

Being "Two-Spirit": A Journey of Healing

Cultural Extension Project

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After 1492, the Americas that Indigenous peoples knew to be home began to change forever. Their history is much longer than 500 years, but in these last few centuries, a lot of damage has been done to these communities that have resulted in both a historical and racial trauma that indigenous groups still face today. One particular group that has faced racism and discrimination is the two-spirit community within the overall indigenous population, and this paper explores some research on this group along with a possible healing space for youth who identify as being two-spirit.

The term “two-spirit” is an umbrella term that combines English (western view) and indigenous languages to describe individuals born with both feminine and masculine spirits. This of course includes Native American individuals in the LGBTQ+ community who are indigenous. Tribes all have different concepts and terms in their languages that describe two-spirit identities. Historically, two-spirit individuals have been a part of many tribes, and long before colonization, have had many roles in society. These roles include helping profession style roles, being ceremonial leaders, hunters, gatherers, warriors, medicine men, and weavers to name a few. One article talks about two-spirit traditions and western views of the social construction of gender and sexuality, and discusses possible curriculum changes within schools to include two-spirit traditions and discuss LGBTQ+ identities with conversations about colonialism and how damaging heteronormative ideas have been to these groups, and how they still operate in society today (Sheppard & Mayo Jr. 2013). The article primarily discusses Navajo communities rather than other ones, and to me it was weird to only talk about one indigenous community when there are hundreds of them with different belief systems. I did like how the article wanted to talk about

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how difficult it is to break down the social constructs of gender and sexuality through a non-western lens which does help, but they should have included other information from other indigenous groups for a more holistic approach to looking at how gender and sexuality was viewed and accepted.

There was another article that I found titled, “Sexual and Gender Diversity in Native America and the Pacific Islands” by Will Roscoe. They talked about intersectionality (but doesn’t explicitly say it) as far as LGBTQ+ identities are mostly viewed as having a white, middle-class history and other narratives had been forgotten over time. The two main communities that they talked about were Native Americans as a whole and Pacific Islanders, and the histories that have in a way “shaped” the way that the communities have come together in more modern times. As I focus on how two-spirit communities that were discussed, Roscoe mentioned how white settlers labeled what they believed were deviants to heteronormative ideas and one French leader named Jacques Le Moyne described the two-spirit people he encountered on his “expedition” as “hermaphrodites” (Roscoe 2016). Roscoe also talked about this becoming a common word among Europeans when describing these groups, and along with colonization and genocide of indigenous people, there came to be a lot of damage. Negative connotations come from places of hate and oppression, and the fact that this led to the creation of the term “berdache,” which means “kept boy,” became really problematic when anthropologists would use this language in their work. Because of issues surrounding language, finally in 1990 at the Third Annual Native American Gay and Lesbian gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba when the term “Two-Spirit” was coined.

I thought that this article covered a lot as far as who is included within indigenous tribes, and I liked that the author included the language and how harmful it did end up being to these

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groups of people, even in more modern times when anthropologists would study these cultures. It would be really interesting to see follow up studies that link specific nations and indigenous groups in all the of Americas for the two-spirit populations and what those communities look like today. There are other damages that I hear a lot, and those include the Indian residential schools that were put in place not very long ago, and in fact, my great grandparents were a part of those schools. Colonizers attempted to erase cultures through these schools, and a lot of knowledge and traditions of native tribes suffered greatly. I would imagine that it was a similar situation with two-spirit people, and because of the damages done, we have forgotten our ways and how important two-spirit people are in reclaiming our culture and older traditions again.

As far as healing, many strides have been made by indigenous communities to preserve their culture and decolonize their own ways of thinking. A lot of what I already know as far as healing practices go comes from what elders have taught me, but I did find an article that looked at a lot of other types as well. A lot of people have probably heard about a Medicine Wheel, which comes up a lot when talking about making meaning from one's direction. It could remind you of a compass, but each direction has a sacred meaning, and by praying to these directions and performing certain ceremonies can help orient yourself in finding your place. The powwow is probably one of the most important healing spaces for Native American tribes, and we use it to practice dances, socialize, and just be free to honor our ancestors. Like the medicine wheel, the arena is also circular, and the circle implies being one and being together, unified. The article mentions the smaller ceremonies like story-telling, smudging, pipe ceremonies, and the sweat lodge (Rybak & Decker-Fitts 2009). I like that most of this was for how people who practice these can benefit with using these for counseling, or for counselors to use this knowledge to help indigenous clients through their issues through their lens of healing.

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The last article that I wanted to touch on was titled, “‘I’m in this world for a reason:’ Resilience and recovery among American Indian and Alaska Native two-spirit women.” Mostly the researchers were curious to focus on indigenous women that identified as two-spirit and vulnerabilities that come with that identity. Through qualitative data analysis and interviews, there were at least 11 different perspectives that were common throughout all of the women who participated. They linked how indigenous people have suffered in the past with how indigenous face reality in modern times, and how historical trauma made these populations vulnerable to substance-use, domestic violence, homelessness, and suicide. The researchers also mentioned how difficult it was to have one really good definition of resiliency because it really depends, and has a complex relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Elm, Lewis, Walters & Self 2016). Some of the responses on how people define their resiliency that I found interesting included one participant mentioning that they “found that spirit that I thought had gone away” (Elm et al 2016). This person looked to herbs and religious prayer to help her become sober and stay sober. Another person looked to sacred spaces to heal in a space where they could just be normal and not scrutinized by heteronormative environments through personal reflection. My other favorite response was about a woman being accepted by her grandmother, someone that she looked up to for her teachings and it helped her internalize resiliency in that as long as she was taking care of herself, her grandmother would be fine.

Two-Spirit people have had to experience a lot of change since first contact with colonizers over 500 years ago, and a lot of damage has been done to this community as a result of historical and racial trauma. For a proposed healing space for this small community, I chose the Tallbull Memorial Grounds outside of Castle Rock, CO. In this space, a 3-day retreat would be organized for 10 youth who identify as two-spirit and their families. It would be ran by Elders

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(not necessarily older, but they would be older than the youth) who also identify as two-spirit, spiritual leaders who identify as two-spirit or those who advocate for two-spirit communities, and two-spirit psychologists or counselors. They can bring their own tents and camping gear or stay in some of the tipis provided by the owner of the grounds. On the first day, the youth only will arrive, pitch tents/tipis, and cook meals together.

During the first night, they will participate in a talking circle with spiritual leaders who also identify as two-spirit along with other two-spirit volunteers. The goal for that night would be to address any concerns that individuals might have when confronting their families about their identity and the issues that they have had with themselves since coming out. It could be a possibility that these individuals may have or do suffer from societal biases or issues within the family that surround the two-spirit identity. There may be tensions because of what is left over from the effects of colonialism, and the youth that are participating could possibly be trying to figure out how to start their journey, how to talk about their insecurities about their identity with their families, or may want to be able to share their stories with others who may not know where to start theirs. Their reasons could all be different, but these individuals are hopefully trying to find ways to heal from generations of trauma and other issues that have stemmed from society outside of native communities.

Parents and/or other family members will join in on the second day and engage in some more talking circles with their child and discuss issues that surround their child's gender identity as being two-spirit. Each talking circle will be done between dialogue leaders (volunteers or spiritual leaders/elders), the family, and the child as they navigate how to support their child and how they can heal from any damage/trauma done to them. On the third day, a mini pow wow will be held on the grounds, and meals will be cooked by the families or certain family members

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while everyone else breaks off into groups to either hike, participate in sweat lodge, or spend time near to where others are cooking in a “free time period.” Families and the youth participants can also reflect with different leaders on what they have learned about themselves during the retreat as well. Once the food is all done in the afternoon, the powwow can start in the late afternoon and after it is over, the retreat will be concluded

The purpose of the space and the retreat is to create a space for native two-spirit youth for being able to look into themselves and through their cultural lenses in order to navigate ways to heal from damage done to them and their families because of stigmas and biases toward this minoritized group of people. Families sometimes have difficult times accepting their child/sibling because of those outside factors that shape how they may view two-spirit communities, and the sad reality is that more often than not, two-spirit youth are ostracized from either their immediate family or from their community. They are more likely to be homeless than other groups of people and face a lot of discrimination outside and within their own communities, depending on the level of acceptance for different tribes. The goal for these youth is to heal and find themselves, but to also find ways to navigate their identities with their family to support them. Depending on the family, the goal may also be to find a way to start having those conversations with their family through traditions and be able to educate their families about the history of two-spirit people and why we need to think about decolonizing the way we are.

As far as barriers go, some of these youth may not have contact with their families or having these conversations with their families may be too much for them at one time, which is why the youth participants arrive first to share their stories with others and give suggestions or guidance for others who may have a harder time with their identities. Elders will be there in

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support, and mental health professionals could be helpful in guiding dialogue to prevent any fights with the family, and so that the youth that talk about their experiences could have more support while talking to their families. There could be a possibility that families may not completely understand in these first conversations, but in order to get rid of a lot of stigmas that families have, it is important to keep talking about these experiences and get more and more people to talk about them.

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