

Two Spirit: Counseling Native American Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People

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The cultural world of the *Two Spirit*, the traditional role of Native individuals believed to possess both male and female spirit, is explored in both "old ways" and current-day experiences. Cultural beliefs and meanings around sexual identity are discussed from a Native perspective with recommendations for counseling Two Spirit clients.

El mundo cultural del Doble-espíritu, el rol tradicional de indígenas que se creía que poseían espíritus masculinos y femeninos, se explora en formas tradicionales y experiencias actuales. Creencias culturales y significados acerca de la identidad sexual se analizan desde una perspectiva indígena con recomendaciones para el asesoramiento de clientes Doble-espíritu.

American society is founded on the philosophical basis of Cartesian thought that classifies people, things, places, and experiences into dichotomous categories that are assigned values such as good/bad, happy/sad, right/wrong, good/evil, and so forth (Wilson, 1996). Many of our dominant social institutions such as religion, media, politics, and so on reinforce the notion of absolute dichotomies. Specifically, with regard to gender and sexuality, one is either/or, male/female, gay/straight. However, as Tafoya (1997) noted, "most Native communities tend not to classify the world into the concrete binary categories of the Western world—good/bad, right/wrong, male/female, gay/straight—but rather into categories that range from appropriateness to inappropriateness, depending on the context of the situation" (p. 2). Tafoya went on to say,

Native American concepts usually prefer circles to lines. If one takes the line of a male/female, gay/straight, and bends it into a circle, there are an infinite number of points. Just so, there are theoretically an infinite number of possible points of gender and sexual identity for an individual that can shift and differ over time and location. (p. 8)

With the Native American emphasis on the concept of the circle, within Native culture what would otherwise be perceived as opposites or dualities on a lin-

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ear continuum are thought of as actually existing in a circle that has no real beginning or end. Thus, in the traditional way, terms such as *good* and *bad* are seldom used in their pure or extreme sense, but rather are given a relative value because it is believed that one naturally implies the other. Truth lies somewhere between the two poles, rather than at one of the two poles. Using the circle, it is believed to be more important for a person to look beyond surface value, such as good or bad, in order to seek what is true based on the needs and/or context of the situation (Garrett & Myers, 1996). In the Native traditional way, an understanding of the relative nature of opposites facilitates the recognition of meaning and truth, which provides an operational means of "walking in step" with the circle, seeking purpose and direction in life.

With the circle as a model, understanding the gay and lesbian experience takes on a different dimension. The terms *gay* and *straight* no longer suggest polar opposites but rather elements of experience that fluctuate and influence each other without being dichotomous (Robinson & Watt, 2001). This would suggest that within Native American culture, people who identify as gay or lesbian might be viewed less judgmentally than in the dominant culture. Perhaps persons who identify as gay and lesbian in Native cultures experience less discrimination than they do in other cultures. If so, counseling interventions based on the alleviation of shame and fear would be inappropriate when working with Native American gay and lesbian clients. Likewise, it is necessary to understand that sexual orientation is something more than gender identification. When considering the sexual dimension, sexual orientation is something that one discovers over time, sexual behavior is what one does, and sexual identity is a label that one chooses. Each of these may influence gender identification, but it is important to understand that gender identification (or gender traits) vary for both heterosexual and homosexual people. Gender identification does not necessarily imply sexual orientation (B. Barret & Logan, 2001; Bohan, 1996). The purpose of this article is to examine the literature on counseling Native Americans alongside that of counseling gay male, lesbian, and bisexual male and female people and to identify counseling approaches that will be useful. Our starting point involves taking a look at some of the words native peoples have used to describe what others might label as gay or lesbian.

an evolution of terms

The term *berdache* that was originally applied to the Native individuals who did not seem to fit conventional European definitions of dichotomous gender roles was popularized by French traders (Schnarch, 1992). The term stuck and still persists to this day as a way of making reference to Native people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The word *berdache*, which actually finds its origins in the Arabic language, was an old Persian term for male sexual slave (Tafuya, 1997).

The word was picked up by Europeans during the Crusades, although its pronunciation and spelling changed slightly to evolve into its current form. In the 1600s, the French word *berdache* implied someone who engaged in receptive anal intercourse. Although globally applied by the dominant culture to refer to Native people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, from a traditional Native perspective, the word was and continues to be a foreign term.

Many Native people do not value individualism the same as does mainstream American culture but rather emphasize relationships, contexts, and interactions (Garrett, 1996, 1999). Therefore, in a Native perspective, the simple reduction of a person's identity according to sexual behavior is inappropriate. In recent time, much of the professional literature about this issue has used the term *Two Spirit* as a more culturally sensitive and appropriate term to describe Native Americans who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In Native culture, the role of a Two Spirit is more of a spiritual/social identity than a psychosexual identity (R. L. Barret & Barzan, 1996; Tafoya, 1997). As such, *Two Spirit* seems to be a more appropriate term for Native persons who possess "male" and "female" spirit, as opposed to the words *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *berdache*, *amazon*, or *homosexual*. This more accurately captures the overlap of ethnic/cultural identity with sexual identity within the context of a traditional Native perspective. As counselors working with a Two Spirit client, use of the proper terms goes a long way in demonstrating respect for the clients and their cultures. Thus, it is equally important to understand both historical and contemporary cultural views of Two Spirit people both from a traditional Native perspective and from a mainstream American perspective, as well as to understand many of the issues faced by these individuals as a result of cultural challenges.

the old ways: then and now

The eagle feather, which represents duality, tells the story of life. It tells of the many dualities or opposites that exist in the Circle of Life, such as light and dark, male and female, substance and shadow, summer and winter, life and death, peace and war. The eagle feather has both light and dark colors, dualities and opposites. Although one can make a choice to argue which of the colors is most beautiful or most valuable, the truth is that both colors come from the same feather, both are true, both are connected, and it takes both to fly (Garrett, 1998).

Native tradition emphasizes transformation and change through harmony and balance (Tafoya, 1997). Just as the eagle feather is held in many tribal traditions as a sacred symbol of this process, the Two Spirit was similarly regarded. Two Spirits were acknowledged and given the role of sacred persons who represent transformation and change through harmony and balance. Be aware that the term *Two Spirit* is not used by all Native culture. The Two Spirit

person is known by different names in different tribal languages: *adanvdo tali* (Cherokee), *tubasa* (Shoshone), *nadleeh* (Navajo), *bote* (Crow), *winkte* (Lakota). Although the words used to describe someone who possesses both male and female spirit differ from nation to nation, the meaning and purpose of such a person historically was very similar across tribes (Hall, 1994).

Historically, the status of the Two Spirit person was highly valued in Native communities and played a critical role in traditional Native societies (Schnarch, 1992). In a traditional Native worldview, men typically see the world from a male perspective, whereas women typically see the world from a female perspective, each perspective respectively defined by the social context of the tribe at any given point in time. On the other hand, Two Spirit people, believed to possess both male and female spirit, were looked on as having unique abilities to view both male and female perspectives and therefore to be able to see beyond the ordinary boundaries of limited human existence. In other words, as Hall (1994) commented,

Because you walk in both worlds. Because you are elements of both male and female—but you're neither. You don't fit in, you're a go-between. And consequently, it's easier for you to transcend from the physical to the spiritual realm. (p. 122)

In many Native traditions, the Two Spirit was looked on as having the ability to walk in two worlds, physical and spiritual, thereby having the ability to move between worlds to learn and teach about balance. As such, Two Spirit people were highly revered as Medicine persons, leaders, and intermediaries. They were an integral part of tribal society just like anyone else and not looked down on as being abnormal in any way. They were seen as an asset to tribal life, not a liability that would erode the community's stability.

Unfortunately, the influx of Christian missionaries, conquerors, settlers, and, later, social institutions such as Christian boarding schools, with different worldviews, differing philosophical bases, and different sets of agenda altogether, influenced and dramatically changed Native communities forever (Deloria, 1994; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Hirschfelder & Kriepe de Montano, 1993). With the introduction of Christian values and beliefs that perpetuated homophobic and "homonegative" worldviews of gender and sexual identity, the role and status of the Two Spirit declined. Moreover, this trend has continued in some Native communities.

the circles of today

Statistics show that Native Americans have the highest suicide rate, a median income that is only 50% of that for Whites, an alcoholism rate double the national average, and among the highest rates of poverty (24%) and unemployment (as high as 80%) in the nation compared with other cultural/ethnic/

racial groups (Hodgkinson, 1990; Office of Minority Health, 1990; Russell, 1997; United States Bureau of the Census, 1991). Tuberculosis and alcoholism are more than 4 times greater for Native Americans than for the general population, with accidents almost twice the general population. Problems with diabetes mellitus are 1.5% greater for Native Americans than for the general population (Indian Health Service, 1992, 1995). Similarly, gay and lesbian people present with high suicide rates, greater than average substance abuse issues, and unique health concerns (B. Barret & Logan, 2001).

Although it is important not to create a deficit model by focusing exclusively on negative factors for any population, these statistics are significant indicators of the challenges facing many tribes across the United States. However, the numbers tell only part of the story of the struggle of a people to survive and the incredible adaptability that Native Americans have shown in the face of historical adversity (Garrett, 1995, 1996, 1998; Herring, 1989). Counselors are trained professionals who encourage clients to tell their story, make sense out of their story, and actively create their story through intentional living. In working with minority clients, it is important to understand the influence of oppression on that person's experience and to assess the extent to which the process of acculturation has affected or continues to affect the client's cultural identity (Lee, 1997; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). For gay, lesbian, or bisexual Native clients, understanding both the cultural experience of meaning and the oppression resulting from multiple characteristics in the cross-section of ethnicity and sexual orientation becomes doubly important.

Of the more than 250 Native languages still spoken in the United States, approximately 168 of these languages have been identified as having terms for people who are not exclusively male or female (Tafoya, 1997). Native attitudes and beliefs tend toward much greater acceptance of and respect for personal choice than is typically found in mainstream American culture (Garrett, 1999; Tafoya, 1997). In some tribes, Two Spirit people continue to be seen as special people who have been born in balance. As such, Two Spirit people in many Native nations continue to have specific spiritual roles and responsibilities as "bridge makers" (i.e., serving in various communal roles that emphasize maintenance of harmony and balance among tribal members) within their communities (R. L. Barret & Barzan, 1996; Wilson, 1996). Just as many sexual minorities in the dominant culture leave their families and migrate to larger cities, in many Native communities where the status and role of the Two Spirit has declined, many younger Two Spirit Native people tend to seek partners and experiences off the reservation. This migration, combined with other reasons people leave the reservation, is such that today more than 60% of Native people in the United States live in metropolitan areas (Russell, 1997). Native people who live off the reservation experience an additional dimension of oppression. Casting off the stereotypical image of the "reservation Indian," many Native clients may blend with the dominant culture in terms of appearance,

mannerisms, interests, and so forth and experience some rejection from their friends and families who have stayed on the reservation (Tafoya & Wirth, 1996). Native people who identify as sexual minorities cannot be neatly described with a specific profile. Like the larger gay and lesbian community, there is abundant diversity within ethnic minorities who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Differences based on environmental and cultural context exist and must be considered when providing counseling services. For most, however, the major presenting issue, in terms of identity, is reconciling not only ethnic identity but also sexual identity. Case examples illustrate these principles.

profiles of the two spirit

The metaphor of the traditional Native dancer shows the movement, stamina, and skill central to the experience of Native people in general, with an extraordinary emphasis on the balance required to thrive and survive. For Native American sexual minority persons, the balance of multiple identities, pressures, and expectations takes on a new meaning as it relates to the metaphorical movements of the traditional Native dancer. In order to better understand the experience of these people, it is important to hear their voices, their stories, and their experiences.

ALEX

Alex, a Two Spirit Cree woman from northern Canada, grew up in a small, remote Cree community that could only be reached by boat in the summer or by plane in the winter. From the time that she was born, she was surrounded by family who taught her the traditions of her Nation. As a child, she admittedly enjoyed playing with “boys’ toys,” so her parents bought her these kinds of toys rather than stereotypical “girls’ toys.” She learned to hunt alongside her brothers and much preferred hockey, minibikes, and Hot Wheels to playing with Barbies. Once, at a powwow, at about age 10 or 11, Alex was dancing freely to the music piped over the loudspeaker when a friend danced up beside her and told her to stop dancing like a boy. Immediately, Alex stopped dancing. Soon she became self-conscious about the toys she wanted to play with. As she grew older, racism eroded her self-confidence, and she questioned her identity as a Cree, at one point leading her to avoid relatives and to be ashamed of her own Indianness. At the same time, she began to realize that she was lesbian.

A combination of internalized racism and homonegativity was so devastating to Alex that she did not finish high school. Instead, she moved to the nearest city both to escape the racism of a small town that surrounded the Cree reservation and to explore her new-found sexuality. Time passed as Alex searched for the idealized version of the “gay world” that she had seen in mov-

ies and books and on television. Keeping mostly to herself, she began to realize that the gay community was as biased against her as were many people in the mainstream culture because of her Native background. She did not find the freedom and acceptance she had hoped existed away from her home community. She managed to finish high school and supported herself with a variety of low-paying jobs and kept her sexuality secret. Later, she began a premedical study program at the local university as a nontraditional student. It was then that she decided to come out. She had even gone so far as to cut her long hair (ordinarily an act, in Cree tradition, associated with mourning) in order to fit in better. However, she still could not find a positive place for herself in the predominantly White gay scene. Luckily, the support of family, culture, and spiritual traditions helped her through what she describes as a difficult period. When Alex came out to her parents, they told her that they already knew but that they respected her enough not to interfere with her coming to that realization for herself. According to Alex, "I became empowered by who I was, rather than disempowered by who I wasn't" (Wilson, 1996, p. 313).

CLYDE

Clyde, a Two Spirit Shoshone–Metis man from southeastern Idaho, was raised by his grandmother in a one-room cabin on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. On long winter nights, Clyde's grandmother would tell him coyote stories beside the fire. During the summer, Clyde spent much of his time roaming the landscape with a group of boys. On one of those days, when he was 11 years old, Clyde discovered his attraction to other males when his best friend put his arms around Clyde in a passionate embrace, awakening in him a desire and passion he knew was permanent.

Later, Clyde left home to find himself and to get away from a place where "everybody knows everybody's business" (Hall, 1994, p. 118). Part of this journey consisted of reconciling his identity as a Native person; part of this journey consisted of reconciling his identity as a gay man. Eventually, Clyde moved back to the Fort Hall reservation where he served as magistrate and attorney. As one who bridges the world of male and female, Clyde perpetuates the traditions and customs of his people, partly by continuing the legacy of the *tubasa*, or Two Spirit, tradition of his nation. He knows firsthand the double challenge faced by individuals who are Native and gay. "The way to honor oneself and others is to lead a spirit-filled life," Clyde says (Hall, 1994, p. 118). His motto? "Hang loose and rattle" (Hall, 1994, p. 118).

implications for counseling

In mainstream American culture, a person's identity is often performance based; in other words, identity is determined by what people do and how well they

do it (Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, & Robbins, 1995; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). By contrast, a person's identity in traditional Native culture centers around one's being, in other words, who one is, especially in terms of family, clan, and tribal nation (Garrett & Pichette, 2000).

Both Alex and Clyde searched for a place that would accommodate their identity, and in that search they evolved in terms of who they were. What they learned was that the places that would acknowledge them in terms of identity were within their Native communities, not on the outside. Indeed, the selection of these two real-life case scenarios is intended as an illustration of how becoming reconnected with one's cultural background was the key to healthy identity integration. This, however, may not be the reality for all Native clients and, in fact, may not be the desirable path for all Native clients as a way of reconciling or developing a positive self-identity on multiple levels. Just as diversity exists between racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, so too does diversity exist within racial, ethnic, and cultural groups and subgroups. "Getting back to the rez" may or may not be the answer for any given Native gay or lesbian person. So how do we know what the answer is?

For many Native people, identity just is; finding safe and supportive places to express their identity may become the challenge. In counseling Two Spirit clients, it is important to be sensitive to how they express their identities and to the meanings that they attribute to various dimensions of their identities. The implications of this worldview mean that counselors must pursue the issue of sexual orientation and sexual identity carefully. For example, a Native client may not define him- or herself as gay or lesbian or bisexual, yet at the same time they are involved in gay or lesbian relationships (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000). Another pitfall can be a tendency to classify individuals by appearance alone without further information as to what their family situation is or was, where they grew up, and how they see their own sexuality and sexual identity. Exploring the following concepts with Native clients allows the counselor to assess these dimensions. In clinical work with Native people who see themselves as Two Spirits, the following questions (not necessarily posed in question format) will be useful:

- Where are you from?
- Where do you live now?
- What are the experiences that have brought you from where you were to where you are now, both literally and metaphorically?
- What does that mean to you, and how does that specifically get played out in your life?
- Have you come out, and if so, what was that experience like, and how has it shaped who you are right now; if you have not come out, then what is that experience like for you at this point?
- How do family and community of origin play into your life experience to this point, and how will they shape who you are becoming?

These are just a few examples of open-ended, unobtrusive issues that can be explored in counseling. These are not meant for the most part to be specific or exclusive to gay, lesbian, or bisexual Native clients as a way of maintaining respect and noninterference (Garrett, 1996). They are, however, intended to provide the client with open spaces from which to share what they wish to share about their experience, their identity, and their goals for counseling. In order to successfully facilitate this, it is equally important for the counselor, whether gay or straight, to explore how he or she understands his or her own sexuality, as well as any biases in terms of race, gender, or sexuality. For Two Spirit clients, all of these dimensions play into the ability of the counseling process to work successfully.

There are additional issues that might be anticipated when providing counseling services to Two Spirit clients. The recommendations below highlight some of these issues.

1. Pay particular attention to the issue of family when working with Two Spirit clients. Not all Two Spirits will have the experience reported by Alex. Helping Native clients carefully examine the issues in their family relative to coming out is important. In Native tradition, there is a strong emphasis on honoring one's obligation with regard to becoming a parent. In the gay community, there is an emerging awareness that parenting is an option regardless of sexual orientation. It might be helpful in working with a childless Two Spirit client to explore the idea of becoming a foster or adoptive parent or becoming a more involved uncle or aunt to nephews and nieces (R. L. Barret & Robinson, 2000; Tafoya & Wirth, 1996). Not having a biological child of one's own does not necessarily preclude that person's ability or opportunity to be a parent. In many tribes, the oldest maternal uncle serves as the child's primary disciplinarian. Also, a part of many tribal traditions is the adoption of children, either formally or informally ("claiming someone").

2. The use and abuse of alcohol and other substances are often coping strategies of self-medication for both the Native and gay cultures. If depression or substance dependence is an issue for that person, then it should be addressed in a culturally sensitive way while helping the client deal with the suffering that often lies at the heart of such symptomatic problems (Perez et al., 2000). Some recovery programs for gay and lesbian people might not have an awareness of the unique situation that Two Spirits face. Carefully questioning programs prior to making a referral is essential. Two Spirits dealing with two or three minority identities may find themselves very uncomfortable in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or other recovery settings designed primarily for the majority culture.

3. Emphasize the spiritual nature of homosexuality over its sexual component. Many Native Two Spirit people may or may not be aware of this tradition of the Two Spirit, and the counselor is in an ideal spot to educate or assist

the client in finding the appropriate resources about this aspect of Native life. Likewise, the clients' families may not be familiar with the history and place of Two Spirits. Using the sources in the reference list and referring the client to appropriate Internet sites may begin a process of exploration that can help the client enhance his or her identity. One of the therapeutic goals of referring clients to resources such as this is to help that person create connections for him- or herself wherein the freedom to be oneself openly exists. Activities, such as Two Spirit gatherings (*naraya*) that feature dances, create a sense of community and can have a healing effect (Hall, 1994). Attending one of these celebrations may help the client find the larger Two Spirit community and find a stronger sense of him- or herself as a Two Spirit.

4. Check a tendency to stereotype all Native gay male, lesbian, and bisexual male and female clients as identifying as Two Spirit. Remember the circle has infinite possibilities. Some clients may find this concept and practice useful; others may express little interest in pursuing it. For many Native people, there have been many cultural changes from the traditions of old to the traditions of today, incorporating adaptations in order to survive in a changing world. Therefore, it is important to understand clients' level of acculturation and what specific components of their identity means to them, culturally and personally (see Garrett & Pichette, 2000, for further information on assessing level of acculturation in Native clients).

5. Finally, as with all clients, acknowledge the enormous diversity within all cultures. Both Native people and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have suffered deeply as a result of negative stereotyping and oppression (B. Barret & Logan, 2001). Listen carefully to the client and explore his or her experience without projecting your own notions of what it might mean to be Native and gay. There is no one path toward effective counseling with Native gay men and lesbians. Some may understand their sexual orientation in ways derived from the majority White Christian culture; others may choose to use the information provided in this article as a path to greater self-awareness, liberation, and an opportunity to be of service to all.

conclusion

An underlying principle when working with Native gay and lesbian clients is to develop an awareness of one's own prejudices and biases. The question is not "Are you prejudiced against gay people?" but "How do your often unconscious prejudices and biases about gay and lesbian people influence your counseling?" As we learn to liberate ourselves from the culturally predetermined confines of perception, we learn to do the same with our Two Spirit clients in order to help them have the courage to make choices about who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming.

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