Two-Spirited People and Social Work Practice: Exploring the History of Aboriginal Gender and Sexual Diversity

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Abstract

Diversity of sexual orientation appears to be universal throughout human history. This article explores gender and sexual diversity of non-Aboriginal and traditional First Nations groups in North America, and the reclamation of traditional roles and identities by contemporary two-spirits. This article argues that social workers, as well as various other human service professionals stand to improve the quality of their practice by seeking deeper understanding of sexual and gender diversity through exploration of historic First Nation traditions of two-spirit roles as well as the intersecting multiple oppressions impacting two-spirits in urban, rural and reserve locations.

Introduction

This article explores the history of gender and sexual diversity of western non-Aboriginal cultures and traditional First Nations groups in North America, and in the latter case, the reclamation of traditional roles and identities by contemporary two-spirit persons. A case is presented for the benefits of social workers, as well as various other human service professionals of gaining a deeper understanding of sexual diversity and oppression by exploring historic First Nation traditions of two-spirits, as well as contemporary two-spirit realities of intersecting oppressions in urban, rural and reserve locations. Though the title of social worker is reserved for individuals registered with their respective professional body, the information provided is intended for a broad range of human service providers. The intention of this article is to increase and improve understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) people, the history of derogatory terms used against LGBTQ people, the history of berdache [sic], historic two-spirit roles, the experience of contemporary two-spirits and implications for social work practice.
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual History and Definitions

It is important to define the myriad of terms relating to sexual and gender diversity. On the most basic level of understanding, “sex” refers only to primary reproductive body parts while “gender” refers to “culturally constructed social roles and identities in which sex is one defining element whose importance varies” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 17). Though evidence of same-sex relations dates back as far as ancient Egypt (2300 B.C.), the term “homosexual” only appeared in literature when coined in 1892 by American doctor James Kiernan. He originally used the term to describe people who we now may consider transgendered, or those who cross conventional gender roles (Katz, as cited in Todd, 2005). Perpetuated by Freudian theories, by the 1950s homosexuality was considered a “mental disorder caused by an individual’s psycho-social environment – a deviation from the heterosexual norm” (Todd, 2005, p. 276). For many, many years, individuals who believed that they were homosexual followed the hegemonic views of the heterosexual world and went to great lengths to cure themselves of the “illness” (Kupper, 1998). It was not until 1973, as a result of the gay and lesbian liberation movement which fought for human rights, was the term “homosexual” removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Todd, 2005). Despite its removal from the DSM over thirty years ago, the term “homosexual” continues to be stigmatized and to some extent carry overtones of a pathological disorder.

World War II was an important time in the emergence of gay communities and the need for LGBTQ human rights. Gays and lesbians imprisoned by Nazis were identified by an arm band with a pink or black inverted triangle badge. Jewish prisoners, identified by the Star of David, who were also gay or lesbian, were further degraded by having a pink triangle superimposed over the star. Bearing this identification, gay or lesbian Jewish prisoners found themselves at the very lowest ranking in terms of concentration camp hierarchy (Friedman, 1997; Stonewall Society, n.d.). In WWII “[when] allied forces rescued most of those in the concentrations camps, gays were left behind with the continued imprisonment by the ‘liberating forces” (Friedman, 1997, p. xv).

As a result of the labour shortage during the war, lesbians and feminists in Canada and the United States lobbied for the right to work as equals with men in the paid labour force. With the end of WWII and the return of many men to the workforce, the climate for women in paid labour soured as women were pressured to return to traditional unpaid homemaker roles (Kupper, 1998). Over half a century later, there remains a need for equal pay and equal employment policies for women in the paid and arguably, unpaid work forces. In Canada women continue to be underpaid and undervalued despite employment equity legislation introduced in the 1980s (Hick, 2005). Women are not the only group facing discrimination in the workplace as LGBTQ and Aboriginal people are also treated inequitably. Todd (2005) highlights the fact that “straight people rarely, if ever, lose jobs, promotions, political positions or social status because they are straight” (p. 273). Aboriginal people also experience much higher rates of poverty and unemployment than non-Aboriginal people. Of urban Aboriginal populations, 50.4% live below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO), as compared to 21.2% of urban non-Aboriginal people (Hick, 2005, p. 198). An important reality for Saskatchewan social workers to keep in mind is that the poorest Aboriginal people in Canada are located in Saskatoon, with 63.7% living below the
LICO (Lee, as cited in Hick, 2005). Dominant patriarchal, heteronormative, Christian beliefs and both overt and covert homophobia in our society, create toxic environments for LGBTQ people. For individuals who identify as female and minority in terms of sexuality, culture, spirituality and/or race, daily life can be a struggle.

Beyond same sex-orientation identities, there also exists an area of sexual and gender diversity where individuals find themselves attracted to both sexes and may identify as bisexual. Separate from bisexual, gay, or lesbian identities are those who see themselves as transsexual or transgendered. Transsexuals are individuals who feel that their gender identity does not match their sexual anatomy. It is important to note that “psychiatry still considers transsexualism a mental illness, which requires treatment” (Todd, 2005, p. 281). The term transgender is “inclusive of people who identify as bigender, gender benders, gender outlaws, cross-dressers, drag queens, drag-kings, transvestites and transsexuals” (Todd, 2005, p. 281). Recently, “the word ‘intersexed’ has come into preferred usage to replace ‘hermaphrodite’, the latter being considered misleading and stigmatizing” (GLSEN, n.d., History of dyke, ¶ 2). Todd (2005) explains that intersexuality “are individuals whose external sex (genitalia) are indeterminant, people who appear to be male but are medically/biologically female” and vice versa (p. 281). None of the aforementioned labels are to be used lightly as they can create confusion and potentially severe negative implications for the “accused”. South African athlete Caster Semenya knows this all to well after being accused of being intersexed following a gold medal win in the women’s 800 meters at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin (CNN, 2009).

The commonly used acronym “LGBT” is not inclusive to all diversity groups. In an effort to be more inclusive of gender and sexual diversity it may be expanded to LGBTQ, GLBTQ, LGBTTQ, LGBTTIQ, etc. Though more specific in its inclusion, the ever elongating acronym for gender and sexual diversity in not always practical. Individuals who identify as intersexual, asexual, cross-dressing, or ascribe to no label of sexual or gender orientation may feel excluded by these acronyms. A term recently “taken back” by North American LGBTQ individuals and communities is “queer”, which was historically used as a derogatory slur against LGBT people. The popularity and growing use of the word “queer” comes from its ability to be inclusive of all gender and sexual diversity. Disempowering derogatory terms by legitimizing the context within oppressed groups is a powerful strategy. “Queer” also facilitates simplification of the ever growing, exclusive and sometimes confusing acronyms used to describe a wide range of gender and sexual diversity. The use of LGBTQ and the term queer, in this paper is intended to be inclusive of individual diversity regardless of personal gender or sexual ascription. The contemporary term two-spirit, which will be discussed in more detail later, shares with the term “queer” a quality of inclusivity. Although sometimes represented as 2S, in this paper the term two-spirit is represented by the letter “T” as in the acronym LGBTTQ. The term two-spirit includes males, females and intersexed individuals, and an entire spectrum of gender and sexual diversity, while simultaneously connecting these identities with Aboriginal culture and spirituality (Roscoe, 1998).

For practicing social workers, it is important to gain a clear understanding of these terms and definitions when working with queer individuals, families and groups to extend support. Value 2, the pursuit of social justice found in the Canadian Association of Social Workers
(CASW) Code of Ethics 2005, supports the idea of social workers becoming LGBTTQ, or simply queer allies. It states that, “[social] workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups” (CASW, 2005, p. 5).

Beliefs such as universal heterosexuality, sex for the exclusive purpose of reproduction and the immorality of homosexuality are often rooted in religious belief systems. For example, I was raised in as a Roman Catholic and attended public school in a small rural town in Saskatchewan. It was no secret that being gay or lesbian was not acceptable. By age thirteen I began praying at night that God would not make me a lesbian when I grew up; anything but that! Stifling my same-sex attractions, which at the time I only recognized as feeling different, I began to punish myself and numb feelings via self-harm and binge drinking. Teasing and bullying about my tom-boyish ways throughout elementary and junior high school had left me with poor self-esteem and strong fears of being different. By age fifteen, I began searching the Bible for passages to support the dogma that homosexuality was wrong. I realize now this was an attempt to intellectualize, stifle and punish myself. By age seventeen my personal Bible that I received at my first communion was book-marked and highlighted of all things related to alcohol, drugs, pre-marital sex and homosexuality: all issues I was struggling with. Of the many passages I marked, Leviticus 20:13 remains etched in my memory: “If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (Holy Bible, n.d., p. 100). This dogma is exploited by some people as justification to use terms such as faggot, dyke and gay in derogatory ways to hurt and bully others perceived to be LGBTTQ. Though at the time I did not fully understand these terms, deep in my psyche the fear was planted and the toxicity of internalized homophobia took root in me.

Terms such as faggot, dyke and gay continue to be used in hurtful and hateful ways in our schools, homes and workplaces. It is important to learn and understand the roots of these words, as well as the physical, mental and emotional harm they can cause. Dorais (2004, as cited in Todd, 2005) finds that “on average gay adolescents and young men are six to 16 times more at risk for attempting suicide” (p. 285). It is important to understand that the reasons for queer individuals’ self-hate, self-harm, or suicide is not because of being queer, but rather the result of living in socially toxic and homophobic environments. In a Proctor and Groze study (as cited in Banks, 2003) 66% of LGB youth with a mean age 18.5 years in the United States and Canada had attempted suicide. Though the Proctor and Groze study does not identify cultural or racial minorities, it has become too common to hear of Aboriginal youth committing suicide, with LGBTTQ Aboriginal youth topping the list. Social workers and human service workers must strive to change the climate of institutionalized heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia, into atmospheres of trust, safety and inclusivity in order to support queer youth and adults in continuing to live and love themselves.
The History of “Faggot” and “Dyke”

The terms “fag” or “faggot,” and “dyke” have become some of the most commonly used derogatory slurs against gay men and lesbians in Canada and the United States. In many dictionaries the word “faggot” may appear harmless referring to a bundle of sticks, herbs, or metal rods tied together. The term acquired its negative connotations when “heretics were burned alive during the European Inquisitions and, the fires used to burn them were built with a "faggot"(s)” (GLSEN, n.d., History of Faggot, ¶ 2). Heretics, those individuals believed to challenge the dogmas of the Catholic Church via their sexuality or lifestyle, were forced to carry the faggot to the fire being built for their execution. Individuals who “recanted their heretical beliefs in order to avoid execution were obliged to wear the design of a ‘faggot’ embroidered on their sleeve, to identify them as former heretics” (GLSEN, n.d., History of Faggot, ¶ 2). The frequent use of faggot, fag, or gay as an insult is “no doubt [derived] from the belief among some straight men that the greatest possible humiliation is to be identified as gay. (GLSEN, n.d., History of Faggot, ¶ 4).

The term “dyke” as found in the “Oxford English Dictionary, is a very old word, referring to a variety of ditches, trenches, pits, caves, pools, fences, embankments, dams, piers, causeways, fissures, faults, and barriers” (GLSEN, n.d., History of dyke, ¶ 1). None of these terms connect to the contemporary usage of "dyke" as a slur directed at perceived or actual lesbian women, so where did it originate? GLSEN (n.d.) suggests that "dyke" was potentially derived from the word "hermaphrodite". Originating from Greek hermaphroditos, “hermaphrodite” has been used to describe plants and animals born with a degree of ambiguity regarding their primary and/or secondary sex characteristics (GLSEN, n.d., History of dyke, ¶ 2). Popular use of hermaphrodite over the course of history altered the term into “morphodite” and “morphodike” potentially resulting in the short form, “dyke”. Derogatory terms such as dyke used against “lesbians or women perceived to be lesbian is rooted in a history of women transgressing their assigned gender roles, and the common assumption that women identify as lesbian out of a desire to be men” (GLSEN, n.d., History of dyke, ¶ 6). Understanding the history of violence and oppression in the etymology of these terms can help social workers to work more compassionately with LGBTQ people in order to “uphold the right of every person to be free from violence and threat of violence” (CASW, 2005, p. 4).

Colonial to Contemporary Aboriginal Sexual and Gender Diversity

Pre-European contact, alternative gender roles and identities were respected and honoured in First Nations groups throughout North America where all people were believed to be part of the sacred web of life and society (Brown, 1997). Unfamiliar to European concepts of sex and gender roles, many “American Indian groups have at least six alternative gender styles: women and men, not-men (biological women who assume some aspects of male roles) and not-women (biological men who assume some aspects of female roles), lesbians and gays” (Brown, 1997, p.6). Roscoe (1998) discusses the “third gender” category referring to male and sometimes female two-spirits, and the “fourth gender” category specific to female two-spirits. Terms such as man-woman and woman-man were also used to describe males and females, who acted and filled roles and identities of the opposite gender (Lang, 1998). The existence of terms to describe...
multiple genders in North American Indigenous groups supports the “theory of social constructionism, which maintains that gender roles, sexualities, and identities are not natural, essential or universal, but constructed by social processes and discourses” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 5). It is difficult to argue universal heterosexuality to an entire continent of people who thrived in gender and sexually diverse societies for thousands of years.

Most First Nation tribes and bands had their own term(s) to describe roles of individuals who today may identify as LGBTQ or two-spirit (Roscoe, 1998). The following is a list of terms found in Indigenous languages to describe male and female two-spirits (translation in brackets): Crow: boté, bate, bade; Cree: ayekkwe, a:yahkwew (“split testicles,” i.e., sterile); Lakota: winkte (“would be woman”) Dreams of Double woman; Navajo: nutlys, natli, nadleehi (“he changes,” “being transformed”), Zuni: lhamana (male), katsotse (female) (Roscoe, 1998, p. 214-222). These terms having been compiled by non-Aboriginal explorers, anthropologists and historians are subject to error and misinterpretation. I inquired about the Cree two-spirit terms ayekkwe, a:yahkwew with a two-spirit woman, knowledgeable both in academia as well as the Cree language, and found the translation to be inaccurate. The literal translations simply do not make sense in the context of identifying two-spirits. Also neither ayekkwe or a:yahkwew appear to translate into “split testicles” as Roscoe (1998) suggests. A. Wilson (personal communications, May 28, 2009) believes that these terms were most likely a specific two-spirit person’s name within a particular group. Rice (2005) suggests that the Cree term for traditional male two-spirits is, “Ayenkway” (p. 70). Given that there are three dialects of Cree, and that it is not traditionally a written language, spelling, pronunciation and the term itself are subject to variation. Kinship is very important in Cree and other First Nation groups. It is a sign of respect to address a relative using terms such as: mother (Kikawi), father (Kotawi), grandma (kookum), grandpa (Kimosoom), brother (nustees), sister (nemiss), etc. (A. Wilson, personal communications, June 14, 2009). European colonizers unfamiliar with the practice of kinships terms, or the use of spirit names, could have easily mistaken words such as ayekkwe or a:yahkwew as lingual groups terms used to describe two-spirits.

Aside from anthropological misinterpretation of names and relationships between two-spirits and kin, the inaccurate use of terms such as hermaphrodite, and the inconsistent spelling and inaccurate use of “berdache” [sic] (explained later), created a somewhat fictional history of Indigenous groups in North America. Contemporary Aboriginal scholars continue to correct misinterpretations and inaccurate records of events, as well as work to restore the importance of traditional female roles in First Nation cultures. Erroneous documentation by anthropologists, explorers and historians resulted from their non-Aboriginal paradigms of thought, without consideration or understanding of Indigenous worldviews. This Eurocentric view was comprised of European superiority, patriarchal values and Christian morals and ethics. Many of the early colonizers to North America were clergy. For these religious leaders it was deemed a charitable act to save the souls of First Nations people for whom they feared would be damned by their diverse sexual and other practices (Brown, 1997). Spanish explorer, Vasco Nunez de Bulboa, while in Panama met forty “male homosexuals dressed as women” and had them put to the dogs (Roscoe, 1998). Some hundred years later his actions were praised by a historian who stated, “A fine action of an honourable and Catholic Spaniard” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 4).
The Discontinued Use of Berdache

Terms used by anthropologists and researchers to describe LGBTQQ Aboriginal people, have ranged from hermaphrodite, sodomite, berdache [sic], not-men, not-women, third and fourth genders, and a range of tribal and band specific terms. In earlier Euro-colonial documentation, the most commonly used term to describe sexual and gender diverse Indigenous people was “berdache,” [sic] or some variation of this term. The word is a derivative of the Persian word “barah,” referring to “slave boys” or “male prostitutes (Roscoe, 1998). Viewed by many two-spirits as derogatory, in 1993 a group of anthropologists and First Nations people issued guidelines to formalize the preference of “two-spirit” rather than berdache (Roscoe, 1998). Scholars were also “encouraged to use tribally specific terms for multiple genders or the term ‘two-spirit’” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 17). For the purposes of this article, I have employed the term “two-spirit” in reference to contemporary, and in many cases to historic two-spirit or Aboriginal LGBTQQ people. The Euro-colonial term berdache [sic], I use with “[sic]” when referencing Euro-colonial historic documentation of two-spirits. As encouraged above, when possible the use of specific tribal lingual terms such as winkte of the Lakota, cote of the Crow and lhamana of the Zuni are best used as they are specific to bands or tribes. Unfortunately with the use of specific lingual group terms for two-spirits, there is difficulty in establishing accuracy. As discussed earlier, this is potentially the case with Roscoe’s (1998) use of the thought to be two-spirit Cree words, ayekkwe and a:yahkwew. When a tribal lingual term is accurate and accepted as describing a traditional two-spirit, this term should be encouraged as pan-historical and capable of building strong cultural identities for contemporary two-spirits.

In contrast to the many anthropologists who agreed to discontinue the use of berdache [sic], Roscoe (1998) defends its use, arguing that the term is not Western, but rather Persian and therefore Eastern in origin. He further states that berdache [sic] is no more derogatory beyond the extent “that all terms for nonmarital sexuality in European societies carried a measure of condemnation” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 17). I believe that “condemnation” is not a light word in terms of meaning or how people associated with it are treated. Further, arguing that a word is “Eastern” rather than “Western” in origin does not make it any less derogatory or colonial. Roscoe (1998) also believes that berdache [sic] was “rarely used with the force of ‘faggot,’ but more often as a euphemism for ‘lover’ or ‘boyfriend’” (p. 17). Despite Roscoe’s arguments, I align with the term “two-spirit”, based on the 1993 agreement by anthropologists to stop using “berdache” [sic] in academic writing, and that the latter is offensive. As a Euro-colonial term imposed on LGBTQQ Aboriginal people, whether rooted in the east or the west, berdache [sic] is not an Aboriginal word and, therefore I believe to use it is to perpetuate colonial oppression.

Traditional Two-spirit History and Roles

It is important to note that historically the two-spirit role “was not made on the basis of one’s choice of sexual partners, but rather on the basis of one’s inclination toward the occupations and modes of behaviour of the opposite sex” (Lang, 1998, p. 255). Two-spirits were not failed men or women rather; they occupied distinct gender roles and behaved according to cultural expectations for those roles (Roscoe, 1998). Roles of two-spirits varied across bands and
tribes, as did tests or rites of passage to determine if a child was two-spirit. Lang (1998) acknowledges the diverse roles filled by two-spirits:

active as healers ("shamans"), medicine men, gravediggers, conveyers of oral traditions and songs, and nurses during war expeditions; they foretold the future, conferred lucky names on children or adults, wove, made pottery, arranged marriages, and made feather costumes for dances; they had special skills in games of chance; they led scalp-dances; they fulfilled special functions in connection with the setting up of the central post for the Sun Dance; and some ethnographers have even imputed to them the specialist role of tribal prostitute. (p. 151)

Non-two-spirits would have also filled some of these roles and obligations, though two-spirits often became specialists in certain skills and as such, had roles reserved for them. These reserved roles varied between groups, and also between male and female two-spirits.

As indicated by Gilley (2006) in “most cases there were specific rites of passage performed where an individual would be recognized as a mixed gender publicly and would from that point on begin the socialization process associated with that role” (p. 67). Some First Nations implemented tests such as “the bow or the basket” test, which would have been implemented with children suspected of being two-spirit (Lang, 1998). In this test, the child would be placed in a circular structure, paper or grass, which would then be set on fire. The child would have to quickly choose one item and escape from the fire. If the child chose the item opposite to one which would typically be associated with their sex and consequent gender role, from that day forward they would be socialized in two-spirit roles (Lang, 1998).

Same-sex marriages were common among Indigenous groups. The entire group benefited from these unions as the skills of the individual were allowed to flourish. Not all tribes implemented gender roles that forced two-spirits to strictly adhere to roles typically associated with the opposite gender. Some groups such as the Lakota allowed winkte members to contribute towards both “men’s work” such as hunting, and “women’s work” such as gathering food or supplies, and making art and textiles (Lang, 1998). Unlike traditional European and Western ideals of dichotomous sex and gender roles, many First Nation groups in North America viewed this diversity as an asset to the group, embracing and revering individual uniqueness. Brown (1997) states that, “alternative gender roles were respected and [honoured], and believed to be part of the sacred web of life and society” (p. xviii). In 1982 a Crow Elder stated, “We don’t waste people the way white society does. Every person has their gift” (Roscoe, 1998, p. 4). As a result of the belief in the sacredness of an individual’s personal life quest or role, which may have come to that person through a dream, fasting or ceremony, two-spirits were readily supported and honoured in following their visions.

Euro-colonial historians and explorers often excluded documentation of the existence and importance of female two-spirits or berdache [sic]. This trend in historic documentation reflects the European male-centric and patriarchal views held by colonial historians, explorers and anthropologists (Brown, 1997). As an example, Roscoe (1998) states that “male berdaches [sic] have been documented in over 155 tribes”, yet in only “a third of these groups, [did] formal
status also [exist] for females who undertook a man’s lifestyle, becoming hunters, warriors and chiefs” (p. 7). It is not because female two-spirits did not exist in tribes where male two-spirits also lived, but rather that European historians were often indifferent to women and failed to recognize or record the importance of the roles of female two-spirits and women as a whole.

Following first contact with Europeans, the way of life of Aboriginal people living outside of typical European gender and sexual norms suddenly faced discrimination, oppression, violence and brutal murder. Despite colonizer’s efforts to conform First Nations people to heterosexuality and Christian marital customs of monogamy, the Crow remained strong in their belief that the boté were integral to the community. The Crow were known to remain so strong in supporting two-spirits that in 1879 when Indian agents attacked the last Hidasta two-spirit by stripping him, cutting off his braids and forcing him into men’s clothing, he fled to the Crow where it became the Chief’s duty to protect him (Roscoe, 1998). These and other more brutal actions taken against two-spirits were justified by the Judeo-Christian beliefs held by colonizers. Passages of the Old Testament, as discussed earlier, no doubt then and to some extent now, fuel and justify both subtle and horrific discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQ people the world over. Wilson (2007) acknowledges that Leviticus also includes a statement of God’s will that those who engage in homosexual or other sexually sinful behaviour should be driven off of and stripped of their land. Leviticus 20:24 states:

But I have said unto you, Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess it, a land that floweth with milk and honey: I am the Lord, your God, which have separated you from other people. (Holy Bible, n.d., p. 100)

As a result, colonizers who forced two-spirits to conform to European sexual and gender norms, or outright murdered them, taking their land and belongings, were supported and praised for their actions (Roscoe, 1998).

Emergence of Contemporary Two-Spirits

Emerging in 1990 at the third annual Intertribal First Nations/Native American gay and lesbian conference in Winnipeg, “two-spirit” has become widely accepted and implemented by a range of sexual and gender diverse individuals (Elhkeem, 2006). Wilson (2007) defines two-spirit as a:

self-descriptor increasingly used by Aboriginal gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Canadians who live within a traditional Aboriginal worldview. It asserts that all aspects of identity (including sexuality, race, gender and spirituality) are interconnected and that one’s experience of sexuality is inseparable from experiences of culture and community. (p. iv)

As seen in this definition the essence of the term embodies an inseparable harmony between sexuality, spirituality, race, gender and cultural identity which makes it especially appealing. As a result, the use of two-spirit by Aboriginal people to replace terms such as in LGBTQ has spread rapidly. Two-spirit has been “deployed as a panhistorical was well as a pantribal term” (Roscoe, 1998. p. 111). Identifying oneself as two-spirit is in itself an act of decolonization, as
individuals break free of essentialist and sometimes derogatory Euro-colonial terms such as berdache [sic], gay, lesbian, transgender, homosexual, or hermaphrodite. Further, acronyms such as LGBTQ create divisions between gender, sexual, cultural, spiritual and other aspects of identity. It is understood by two-spirits that one’s sexuality cannot be separated from their culture (Roscoe, 1998). Separation of various aspects of the self is not congruent with many First Nation beliefs where sexuality and life are seen as circular (Roscoe, 1998). “Two-spirit” is inclusive of men, women and intersexual individuals. It facilitates Aboriginal people uniting in a way that is inclusive to various sexual orientations, including heterosexuality, while equally recognizing traditional Aboriginal cultural beliefs and identity.

Jacobs, Thomas & Lang (1997) note that “Urban Native American gays and lesbians, as well as homosexual women and men on reservations, have long found themselves without any sources of identities that were specifically Indian/Native American, as opposed to the white lesbian and gay identities prevalent in cities” (p.111). For Aboriginal LGBTQ persons the implementation of “two-spirit” and growing use of the term has provided an opportunity to “align themselves with traditional culture and [the ability to] make a claim for acceptance that no other gay minority group in the United States can” (Roscoe, 1998. p. 111). Two-spirits can look to their cultural history and find examples of traditionally accepted and respected two-spirit role models, as well as overall respect for sexual and gender diversity. Though pre-colonial Indigenous ways of life will never be fully restored, the knowledge of traditional cultural roles and identities has the power to instil positive identities and healthy self-concepts in two-spirits. With various intersecting oppressions such as racism, homophobia, sexism, socioeconomic disparities and the potential for intergenerational difficulties, creating a positive identity that unites sexuality and culture must be nourished in two-spirits. Elhkeem (2006) states that “for many contemporary transgender, gay, or lesbian natives living in the city, identifying as two-spirit is a way to help them cope with difficult social and psychological circumstances” (¶. 19).

It is important to acknowledge that though the “two-spirit” identity has rapidly grown and been adopted by many Aboriginal LGBTQ communities and scholars, the term and its relationship to traditional cultural roles and identities has been much slower to be accepted and recognized by non-LGBTQ Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The impact of Christianity on traditional Aboriginal worldviews, outlawing of traditional ceremony, language and ways of life, and the silencing, erasing and distorting of Indigenous gender and sexual diversity in colonial historic records, has had the effect of erasing knowledge of cultural and spiritual roles of two-spirits (Roscoe, 1998). Even when historic roles of two-spirits are revealed, contemporary two-spirits still experience anxiety and fear of violence from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people heavily influenced by ideas of universal heterosexuality, homophobia and dichotomous gender roles and identities. Roscoe (1998) references the story of a young man of the Tewa-speaking Pueblo, who felt the force of homophobia from his family and community. Discovered having sex with another boy, the young man was beaten multiple times by his father and other men in the community. Even after Elders intervened “asserting to the father that his son ‘was special and would have to be protected within the reservation for the sake of the Pueblo,’” the attacks continued (Roscoe, 1998, p. 113). This type of violence against two-spirits and other sexual and gender diverse minorities are not isolated to the Pueblo. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan has its own
history of violence and discrimination, which is only recently beginning to be acknowledged and addressed by the Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) as I will discuss later in this paper.

**Saskatchewan Two-Spirits from Rural, Urban and Reserve Communities**

Recently I had the opportunity to have an informal discussion with a group of Aboriginal men and women about what it meant to them to be two-spirited in Saskatchewan. I asked why and when they adopted the two-spirit identity, and to discuss issues that affect them within their family, culture and community. I will not share in detail their stories or use names, as I have agreed to keep their identities anonymous.

The two-spirits I spoke with had lived in urban, rural and reserve locations and thus shared an understanding of the climate and culture of various geographic locations regarding two-spirited people and homophobia. Most of the two-spirits present during the discussion, including those currently living in urban centres, practiced some form of traditional spirituality and ceremony involving Elders. One man spoke of the intermingling that he has experienced within himself between Aboriginal spirituality, Christianity and elements of a non-Aboriginal world view. Rice (2005) notes that, “when Aboriginal people begin to lose their own forms of understanding they may develop what is referred to as a false consciousness,” or what Marie Battiste refers to as “cognitive imperialism” (p. 65). This two-spirit also commented on the affect Christianity has had on traditional Aboriginal ceremonies and worldviews taught by Elders (personal communications, May 21, 2009). Saskatchewan was greatly impacted by residential schools, the last one closing in 1996. As a result of the removal of Aboriginal children from their culture, home, family and language into residential schools, as well as the adoption of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal homes, it is difficult for the current generation to practice ceremonies that are free of Euro-colonial influence. One Dene woman I spoke with felt that in the North of Saskatchewan, Dene spirituality and culture has been almost completely erased and has replaced with Catholicism. The legacy of colonial missionaries bringing Christianity to the north and the pressure to assimilate to Euro-colonial beliefs and values remains strong. Another two-spirit shared in the difficulty she has had when seeking two-spirit teachings from Elders who themselves were never taught the teachings (personal communication, May 21, 2009). The outlawing of non-Christian sexual practices in Indigenous groups, as well as the tremendous partition created between generations of Indigenous people created by residential schools, and non-Aboriginal adoption, has erased much of the knowledge of traditional two-spirit teachings. The group recognized that on the occasion where an Elder has some knowledge of traditional two-spirits, they may be reluctant to pass this knowledge on for fear of stigma, shame and ridicule. This reluctance to speak of two-spirit traditions is clearly due to the influence of Christianity and homophobia, in short colonization.

Many two-spirits shared with me the homophobia that they have felt from their families after “coming out”. Some experienced terrible rejection from their families and years later continue to work to rebuild familial trust (personal communication, May 21, 2009). Though rejection by family may not be permanent, the impact can be particularly devastating if the two-spirit person has no other formal or informal supports to turn to. Familial or community rejection resulting from homophobia, combined with racism experienced in urban LBGTQ communities,
can be extremely harmful and isolating. The sense of loss combined with isolation and inadequate social or professional support, for many two-spirits may be too much to cope with. This is evident in the very high rates of alcoholism, addictions, and attempted and completed suicides of LGBTQ Aboriginal and two-spirit people (Banks, 2003; Brown, 1997). By “coming out”, a two-spirit person risks not only losing their family, which is extremely important in Aboriginal cultures, but also may risk dejection from their traditional community. Gilley (2006) suggests that if “the goal of coming out is to set oneself apart from the mainstream, then this would fail Two-spirit goals,” which are more of a desire to be “incorporated into cultural practices” and to be “brought into the circle,” not to be excluded further from it (p. 66).

Many of the two-spirit people I have spoken with, as well as literature on two-spirits, identify problematic romanticism of Aboriginal culture and two-spirits. Brown (1997) notes that the “romanticized images of American Indian people have been instituted and perpetuated by the dominant society for the last 500 years” (p. 75). Two-spirits are often thought to hold special shamanistic powers, to be medicine people and healers and to be extremely skilled in arts, hunting, bravery, ceremony and many other tasks. Though some of these special skills may have been true as with other famous historic two-spirits such was We’wha, Lozen and Osh-Tisch, these types of skills are not inherent in being two-spirited. Contemporary two-spirits who know only of the romanticized two-spirit roles, will certainly feel poorly about themselves when they realize that they do not share these touted “magical” or thought to be inherent characteristics. One two-spirit expressed concerns over the expectation that he must take on the responsibility and role of Pipe Keeper and leader of ceremonies. He feels a great deal of pressure in this regard, but hopes that as he matures, he will one day feel confident to take on these responsibilities. As somewhat of an epiphany, the same person stated that it is up to us (two-spirits) to find our place in the circle as it is not going to come from non-two-spirits in the Aboriginal community (personal communications, May 21, 2009).

My Two-Spirit Journey

I have only recently incorporated the terms Métis and two-spirit into my own identity. My mother divorced my biological father (Métis) before I was 4 years old, and remarried when I was six. My mother and step-father, though both non-Aboriginal, taught me and my sisters to work and live in many ways congruent to Métis and/or a more traditional First Nations “hunter gatherer” way of life. I don’t know that it was their intention to teach us Aboriginal worldviews, but they did intend to teach us how to grow, hunt and catch our own food while also caring for the natural environment around us.

I know very little of my Cree ancestry other than my discovery two years ago that my father’s grandmother was from Yellowquill First Nation, Saskatchewan. Since my teenage years, I have longed for a way to reconnect to my Cree ancestors. I have sought friends who are Métis or First Nations in an attempt to reconnect to my own roots. This has not always worked out as I hoped, after finding that my new friend knew little more than I of Cree or Métis culture. I have also had occasions where I found myself too fearful to come out to them about my sexual orientation. At times I am also very cognisant of the whiteness of my skin and a fear of not being accepted by darker complexioned Métis or First Nations people. Though I recognized that my
fear of rejection based on my skin colour is a ripple effect of government policies that quantify Aboriginal and First Nation race as a means to separate and prevent Aboriginal people from unifying, it remains at times difficult to forget.

Last year I participated in my first Sweat Lodge ceremony. I was very excited and nervous, but when it was all over I was filled with mixed feelings. The experience for me was a guarded one. I had not told the leader that I was two-spirit, nor how incredibly uncomfortable I felt wearing a skirt and sitting the way women are “supposed to,” which to me was awkward and even painful. Though I tried to focus on the overall experience, it frustrated me to see the men sitting separate from the women, wearing shorts and free to sit as they pleased. Since this time I have attended several events and ceremonies, and continued to be hypervigilant to the fact that I am either “honouring” my womanhood and the Elders by wearing a skirt and sitting like a woman, thus dishonouring myself. Alternately, I honour my two-spirit self by not wearing a skirt and sitting as I normally would, while still being wary of potentially disapproving Elders.

This past March I had the opportunity to meet a group of two-spirits, who welcomed me as a fellow two-spirit at the 2009 “Breaking the Silence” conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I am grateful for this acceptance and I am privileged to call them my friends. With my new two-spirit friends, I had the opportunity to sing traditional songs and play a hand drum in a group that watched and followed the lead of a respected Elder. It was a wonderful two-spirit affirming experience for me. I continue to be elated by this experience and look forward to the next time I can play and sing with my two-spirit brothers and sisters.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Though the intent of this article is to educate a wide range of human service providers, and social workers specifically, without changes to university curriculum for social workers and other human service professions, and improvements in workplace policies and climates regarding two-spirits and LGBT persons, I fear change will continue to be painfully slow. While some universities and workplaces have implemented “Positive Space” campaigns and posters supporting LGBT persons, many students and staff continue to fear the consequences of coming out in their respective institutions. Toxic environments, policies and attitudes in our universities particularly in those faculties educating future human service professionals must evolve to include, support and protect the rights of two-spirits and LGBTQ people.

Social workers often work with professionals such as police and may serve as advocates for two-spirits and LGBTQ individuals. Currently the SPS Cultural Resource Unit, along with LGBTQ members of the “Saskatoon Police Advisory Committee On Diversity” are working to build understanding, trust and communication with the SPS (SPS, 2007). The Diversity and Cultural Resource unit is working towards training and educating the entire police force on how to be more sensitive to cases involving racial, sexual and gender diversity. Hate and bias crimes committed against LGBTQ people are grossly underreported in Canada due to fear of stigmatization, as well as prior or potential re-victimization by uneducated police officers (Cst. H. Lam, personal communications, March 14, 2009). With this, the “[SPS] is working to develop mechanisms to record and track hate and bias crimes, and is working to encourage GLBT people
to file a report when they have been the victim of a hate or bias crime” (SPS, 2007). Though I respect that the SPS has begun this very important work, including the Chief of Police coming out to meet and build relations with local Saskatoon LGBT individuals at The Avenue Community Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity, much more needs to be done. One notable aspect missing from the website description of the program is recognition of two-spirit individuals. The SPS has been working to educate its members on all types of cultural and sexual diversity however this knowledge for improvement relies heavily on input from members of the public to help with issues needing to be addressed in the city. Social workers aware of two-spirits and issues affecting them in Saskatoon can help to educate and liaison with police to create an environment that is inclusive and safer for two-spirits who face issues of racism, homophobia, transphobia and/or sexism.

HIV/AIDS are also very important factors in terms of education, health and stigma. The majority of aboriginal people living with HIV/AIDS continue to live in the urban centres of Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal (Elhakeem, 2006). Many two-spirits fear “rejection and a backlash of AIDS phobia should they return home” and so “they continue to live isolated from their communities for years” (Elhakeem, 2006, ¶ 24). Social stigma aside, there also remains misperceptions regarding how the virus is transmitted. Though HIV is most easily transmitted via unsafe intravenous drug use, and unprotected male-male and male-female sexual intercourse, female-female sexual activity still poses a risk for transmitting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). There is a common misperception among female same-sex partners, as well as some health professionals, that women who have sex with women cannot transmit STIs. Many physicians simply don’t know what same-sex females do during sex and thus are not able to accurately assess risks or make educated recommendations for safer sex.

Conclusion

This article has covered a vast range of LGBTQ definitions and history including Euro-colonial and Christian beliefs, traditional North American Indigenous beliefs, and contemporary two-spirit and LGBTQ Aboriginal people, as related to social work and human service work. It is important for social workers and various other human service providers to be aware of LGBTQ history, the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal people and culture, and the realities of people who identify as two-spirit. Social workers must be sensitive to gender, sexual and cultural diversity in their practice and be aware that these and other aspects of self are all interconnected in an Aboriginal worldview. Professionals must be careful not to assert their power over clients by denying them preferred terms for their identity. The persistence of the medical profession in using the term hermaphrodite instead of intersexed, which is this demographics’ preferred term, is case in point and must be changed (GLSEN, n.d., History of dyke).

As discussed earlier, two-spirit people face multiple intersecting places of discrimination and oppression such as racism, homophobia and sexism (Brown, 1997). Social workers need to be aware of these intersecting places of oppression, while assisting two-spirit persons in identifying and developing positive coping mechanisms and nourishing resilience (Brown, 1997). Also important, social workers and mental health service providers must understand the differences between rural, reserve and urban two-spirits (Brown, 1997). Though some Aboriginal LGBTQ individuals have adopted “two-spirit” as an identity, not all LBGTQ Aboriginal people
hold such a connection between their sexuality and culture, thus it must not be assumed. Aboriginal communities vary and may or may not be, more or less accepting of two-spirits. Brown (1997) states that a “viable and religiously informed Indian community should not oppress its [two-spirit] members” (p. xviii). This is the hope for all Aboriginal communities, no matter the geographic location.

To specifically support two-spirits, social workers should consider the following non-exhaustive list of suggestions. First, they must understand that the term two-spirit indicates a person’s Aboriginal culture, spiritual beliefs and values, as well as gender and sexual identity. Secondly, though a two-spirit may have masculine and feminine qualities, it does not mean that two-spirits have two souls. Third, social workers must take care not to romanticize two-spirits or Aboriginal culture. Not all two-spirits are spiritual leaders, healers or medicine people, nor have they all had visions or gone on quests where in they arrived at their two-spirit identity. Contemporary two-spirit people may have simply come to identify as such based on their sexual attractions and identification with their culture. If non-Aboriginal “social workers are insensitive to this issue they can unknowingly exacerbate the situation as well as discourage the client from seeking help” (Brown, 1997, p. 75). Social workers must be careful not to assume gender or sexual identities of their clients. Another point to remain aware of is never to assume that because a client, service user, or co-worker is “out” in some social groups that this person is therefore “out” to everyone. Being present in any situation is important however, for social workers often burdened with heavy case loads beyond their abilities, being more than simply physically present can at times be a difficult task. Though a difficult subject, social workers also must know that suicide is preventable and often all that is needed is one reason to live, one person who is willing to listen and support a two-spirit or LGBTQ person. Social workers can show support by attending Two-Spirit and Gay Pride events, joining two-spirit groups, collaborating with public service initiatives such as with the SPS, and other political groups. Human service workers can play a vital role in ending homophobic policies in communities, schools, universities, all levels of government, public and private work sectors, and places of worship. Through involvement in education, advocacy, and/or political groups, human service workers can make a big difference in the lives of two-spirit and LGBTQ people. Support via donations to existing support groups, letter writing, pushing for more inclusive employment policies such as the inclusion of LGBTQ and two-spirits in employment equity policies, signing petitions and voting to support LGBTQ and two-spirit people, are just a few examples how social workers can make our world a more welcoming place for two-spirits and LGBTQ persons.

Across Canada there are a growing number of LGBTQ First Nations and Métis people who want to reconnect with their ancestry in establishing a sexual and cultural identity. They are doing this by beginning to identify as two-spirit and learning about two-spirit traditions. Empowered with knowledge of the history of LGBTQ people, traditional two-spirit roles and the impact of colonization on two-spirits, as well as traditional Aboriginal practices and worldviews, social workers have the potential to assist contemporary two-spirits in once again finding their place “within the circle.”
References


