**Big Idea Final Paper: Two-Spirited Indigenous Peoples**

Two-spirited Indigenous peoples, as defined by the co-director of Two-spirited People of Manitoba Inc., are individuals that “assume cross- or multiple-gender roles, attributes, dress and attitudes for personal, spiritual, cultural, ceremonial or social reasons.” (Albert McLeod as cited in Monkman, 2016). Gender variance and two-spirited peoples were often celebrated in traditional Indigenous communities and “gender roles were fluid in pre-colonial societies. Words to describe up to six different gender variants, beyond the binary of male and female, have been found in 155 indigenous nations of North America” (Klassen, 2014). Today, two-spirited Indigenous peoples are all too often victims of discrimination from society and their own communities. This can be attributed to the contact Indigenous groups had with settlers. Colonial contact with Indigenous groups and the Western views settlers imposed on Indigenous communities has lead to the violence and alienation that two-spirited peoples face today.

Prior to colonial contact, Indigenous groups were accepting of two-spirited identities and “research and oral histories reflect widespread respect and honour for Two-Spirit people... the roles of Two-Spirit individuals carried unique responsibilities that were vital to the nation’s’ collective well-being and survival, including as teachers, knowledge keepers, healers, herbalists, childminders, spiritual leaders, interpreters,
mediators and artists” (Hunt, 2016). Elder Mae Louise Campbell notes that in traditional Indigenous societies “it was quite an honour to have a child that was two-spirited to be born in the community” (Monkman, 2016). Two-spirited children were celebrated in the form of ceremonies and rituals that “ensured the child was truly two-spirit” (Laframboise and Anhorn). One such ceremony placed a child thought to be two-spirited in an enclosure that was set on fire and the child was given the choice of grabbing an item to save from the flames. If the item the child chose was item typically used by the opposite gender, the child was declared to be a two-spirit (Laframboise and Anhorn). As described by two-spirit Laurie McDonald, such tests were to see if one gravitated to “the bow or the basket” (Xtra Online, 2014). As seen by the important roles and ceremonies for two-spirited Indigenous peoples in pre-colonial societies, two-spirits were once revered, accepted and celebrated in their communities.

In modern society, postcolonial contact, two-spirited Indigenous peoples are now victims of violence, misunderstanding and alienation at the hands of both settler society and their own communities. It has been reported that “two-spirited people are more likely to experience violence than heterosexual First Nations and they are twice as likely to experience assault (including physical assault, sexual assault, and assault with a weapon) than GLBT people in the general population” (NAHO, 2012). One such example of violence against two-spirited peoples is the story of Fred Martinez, whose story is highlighted in the film “Two Spirits”. Martinez, a Navajo two-spirited teen, was killed in June 2001 in Colorado. Martinez was beaten to death by a peer, Shaun
Murphy, who did not accept his feminine gender expression, such as wearing makeup and female clothing. Murphy beat Martinez to death with a large rock in a remote area, his skull was caved and his body barely identifiable. Martinez became one of the youngest hate crime victims in modern history (Two Spirits, 2012). Two-spirited Indigenous peoples also experience misunderstanding and societal judgement. An example of this is a Sun News broadcast that aired in 2016 in which newscasters Alex Pierson and Sarah MacIntyre discuss the topic of “two-spirited issues”. The women demonstrate ignorance about two-spirited individuals as they make fun of the term “two-spirited” and compare it to trivial concepts such as moodiness and the duality of horoscope signs (LGBTQ Canada in the Media, 2016). This is a current instance of society’s refusal to understand or acknowledge two-spirit identity, but not the only. Two-spirited Indigenous peoples are also denied a unique position within the LGBTQ community. Michelle Cameron notes that “two-spirited people have typically been seen only as an add-on or subset of other queer categories like bisexual or transexual, rather than their culturally specific and unique selves” (Cameron, 2005). A lack of acceptance from society and alienation from their own communities can also put two-spirited Indigenous peoples at an increased risk of committing suicide. Researchers note that “two-spirited people experience oppression and exclusion from three potential sources: their First Nations community because they are two-spirited, GLBT communities because they are First Nations and mainstream communities for both reasons” (Brotman et al. as cited in NAHO, 2012). These factors also demonstrate the intersectionality between being Indigenous and also being a member of the LGBTQ
community. These two facets of a two-spirit’s identity interact to put them in a position to experience increased feelings of isolation and societal judgement compared to those who just identify as LGBTQ or Indigenous. One study evaluating the suicide risk of two-spirited teens found that “two-spirited adolescent males were twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to have thought about or attempted suicide” (NAHO, 2012).

Two-spirited Indigenous peoples are faced with many issues in modern society including rejection from their own communities and a refusal from society to recognize their identity. These instances of discrimination and prejudice can compromise the safety of two-spirited peoples and in the worst case scenario lead to suicidal thoughts.

Colonial contact drastically changed Indigenous societies’ treatment of two-spirited peoples, due to imposed views of heteronormativity and cisnormativity and the forceful introduction of religion. It is argued that the “prevalence of homophobia, including violent rejection and isolation from family and community found within Indigenous communities is, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon and a symptom of colonization that goes against traditional cultural norms” (Plaut and Kirk, 2012). It is noted by experts that “imposing a totalizing measure of modern sexuality, is the baseline for settler-colonial society.” (Uzendoski, 2013). Thus, settlers worked to correct Indigenous abnormalcy and reiterate what was considered normal in terms of gender expression and sexuality. It can be said that European settlers “manipulated native ideas about gender for their own purposes” (Slater and Yarborough, 2012) as settlers wanted Indigenous peoples to follow and conform to European expectations of
cisnormativity and heterosexuality. One way of accomplishing this shift in beliefs was through the Indian Act...and other assimilative policies and processes, Aboriginal people were forced to follow a heteropatriarchal model of marriage in order to gain rights and status" (Barker as cited in Hunt, 2016). Residential schools were also instrumental in the colonial agenda they were “very methodical in terms of reprogramming how indigenous people saw gender and identity” (Monkman, 2016). According to two-spirit Laurie McDonald, children in residential schools who identified as two-spirited experienced “abuse and...effects [that] were more intense” (Xtra Online, 2014) and had to undergo the struggle of trying to hide and suppress their identity. Residential schools segregated children based on biological sex, reinforcing the gender binary, and taught children how to perform tasks that were congruent with their birth sex. “Strict divisions between girls and boys through European dress and hairstyles” (Slater and Yarbrough, 2012) was another tactic used by residential schools to reinforce gender norms and expected means of gender expression. Religion also played a large role in reshaping Indigenous views on gender and sexuality. The National Aboriginal Health Organization argues that “when the Europeans came... they brought with them their religions, their values and their way of looking at the world, which adversely affected Aboriginal communities including [their] sexual expression. [Indigenous peoples] have come to believe that two-spirited First Nations people are disgusting and perverse” (NAHO, 2012). Researchers at the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission also acknowledge the role that religion played in shaping Indigenous views on sexuality and gender, they explain that upon seeing
two-spirited Indigenous peoples “Christian colonists found this to be abnormal, for it was not a part of their vision of the world. The book of Leviticus in the Holy Bible explains to Christians why they ought to condemn the person that today is called gay. At the beginning of colonization Aboriginal people did not share this perception…” (FNQLHSSC). Using religion that reinforced homophobic views and the gender binary, colonists were able to instill these close minded views into Indigenous populations which lead to their rejection of two-spirited peoples, peoples who they once revered. Religion, highly gendered policies and acts, and the residential school system all demonstrate the role that settler’s played in turning Indigenous peoples against two-spirited people's.

To address the issues that two-spirited Indigenous peoples experience with isolation and rejection, several strategies are suggested by experts who study two-spirited peoples and by two-spirited peoples themselves. The first is the introduction of two-spirited peoples, identities and issues into LGBTQ communities and fostering discussions about “Queer Studies” and “Native Studies”. This concept is referred to as “double-weaving” and was conceived by two-spirit Qwo-Li Driskill. Driskill’s concept of doubleweaving “[invites] an alliance between queer studies and Native studies that can interrupt the unseeing of Native people that serves to bolster the colonial project” (Driskill, 2010). Driskill’s suggested alliance also serves to address the absence of Indigenous peoples in most discussions pertaining to “queer” identities. Another strategy suggested by two-spirit, Métis writer, Kai Minosh targets Indigenous
communities and what they can do to help combat the “ostracism and isolation” (Minosh, 2016) that their two-spirited members face. One of Minosh’s suggestions is to encourage Indigenous communities to include two-spirited peoples in ceremonies, as they once were given important ceremonial honours. Minosh says that “even if no one remembers what kind of roles two-spirit people once had in ceremony, [they] can still create places today where two-spirit people are valued parts of ceremony” (Minosh, 2016). Also an important suggestion is to open up discussions and talk about topics related to two-spirit identity that Indigenous communities may be uncomfortable with. Lenard Monkman, an Anishinaabe writer for CBC, voices that “Indigenous communities need to begin talking about gender and sexuality” (Monkman, 2016). Similarly, Minosh emphasizes a need for Indigenous communities to talk about the history of two-spirited people in order to demonstrate that they are not a recent phenomenon and “have always been integral parts of [their] communities” (Minosh, 2016). Driskill, Minosh and Monkman all reinforce the importance of opening up a dialogue about two-spirited Indigenous peoples both within and outside of Indigenous communities. Such discussions would be beneficial in promoting the acceptance and recognition of the unique aspects of two-spirit identity.

As explored, two-spirited Indigenous peoples have gone from being revered members of their communities to being alienated from both settler and Indigenous societies. This drastic shift in the treatment of two-spirited peoples can be attributed to colonial contact and the gendered, binary, cisnormative views that were reinforced as a
result. Despite being victims of violence, alienation and rejection, experts believe that these negative effects of colonialism can be counteracted by opening up more discussions about two-spirited peoples, gender and sexuality which will hopefully restore respect and understanding towards these once celebrated individuals.
References


XtraOnline. (2014, November 5). *Residential schools’ impact on two-spirit people* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzT2ed8xRIU