a child’s right to express their ideas on everything that affects them and the right to enjoy those rights without discrimination (AHRC 2020c). The first group of participants in our face to face interviews were young people aged between 14 and 25 years of age. Only 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, young people are not. The UN, however, does recognise that, “Young people face discrimination and obstacles to the enjoyment of their rights by virtue of their age, limiting their potential. The human rights 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
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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 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, LGBTIQ+ 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 used by experts, service providers and community advocates 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 of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over lands and waters 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. The ongoing colonisation of lands and waters by federal 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).

**LGBTIQ+ People**

There are no targeted laws protecting or promoting the rights of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia either. Along with First Nations Peoples, LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ communities were commonplace. The federal and state governments either ignored the issues or scapegoated the LGBTIQ+ 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, LGBTIQ+ rights have progressively improved with the legal recognition of same sex relationships and marriage. LGBTIQ+ 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
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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
• 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).

Research Approach

This project report sets out key findings from a project investigating the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in NSW. The project initially focused on First Nations people aged 14-25 years of age. However, requests were made to the project to expand the scope of the project to include older people. Consequently, the first round of interviews only included young people aged 14-25 years whereas the later community survey includes people aged 14 years and above.

This community report is part of a series of papers based on these interviews and the community survey. The aim of the study was to understand the experiences of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people to understand what works, what doesn’t and to develop culturally and gender/sexuality appropriate service provision. The project took a strengths-based approach and focused on the experiences, needs, successes, achievements and perspectives of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in overcoming challenges to their wellbeing.

The 14 in-depth interviews with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQ+ people were part of the first phase of the study. These interviews informed the content of phase two, an online survey of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people about their wellbeing, and experiences of health and community service provision. The survey was promoted through the project’s networks including BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation and ACON. Unfortunately, in part we think
due to the Covid outbreak in Sydney, the survey had a very low return rate of 16 participants. We recognise that the low response rate means that these findings cannot be generalised to the broader First Nations LGBTIQ+ population living in NSW. However, the survey results provide additional information that complements the face to face interviews and gives more detail about the diversity of lived experiences of First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples in NSW. Even though the interviews were held first, we have structured the report so that the more nuanced messages of the interviews come last. The interviews nicely add substance to survey participants’ experiences in terms of coming out, for example, and their reliance on particular family members such as mothers and social networks for sustaining wellbeing.

This report informs a series of workshops that make up the final phase of the project. The project team worked with First Nations LGBTIQ+ young people and Elders, their organisations, relevant service providers and stakeholders to co-design programs that support First Nations LGBTIQ+ people’s wellbeing. All phases of the research process have been guided by an Advisory Group of First Nations LGBTIQ+ young people and service provider representatives, including BlaQ Aboriginal Organisation and ACON.

Prior to submission, this report was reviewed by 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 Gadigal name to reflect this: Dalarinji or ‘Your Story’.

**Findings from the community survey**

In this section we discuss some key findings of the community survey and the main ideas people raised with us in the survey. Although many survey participants had similar experiences to the people in the interviews, there is also additional information that complements the interviews. One important difference was the ages of the participants with people taking the survey being much older in general than those doing the interviews. There was a similar spread of First Nations peoples and gender/sexuality diverse identities in both the interviews and the survey. The survey also included questions not covered in the interviews including a question around intergenerational experiences and reactions as well as a question about pre-invasion attitudes to First Nations gender and sexuality diverse people.

**Who took the survey**

Sixteen people completed the whole survey. Two people attempted the survey but did not complete enough questions to be included in the following discussion. Knowing who responded to the survey places the findings in context and highlights any strengths or gaps in the data set. The majority of people lived in the greater Sydney area. Six people just said they lived in Sydney and three said they lived in Western Sydney or Mount Druitt. Two people were from the inner city areas of Waterloo and Newtown and two people lived on the south
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coast of NSW (Blackbutt and Shellharbour). One person lived in Glenbrook in the lower Blue Mountains and one in the central coast town of Mardi. People’s ages ranged from 17 to 53 years with an average of 34 years of age.

There was a diverse range of First Nations peoples represented in the survey. Four people identified with belonging to the Wiradjuri nation and one person each identified as either Wiradjuri/Walbanja, Dharug, Dunghutti/Gumabayngirr, Dhungutti, Gamilaraay, Gamilaroi, Gomeroi, Gumbayngirr, Gundungurra, Noongar, or Tharawal. One person did not know.

In a similar way, people’s LGBTIQ+ identities were diverse with intersectional genders and sexualities. The survey included five gay men. One person each identified as being Bisexual, Bisexual/Pansexual/Trans/Non-binary, Lemon, Lesbian, Nonbinary Lesbian, Questioning/Pansexual, Trans/Queer and Transman/Bisexual. Two people agreed they identified as LGBTIQ+ but did not specify how. One person did not respond to this question.

Question 7 asked where people were living at the time of the survey (see Figure 1 below). Most people lived with their partners and another four people lived with their mothers, one of whom also lived with other relatives. Three people shared houses or flats with friends and three people owned or rented their own places.

![Figure 1: Where do you live?](image)

Seven people, or nearly half, worked full-time. Except for these participants, most of the other participants were either at university (4 people), TAFE (3 people), or high school (1 person). Some university students were also attending TAFE. Students supported their studies through part-time work, unemployment benefits and/or scholarships. Three people were on disability support and another persons on disability support was also a carer.
Where people felt comfortable and/or safe
All 16 people answered a question about the places, spaces and people they felt safe around. Stressing the importance of social networks, people felt safest with their LGBTIQ+ friends, where they lived, with their First Nations friends and their First Nations LGBTIQ+ friends. First Nations communities and LGBTIQ+ spaces and community were also important safe spaces. Fewer people felt safe or comfortable on Country, with their families or in their childhood homes. Other responses not shown here for sake of space include Online (3 people), University (3 people), Schools (2 people), Workplaces (2 people), TAFE (1 person) and On the Street (1 person). The top ten responses are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Where people felt uncomfortable and/or unsafe
Figure 3 shows the top 12 answers regarding First Nations LGBTIQ+ people’s experiences related to spaces, events or activities where they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. This mostly lines up with what was reported in Figure 2, with most people feeling unsafe on the street, online or in their childhood home. Also aligning were people’s feelings of safety and comfort when they were with their LGBTIQ+ friends or within their current living spaces. However, most spaces and events have mixed results. For example, although some people feel safe in LGBTIQ+ spaces or on Country, but also some who do not feel safe or comfortable. Schools, universities, workplaces and TAFE were listed by some people as unsafe places but not many people listed them as safe, so this would indicate these places were not considered comfortable or safe for First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples.
People’s experiences of coming out
This question related to people’s experiences of coming out to family, friends and service providers. People’s experiences were overwhelmingly positive with the majority of people having positive reactions to telling people they were LGBTIQ+. Within families, people’s experiences of telling mothers, cousins and aunties were mostly positive. Within social networks, friends’ reactions were seen as being very positive. Amongst professionals, counsellors or psychologists’ and doctors’ of GPs’ reactions were also mostly positive. Youth workers were unanimously positive whereas teachers in general reacted in a positive way but their reactions were much more mixed.

| Table 1: Who have you come out to as LGBTIQ+ and what was their reaction? |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|---------|
| Mum                            | 10  | 4  | 1       |
| Dad                            | 6   | 3  | 1       |
| Sister                         | 7   | 1  | 0       |
| Brother                        | 8   | 2  | 2       |
| Cousin                         | 11  | 2  | 4       |
| Grandmother                    | 6   | 1  | 4       |
| Grandfather                    | 1   | 1  | 3       |
| Aunty                          | 10  | 6  | 2       |
| Uncle                          | 8   | 6  | 1       |
| Foster sister                  | 1   | 0  | 0       |
| Foster mother                  | 0   | 1  | 0       |
Table 1: Who have you come out to as LGBTIQ+ and what was their reaction?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellor/Psychologist</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor/GP</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Worker</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intergenerational experiences and reactions

All 16 people said that someone in their First Nations families or communities had told them stories about negative experiences, such as discrimination, racism and abuse. Racism and verbal abuse were the most commonly reported experiences, followed by being removed from their families (fostering, adoption, child protection, Stolen Generations). Related to this is the number of experiences of community and family members being part of the Stolen Generation. Discrimination, physical abuse, LGBTIQ+ phobia, loss of Country, living on mission and working without payment were also common experiences told to First Nations LGBTIQ+ people. Figure 4 sets out the main experiences reported by participants.

Figure 4: Intergenerational First Nations LGBTIQ+ experiences

People reacted in various ways to being told these stories, often with a complex mixture of different emotions. The intersection of emotion and experiences is too detailed and complex to include here for reasons of space. However, many reported being anger but often mixed with fear, sadness, loss and concern. Sadness was also a strong emotional reaction, with another five people reporting this feeling mixed with anger, loss, fear, devastation and
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depression. Other emotions included ‘determined to create change’, ‘feel like shit’ and ‘some hope, as not all stories have been negative’.

**Discrimination, racism and abuse for being First Nations**

Fourteen of the 16 people participating in the survey reported experiencing discrimination and/or racism of some kind based on being First Nations. One person did not know if they had experienced discrimination, abuse or racism. One person said they had not. Figure 5 below sets out the ten most common places people said discrimination and/or racism took place highlighting the numerous locations in which First Nations LGBTIQ+ people had negative experiences in relationship to their Indigeneity. Public events (i.e. non-Indigenous, non-LGBTIQ+) and online were the spaces many people felt they had experienced racism and/or discrimination. Many of the participants also reported experiencing discrimination, abuse and racism in the LGBTIQ+ community, LGBTIQ+ spaces (refuges, parties, etc), at school and work. To a lesser extent, communities people grew up in, people’s childhood homes, and First Nations communities were also identified by participants. To a lesser extent other spaces reported here included LGBTIQ+ events (e.g. Mardi Gras), TAFE, University, places people currently live, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander events (e.g. Yabun) and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander spaces (e.g. AMS).

**Figure 5: Where did this discrimination/racism take place?**

Fourteen participants reported being abused verbally, emotionally or mentally for being First Nations peoples. One did not know and one person said if they had not experienced this kind of abuse. Figure 6 sets out the top 12 responses to this question. First Nations LGBTIQ+ people experienced verbal, emotional and/or mental abuse in a wide variety of places and
events. The most common places were online, in the community people grew up in, public events and spaces and at school. Sadly, this also took place in spaces often associated with safety such as their childhood home, where they were living, First Nations communities, and LGBTIQ+ communities and spaces.

Two people reported experiencing physical abuse for being First Nations peoples. One had experienced physical abuse in a number of places including their childhood home, where they currently lived, First Nations community, the community they grew up in, at a First Nations event, a First Nations space (e.g. AMS, ALS, etc.), in the LGBTIQ+ community, at a LGBTIQ+ event, LGBTIQ+ space, Public event, a public space, at school, TAFE and university as well as at work. The other person also reported they had been physically abused at work, the rest of the participants did not report physical abuse of any kind.

**Discrimination, phobia and abuse for being LGBTIQ+**
Fifteen people reported experiencing discrimination and LGBTIQ+ phobia. As with other negative experiences, the places and events where this took place were quite diverse. Figure 7 shows the places, events and spaces where people experienced discrimination and/or LGBTIQ+ phobia.
The most common places people experienced LGBTIQ+ discrimination and/or phobia were their childhood home, the community they grew up in, online and at school. Other common places were non-Indigenous/non-LGBTIQ+ events and spaces as well as university, work, First Nations communities and TAFE. People also reported phobic reactions in First Nations communities and spaces as well as LGBTIQ+ spaces and events plus at church, police, with doctors and in mental health wards.

Only five people reported experiencing physical abuse for being LGBTIQ+. Even so, the locations and events listed were considerable and diverse including people’s childhood homes; communities they grew up in, at school; at work; where they lived; First Nations spaces and communities; LGBTIQ+ events, spaces and communities; TAFE; university and non-Indigenous/non-LGBTIQ+ spaces and/or events.

Pre-Invasion stories of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people
There is little known about First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in Australia prior to Invasion Day 1788 and eleven participants had not heard any stories about First Nations LGBTIQ+ people before 1788. However, five people had had some information share with them about LGBTIQ+ people in First Nations communities pre-invasion. Two people said that they had been told that among the Wiradjuri people LGBTIQ+ people were accepted and “even celebrated”. Another participant said that their Nan told them that “people might have found it a bit ‘weird’” but that Wiradjuri people did not really hate LGBTIQ+ people before colonisation. On the contrary, another Wiradjuri person said that their aunty told them that “it wasn’t allowed” and you would be rejected by “your family and tribal people”. Finally, one Gomeroi person had also heard stories about this, but felt they could not share this information in the context of the survey.
Table 2: First Nations LGBTIQ+ people before 1788

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WRITTEN RESPONSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
<th>COUNT</th>
<th>FIRST NATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“NOT MUCH OTHER THAN THAT THEY WERE ACCEPTED BY OUR OLD PEOPLE”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wiradjuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“YES. WE WERE ACCEPTED IN COMMUNITY AND INCLUDED, EVEN CELEBRATED BEFORE COLONISATION”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wiradjuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I DON’T THINK IT WAS EVER SOMETHING PEOPLE GOT HATED FOR AS FAR AS MY NAN SAID PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE FOUND IT A BIT &quot;WEIRD&quot; IN HER MEMORY BUT THERE WASN’T HATE, JUST A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Noongar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“MY AUNTY HAS SAID THAT IT WASN’T ALLOWED AND THAT YOU WOULD GET REJECTED BY YOUR FAMILY AND TRIBAL PEOPLE”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wiradjuri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“YEAH, BUT I DON’T KNOW IF I CAN SHARE THEM HERE, SORRY”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gomeroi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maintaining physical, mental, social & emotional wellbeing

Figure 8 illustrates the top answers from participants describing the most important people, organisations and services they used to maintain their health and wellbeing. Everyone used more than one type of person, space or profession to support their wellbeing. Twelve people said they use their GPs, counsellors and other health professionals to help support their wellbeing. Another nine people said they got support from their friends and family. Eight people used other health and mental health services such as private Medical Clinics, Headspace, or Beyond Blue. Another six people relied on the support from First Nations and LGBTIQ+ communities. Three people said that LGBTIQ+ community services (e.g. ACON, Twenty10) were important to their health and wellbeing. One participant each said they used self-help groups (e.g. AA, NA, DV support), their own research and the Kirketon Road Centre, Kings Cross. Interestingly, no-one said that they considered Aboriginal community services as the most important thing supporting their everyday wellbeing.
First Nations LGBTIQ+ people overwhelmingly go their own General Practitioner (GP) for any issues related to their physical health. To a much lesser extent, they also sought help from Pharmacists, Allied Health Professionals (e.g. physiotherapists, dieticians, exercise physiologists), Aboriginal Medical Services and public Hospitals. One participant each also said they used a Community Health Clinic, private Medical Clinic, Kirketon Road Clinic, and a specialist Sexual Health Clinic. One participant said they do not use any services for their physical health.

Surprisingly, half the participants also used their GPs for emotional and/or mental health support (see Figure 10). Most of the other responses highlighted the importance of other professional support from Psychologists/Counsellors, Aboriginal Medical Services, and
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public Hospitals. People also relied on informal support through self-help groups as well as relying on their families.

For sexual health needs, ten people said they used their GP and five used ACON. Another four people used Community Health Clinics and two people said they relied on public hospitals for sexual health services. Only one person each used their AMS, a specialised Sexual Health Clinic or Kirketon Road in Kings Cross. One person did not see anyone for their sexual health.

What people would like service providers to do better
Seven participants told us the reason they used different services, which can be summarised as, “They each help in different ways”. Some people had issues with AMS doctors assuming they were heterosexual and that GPs did not know enough about trans health and one participant said that their experience with GPs “was awful”. Others used private clinics that specialised in sexual health but also had an “indepth knowledge of mental health” such as Taylor Square Private Clinic. Essentially, finding a service that provides support for gender/sexuality and other health needs is good but when this was not possible, people used multiple services that were gender/sexuality diverse friendly to meet their diverse needs.

In many ways, the survey replicated the issues raised in the interviews. People recommended that services needed to improve their service provision and visibly support First Nations LGBTIQ+ people. Education, training and awareness for staff of First Nations gender/sexuality diversity was seen as very important. People also stressed the need for respect and for service providers not to patronise their clients. The provision of visible support for First Nations LGBTIQ+ people was also important, using things like
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Acknowledgement of Country and preferred name and pronouns on intake forms. One person summed this up as, “Sometimes I have to explain both [gender and sexuality]. I wish I was just accepted for who I am”.

Survey participants said in full they thought services needed:

- “Education and respect and getting transgender stuff dealt with like not just treating me like I’m dumb”
- “I dunno, hope this doesn’t sound too pessimistic but I think these are structural colonial problems that aren’t gonna be fixed by services”
- “I feel a lot safer when there is an acknowledgment of country in a prominent place in a health service. Also a preferred name and pronouns section on an intake form”
- “I think they just need to learn more about the fact we have different health needs and different bodies and to not be judgemental”
- “In the GP clinic, have a sticker that says it’s a safe space. Also have doctors who are welcoming of the queer/aboriginal community”
- “Knowledge of gender diversity, most GPs seem to know near nothing about the community, lacking even the ability to use pronouns correctly”
- “Way can see people with different needs”

**Covid-19 restrictions and their impact**

During Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns participants mostly felt that they had had less support than before (8 people). Others felt that they had about the same (3 people) or more support (3 people). Only 14 people answered this question. Another 11 people who responded to a question about the closure of LGBTIQ+ venues said they felt they had been affected by the lack of access to community spaces.

People developed strategies to help cope with feelings of isolation during lockdowns and restrictions. Strategies people into place included maintaining connections with professional service providers through counselling zooms and maintaining close contact with case managers. Many talked more to family and friends on their phones or online, moving more into online spaces trying to reach out as much as they could. Others tried to stay engaged in education and continued their volunteer work when they could. Others used the time to do more around the house, working with their hands to keep grounded; expanding their home cooking repertoire or planning home movie nights. Some people also spent the time learning more about their culture since it was harder to travel to be on Country.
Findings from the interviews

In this section we discuss three key themes that people discussed with us in the interviews. The three key themes from interviews are: culture and identity; cultivating wellbeing; and everyday life around work, education and support services.

Culture and Identity

All participants identified as proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and identified across a range of sexuality and gender diversity. The challenges people 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. One important issue was acceptance within different communities. Many of the participants described that they felt more comfortable living in urban areas because this enabled their LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQ+ communities.

People 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 LGBTIQ+ communities.

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.

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”.

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
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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…

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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”.

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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”.

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.

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.

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.

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.

‘Passing’ to feel safe
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”.

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…
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.

Cultivating Wellbeing: Challenges, Resistance and Moving On
This section looks at some of the struggles told to us by young 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. 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”.

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.

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”.

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
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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”.

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.

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

…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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’

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.

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

…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.

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.

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.

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.
Dalarinji – ‘Your Story’

**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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

**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:
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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.

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.

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.

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.

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 LGBTIQ+ 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.
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.

I’m a bit of a picky 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.

Generally, participants spoke most about the value of LGBTIQ+ 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.

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.

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.

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.
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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”.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
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Discussion

This paper has outlined the key findings of the Dalarinji project on the wellbeing of First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples in NSW. The report shows the need to better understand the perspectives of First Nations LGBTIQ+ people as they meet the challenges of living in a neo-colonial state such as the country now known as Australia. First Nations LGBTIQ+ people of all ages say they have experienced discriminatory, racist and queer-phobic attitudes and behaviour at collective (culture, community, family) and individual levels. This has impacted on their wellbeing and connection to their communities, First Nations culture and Country. Although participants spoke of feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in some situations, they also spoke of their pride in being First Nations LGBTIQ+ people and of their strategies used to sustain and cultivate wellbeing.

To meet these challenges, people spoke of the importance of family, social networks and positive role models. In both the interviews and the survey, people spoke to the importance of their mothers to their feelings of wellbeing. Mothers were their best friends, protectors and advocates within community. Other members of the extended family were not seen as being as important with some family members from rural areas less open to LGBTIQ+ identities. Some of this lack of acceptance related to the age of family members, and generational experiences such as being part of the Stolen Generations and whether religious values conflicted with gender and sexuality diversity. Friends and social networks were also very important for many participants, a strong set of friends and safe places where they felt comfortable was seen as critical to their wellbeing. Having strong role models that were out and proud in either their families, in education or in service provision, were also seen as important as it gave much needed strength and support.

Unfortunately, both the survey and the interviews demonstrated that First Nations LGBTIQ+ people were less positive about places within the public domain. Education was seen as challenging, with bullying, discrimination, racism and queer-phobia reported as being very prevalent especially in primary and secondary schools. Some participants reported that their experiences at universities were better but this was not universal. People’s working lives were also difficult to navigate as some places were unsafe and people weren’t always able to be out and proud about being First Nations LGBTIQ+. People developed strategies to hide their identities in order to feel safe and be able to continue to earn a living but this meant hiding an important part of themselves. 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 testing whether they were allies to both First Nations peoples and provided LGBTIQ+ appropriate services. However, participants demonstrated a strong capacity to use current services, asserting their rights to high quality mental, physical and sexual health service provision that met their needs as both First Nations and LGBTIQ+ people.
The survey findings support the more nuanced stories of the interviews. The main differences between the survey and the interviews were some more information regarding intergenerational experiences of discrimination and abuse and stories from family members about First Nations attitudes to LGBTIQ+ people pre-invasion. The survey highlighted the fact that people are still affected by events that occurred during the lifetimes of their older family and community members. People talked about the impact on them of having family and community members who suffered from abuse, discrimination and racism. On a more positive side, survey participants told stories they had heard from aunts, grandmothers and others about attitudes to pre-invasion First Nations LGBTIQ+ people. One Wiradjuri aunty did not present a positive picture, but most stories suggested the potential positives of knowing more about pre-invasion First Nations LGBTIQ+ people’s everyday lives.

The report findings point to the need for more targeted human rights frameworks in Australia and for the effective and forceful implementation of existing ones. Current legislation, policy and rights frameworks are very limited in their ability to effectively protect First Nations LGBTIQ+ peoples’ rights in any meaningful way. Although there are significant limitations to rights based approaches, they do set up normative expectations and allow for people to contest and challenge individual and systematic abuse and discrimination. Given the age, relevance and weakness of most of Australia’s current discrimination laws and policies, being forced to go to the international stage to attempt to force Australian governments to act means that rights are only granted to those with the resources to travel and advocate with Human Rights Committees in New York or Geneva. First Nations LGBTIQ+ people have only relatively recently started to advocate and push for change in Australia, their organisations are new and often under-resourced. This means that forcing people to seek redress at a global level makes the system even more inequitable and limits ordinary people’s ability to challenge individual and systematic abuse or discrimination. There is much that could be achieved at national, state and local levels such as improving implementation of laws to protect people’s everyday lives and experiences of service provision, education and work. Having a stronger human rights regime would further enable people to at least challenge some of the worst abuses experienced by First Nations LGBTIQ+ people in NSW.

It is clear that younger and older First Nations LGBTIQ+ people encounter and live with many of the same challenges. They are affected by centuries of colonial policies that denigrate and attempt to eliminate community, culture and people. This led to collective intergenerational suffering but also has inspired some to want to change the way things are. Young First Nations LGBTIQ+ people strongly acknowledged the hard work and challenges encountered by their older peers, living through criminalisation, police and media witchhunts and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Understanding more about how people of all ages meet and overcome these challenges and the kinds of strategies people use to survive and thrive in the colonial settler state now know as Australia is important. Hopefully, this report breaks down some of the barriers to understanding the experiences, needs and aspirations of First Nations LGBTIQ+
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people and encourages service providers of all kinds to develop culturally and gender/sexuality appropriate programmes in education, work, health and community services.

References


