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### Native American Two Spirits

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### **Native American Two Spirits**

In this paper, the author reviews research on the history and health implications of Native American Two Spirits. The need for research with Native American Two Spirit cultural groups is also emphasized. Within the approximate 250 Native languages currently spoken in the United States, more than 150 of these include terms for those who do not identify as exclusively male or exclusively female (Tafoya & Wirth, 1996). Over 200 different Native American specific terms have been identified (Roscoe, 1987). In an attempt to cover a vast array of gendered statuses and expressions, while also serving to reconnect Native individuals and tribes with traditional views about gender and sexuality (Walters, Evans-Campbell, Simoni, Ronquillo, & Bhuyan, 2006), the Northern Algonquin word *niizh manitoag* (two-spirits) was agreed upon and adopted in 1990, at the third annual spiritual gathering of gay and lesbian Native people (Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni, & Walters, 2004; Driskill, 2004). The term, “Two-Spirit,” was chosen as an umbrella term meant to include all Native GLBTQ individuals.

Historically, uniqueness was most often honored (Brown, 1997). Each individual played a specific role in their family, community, and the natural course of life. This role, that may or may not include gender, was often viewed as an individual’s spiritual calling. Not only were Two Spirit individuals most often seen as integral members of the community, in many Tribal Nations they were held in high regard and assigned valued roles. Many tribal traditions, including the acceptance of Two Spirits, have largely been lost in the process of colonization (Balsam, et al., 2004).

Not surprisingly, as Two Spirit individuals face multiple forms of oppression and adversity, they have been shown to be at greater risk of negative health outcomes than either LGBT European Americans or heterosexual Native Americans (Balsam, et al., 2004; Lehavot, Walters, & Simoni, 2009). For example, in a study investigating health and abuse in lesbian, bisexual, and Two Spirit

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) women, Lehavot et al. reported alarming rates of abuse. The authors referred to Two Spirit Native women as being in “triple jeopardy.” In their sample, 78% of the women had been physically assaulted and 85% had been sexually assaulted. AIAN women who have been assaulted report poorer physical and mental health than do some men living with the terminal illness, HIV (Lehavot et al.). In addition to higher rates of physical and sexual assaults, Two Spirit individuals report higher rates of childhood abuse and historical trauma within their families (Balsam, et al.). These rates are nearly twice that reported by other AIAN participants. Balsam, et al. also report significantly higher rates of illicit drug use and alcohol consumption by Two Spirit individuals.

Native Americans are severely under-represented in psychological research. Even within Native American studies, Two Spirit individuals are noticeably absent despite their increased risk for health problems (Balsam, et al., 2004; Driskil, 2004; Lehavot et al., 2009). There are no studies that compare Two Spirit individuals with heterosexual Natives, and none evaluating coping mechanisms, buffers, or treatments that may help these individuals build resilience in the face of difficulties (Balsam, et al.). Research seeking to understand pathways to health and wellness for Two Spirits would also help to illuminate treatment methods (Lehavot et al.).

Driskill (2004) argues for Two Spirit research to come from a place that wholly recognizes Native American culture and traditions and to separate this work from that of mainly White Queer studies. Driskill (2010) explains that including Two Spirits within the small fraction of “other” minority ethnic groups listed as participants in mainstream Queer studies contributes to the *unseeing* of Native Americans. This makes Native Two Spirit struggles and journeys quite distinct from other LGBT movements. By reclaiming identities once normal to Natives, Two Spirits are balancing power dynamics and restoring traditional beliefs.