THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO-SPIRIT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

by

Rishona J. Slutchuk

A Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Native Studies

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THE PERSPECTIVE OF TWO-SPIRIT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

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A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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The Perspective of Two-Spirit Aboriginal People

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University of Manitoba

2002
Abstract

Historically, *berdache* were seen in a negative light in both Aboriginal and European cultures. Recently, the term *two-spirit* was chosen to identify these people thereby creating a positive spiritual path bridging the historical experience with the contemporary. In the modern sense, the term *two-spirit* has come to be seen as inclusive while allowing people to use the term in a way that fits their own personal ties.

This thesis will illustrate a few of the ways the term *two-spirit* can be used. It will also examine the historical and contemporary importance of the term. It will focus primarily on contemporary *two-spirit* Aboriginal people’s opinions and provide a closer look at how they choose to define and identify themselves. The journey that *two-spirit* people have taken to get where they are now will also be examined. Further, a closer look at their history and the reclaiming of their voice, as well as qualitative interviews with people who identify as *two-spirited*, will be presented. In the final analysis, there is much more to identifying oneself as *two-spirited* than just speaking the words. It is a process, a journey and, for some, a dream. *Two-spirit* Aboriginal people were chosen by their Creator to walk in both worlds – the physical and spiritual and they were chosen to mediate between men and women. *Two-spirit* is a positive word with a beautiful and harmonious balance that encompasses all people and it has a definite place within Aboriginal culture.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Two-spirit Aboriginal people may not be who we think they are. In recent years, the term has been used to describe Aboriginal people who identify as gay or lesbian. However, not everyone who identifies as two-spirit is, in fact, part of the gay or lesbian lifestyle. The confusion over the term can be traced back to the arrival of the Europeans in North America and their misinterpretation of the people they met. The lack of understanding of Aboriginal customs and beliefs inevitably created stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes. As well, the language barrier made it most difficult to transfer thoughts and ideas. The language made it most difficult to appropriately speak about this phenomenon in the English language. The original term, *berdache*, is a European invention used to describe what the early Europeans perceived as a deviant role within Aboriginal societies. Europeans thought that the two-spirit people were homosexuals and cross-dressers because they saw a man wearing women's clothing or a man living with another man and they perceived this as deviant behaviour. Therefore, they postulated that these people were homosexuals and cross-dressers without inquiry into the reality of the situation.

Historically, *two-spirit* people were spiritual leaders, matchmakers, visionaries, artisans and role models for the rest of the community. Sexuality and sexual orientation were only a small component of the two-spirit lifestyle. Modern two-spirit Aboriginal people have chosen the term *two-spirit* to separate themselves from the derogatory terms used in the past. They, in effect, have distanced themselves from past experiences with a
fresh term that incorporates the spiritual component that has been misplaced for so many years.

Prior to 1990, the term used was *berdache*, a term used today almost exclusively by anthropologists to describe “an American Indian phenomenon” (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p. 603). The word originates in the Arabic language from the word *berdag* and the Persian word *bardaj* (bardah). Courouvé (1982) reports that by the 16th century, at least three languages – Italian, Spanish and French – had borrowed the Arabic term to denote passive male-male sexual intercourse (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p.603).

The term *berdache* can be defined as a passive male partner in a homosexual relationship (Fulton and Anderson, 1992; Epple, 1998). This term is derogatory when applied to historical Aboriginal people; it is and was imposed upon them, was not defined as such by them, and is similar in connotation to the term “savage”.

Aboriginal people had their own terms and their own method of describing what was sacred and spiritual. These terms were far removed from the term *berdache*, and sexuality and sexual orientation may not have been included in their definition. Inevitably, the academic use of the term *berdache* caused the focus of the research to shift solely on to the sexual components surrounding the term.

Early literature on the berdache listed the qualifying characteristics possessed by the subjects, and homosexuality was the prominent factor. However, when the term *two-spirit* came into use, it replaced and took on everything that the term *berdache* stood for, including its assigned characteristic of homosexuality. Current literature suggests that the term was actually chosen by Aboriginal people to separate themselves from the previous
derogatory connotations of the European term berdache and to escape negative sexual perception.

Before colonization, people who became a part of the berdache did so because of a dream or vision undertaken to develop a supernatural gift. This ability was not defined by gender, and often the berdache could fill any male or female role during ceremonies. They were also often mediators between male and female spirits (Callender and Kochems, 1983; Clark, 1984; Williams, 1986; Roscoe, 1995).

After colonization, Aboriginal people who were granted this role and title feared for their lives and were often forced to live underground and to lead secret lives in order to protect themselves from possible execution by white settlers (Two-spirit People of the First Nations, 1997). Europeans imposed their male and female roles upon the Aboriginal people based on the teachings of Christianity. It is not surprising that, as a result, researchers found that the berdache seemed to vanish from many communities. In the last few decades, by means of political movements demanding social justice, Aboriginal people have commenced the long process of healing. At the same time, one specific group of Aboriginal people decided that it was no longer appropriate to hide from the reality of who they were that and they could feel comfortable again with being a two-spirited Aboriginal person. They recognized that embracing their lives as two-spirit people included embracing their history, which included the term berdache.

An intriguing aspect of the berdache is the spiritual component, a complex subject. It refers to a sophisticated understanding of the balance of the physical and emotional concepts surrounding life and death. People who recognize themselves as spiritual have a connection that allows them to respect and to be respected by themselves, by others, by
elements such as wind, fire, rain and properties such as earth, water, rocks and a greater being. In the literature there are, unfortunately, only clues and hints that point to this side of the berdache. In particular, researchers commented briefly on the supernatural gift that was seen as highly prestigious in some Aboriginal communities.

In order to overcome some of the negative interpretations, they selected a new title which would redefine themselves and, at the same time, shed any previous derogatory elements; the term they chose was *two-spirited*. The literature also shows that the purpose of the new term was to reclaim the spiritual side of “two-spiritedness”. Despite this, homosexuality continues to dominate the definition.

The concept of *two-spirited* recognizes people who house both the male and female spirit within themselves. These are individuals who have come to identify with this term and have taken it as their own. The concept also includes people who recognize themselves as the former berdache. Besides a recognition of the spiritual, another reason behind the establishment of the new term was to commence the healing process by taking control of their spiritual being and learning their own history. As well, an attempt was made to separate themselves from a non-Aboriginal perspective. This was the people’s choice with their voice.

The recent literature on *two-spirited* people ignores references to the spiritual aspect, and is closely related to the literature on the berdache, while the strong emphasis on homosexuality remains. However, recent literature is also more positive and there is less reference to deviant and submissive roles.

The question that arises is, do all Aboriginal people who see themselves as gay or lesbian identify as two-spirited? If yes, do they know their history and what it means to
identify as a two-spirit Aboriginal person? The previous literature on the berdache that documented sacred roles seems hidden in the term two-spirit. A preliminary interview with a person who defines himself as two-spirited heightened the awareness that the spiritual component had been misplaced; he is also unsure as to why homosexuality is so predominant (Interview #1, 1999). The subject of the interview does not see homosexuality as a defining characteristic, nor is he a homosexual. This is the voice of an Aboriginal Elder who has defined himself as two-spirited since he was an adolescent.

Contemporary two-spirit Aboriginal people are found in many places. This is the beauty behind the new definition of two-spirit. It is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and was brought forth by Aboriginal people themselves. The wheel is not being reinvented, just re-oiled. Inevitably, it is up to Aboriginal people themselves to determine how they identify as two-spirit. This thesis allows the Aboriginal voice to be heard in the literature with their own definitions. It demonstrates the reality that people are more complex than how they identify sexually, and that there is a spiritual component to their lives.

For years researchers have written about Aboriginal people. This thesis will act in conjunction with Aboriginal people. With the permission of Aboriginal two-spirit participants, I will ask them how they identify as two-spirited? The term is an inclusive term, which therefore allows anyone to identify as such using their own guidelines. The term leaves room for people to take from it what works for them in order to make a place for themselves. An interesting component is that historically Aboriginal spirituality has been misplaced from this term; however, it will be replaced with the aid of the voices of the present generation. Doing this, sheds a positive light on how two-spirited people think about themselves.
This thesis will also illustrate the lack of Aboriginal voices in historical literature on the berdache. The historical literature will also clearly point to the derogatory and deviant descriptions that were placed upon two-spirit Aboriginal people. Another component of this project will examine two-spirit organizations and other organizations that are affiliated with two-spirit Aboriginal people. For example, every year, a two-spirit gathering is hosted and held in North America by Aboriginal people who identify as such. These gatherings are increasingly popular and are a safe environment for two-spirit people to connect with one another on a sacred and spiritual level. This information is imperative in understanding the lives of two-spirit people today. In order to put forth a variety of definitions from the many people who choose to identify themselves as two-spirit, all the variables must be examined. The examination will include the historical identities of two-spirit Aboriginal people, the transition to the term two-spirit from berdache and the organizations that are affiliated with two-spirit Aboriginal people. Every two-spirit Aboriginal person has a story to tell; their feelings are real, how they got to the place they are in is real and, most importantly, their story is worth telling.
Chapter 2: Historical Identities Associated with the Aboriginal Berdache

Since the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent, the role of the two-spirit person within Aboriginal culture has been the source of much speculation, debate and intrigue among scholars. Despite an abundance of literature on the topic, few researchers have successfully captured the totality of this role. European scholars, ranging from 16th century Christian missionaries to contemporary ethnographers, have attempted to describe the definition, the history, the writings about, and the numerous historical identities associated with the Aboriginal two-spirit person. However, despite the diverse backgrounds of and the sheer number of writers/researchers, this focus has fluctuated somewhere between sexuality and spirituality. In order to gain an understanding of the many different interpretations that researchers have imposed on Aboriginal two-spirit people, it is imperative to comprehend the cultural biases in the literature, the overemphasis on sexuality, the discussion in the literature on spirituality, as well as the path undertaken to become a berdache.

In Western European culture, a same sex relationship is defined as being between two men or two women. In the Aboriginal culture, a relationship that is between a male two-spirit and a male is not viewed as a same sex relationship because the two-spirit is considered a separate gender. The two-spirit partner belongs to an alternative, or mixed gender, neither man nor woman (cf. Calender and Kochems 1983; Williams 1986a, 1986b; Lang 1990; Jacobs and Cromwell 1992; all sources in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997). Therefore, a same sex relationship in many Native American cultures, at least traditionally, is not necessarily considered a same gender relationship. This can be interpreted to mean
that a relationship between a male two-spirit and a man or a female two-spirit and a woman may be seen as homosexual on the physical level but not on the level of gender¹.

If you are a man and you are having a sexual relationship with a two-spirit, you are not having sex with another man, you are having sex with a two-spirit person. The same is true for a female having a sexual relationship with a two-spirit person. This means that the partners of a two-spirit are never having a same sex relationship because they are not having sex with the same gender (Terry Tafoya in Levy, Beauchemin, and Vogel in Jacobs, Thomas and Lang 1997). Choosing or deciding which sexual relationships are culturally acceptable depends on how each varying Aboriginal group defines gender and sexual behaviour.

One of the main objectives here is to thematically sort through the historical literature according to the limited information that is available. It is clear that sexuality was a focus, but the question that needs to be answered is “why?” Why was the focus not placed upon spirituality and what was involved in the spiritual side of two-spirit people? Describing and analysing the literature on the subject helps to reinforce the argument that there was an alternate focus; that spirituality was missing and that two-spirit is the ideal term for the present. Most importantly, understanding the literature gives the appropriate grounding to understand the path that was taken to come full circle back to a spiritual focus.

The majority of previous writings on two-spirit Aboriginal people, or the former berdache, focuses extensively on the sexual or gender aspects of the term. These writings deliberate on whether berdache are men, women, or a separate gender, with whom they

¹ For the purpose of this project gender refers to the role that someone plays and is not necessarily the European construction of the term gender, which is based on one’s physiological sex.
are having sexual relations, as well as the varying roles and dress. From Jonathon Katz (1976), an historical researcher who compiled the earliest references about Native homosexuality, to Will Roscoe (1998), who documented contemporary Aboriginal two-spirit culture, the writing on Aboriginal two-spirit people nearly always reverts to sexuality. The role of the two-spirit person, after years of such one-sided referencing, has become clouded. Inevitably, the true essence of the role is obscured by years of eurocentric, sexually-oriented analysis.

The variance in labels, definitions and terminology surrounding the concept of two-spirit Aboriginal people is a clear indication of the complexity of the issue, as well as the sexual focus. Over the past decade, Aboriginal people have identified themselves as two-spirit. This was a collective decision made to separate themselves from the label berdache that they felt was inaccurate and offensive. In effect, the term two-spirit is a “contested compromise to move forward the debate in eliminating culturally inappropriate terms and includes a wide variety of Native persons: cross-dressers, transvestites, lesbians, gays, transgendered or those otherwise ‘marked’ as alternatively gendered” (Jacobs & Thomas, 1993, as cited in Epple, 1998, p.274).

However, something was missing in this sexually-focussed berdache terminology; Aboriginal people felt they were more than sexual beings and that the spiritual component of the role had been displaced. Despite this realization, even in recent literature, the term berdache appears frequently. It is therefore impossible to give an historical overview of two-spirit people without examining the history of the berdache. To early writers and researchers, the sexuality of the berdache was often depicted as a foreign, deviant, or even supernatural phenomenon. Due to the variety of people putting forth definitions on a
group of people who held sacred and spiritual roles in their communities, it is very difficult to know which definition is most suitable or accurate.

The term berdache refers to special gender roles in Native American cultures that anthropologists have interpreted and described as ceremonial transvestism, homosexuality, and gender variance/multiple genders (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997; Lang, 1998). Epple (1998), a more recent researcher, states that the term berdache is a "catch all term that ethnographers use to describe males who in some way take on at least some of the garments, occupations and/or sexual partners culturally prescribed for what Anglo-Europeans might call the opposite sex" (p.269). This type of relationship was attacked and described as "sodomy" by the Europeans. It was a concept framed by European ideals, the collapse of Aboriginal religious traditions, and the reluctance or inability of contemporary Aboriginal informants to describe the position of two-spirit Aboriginal people in precolonial life (Fulton & Anderson, 1992, p. 604).

To further illustrate the variance of definitions, the following are examples of how a number of influential researchers define berdache. Jacobs, Angelino, Shedd and Whitehead define berdache as "one who behaves and dresses like a member of the opposite sex" (Goulet, 1986, p. 684). Callender and Kochems (1986) define berdache as a person, usually male, who was anatomically normal but assumed the dress, occupation and behaviour of the other sex to effect a change in gender status. Therefore, without having the appropriate sex organs, the person was able to change gender status merely by assuming the dress, occupation and behaviour of the opposite gender. It was also a movement toward a somewhat intermediate status (Callender & Kochems, 1986, p. 443). Herdt (1994) states that the berdache, as a biological and psychological destiny, would
automatically assume socially deviant roles (Goulet, 1986, p. 684). In other words, they were destined to live their lives as “deviant” homosexuals. Blackwood (1984) describes berdache as a separate gender within a multiple gender system. Roscoe (1998) suggests that the berdache occupied a third and fourth gender role. By third and fourth gender, he is referring to the possibility that there is something other then men and women. This would be the space that two-spirit people would occupy, it is for those individuals who identify as having a male and female spirit, not a combination of male and female sex organs. The idea being that because they treat both spirits as equals and are considered to be an elevated status that they are not the same as a female or male that do not treat their spirits as equal.

Just as there are many opinions on the suitable definition of the berdache, there are also a wide range of views on the role of berdache in Aboriginal society, as well as the path taken to assume that role. Early writings on the berdache were heavily influenced by the Christian world view of the European colonialists and focussed on the “deviant” aspects of the role. Unfortunately, this influence has resulted in a biassed and incomplete view of the berdache.

The Bible states that men and women were put on this earth to procreate and have children. Western European ideology uses the binary system of men and women. Men are at one end of the spectrum; women are at the other. For Christian writers, the berdache, who arguably fell somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, were a source of great interest and, as a result, there is an abundance of early European documentation on the role.
In the Keres Pueblos of New Mexico, male berdaches were seen as equals, however, they talked, dressed and acted like women. Miller (1980) references White (1943), who describes boys as being manipulated and pressured to take on the needed role of berdaches in the society during the 1940’s.

Hauser (1990) introduces his theme by describing the term berdache. He defines the term as a male Aboriginal who takes on a female role, dresses in women’s clothing, performs women’s work, has similar restrictions placed upon him as women, and pursues “sexual relationships with both males and females” (Hauser, 1990, p. 45). Hauser states that from the earliest recorded encounters with the Illinois, French observers described their disapproval of males who aspired to be like women and “glory in demeaning themselves to do everything that the women do” (Marquette, 1959, p.129; cf. Deliette, 1934, p.329, in Hauser, 1990, p.45). For the French, women were not considered equal to men and it was not seen as a positive trait to aspire to be like a woman or to do women’s work.

Hauser (1990) uses four hypotheses to explain the berdache phenomenon among Aboriginal groups: 1) to accommodate homosexuality, 2) male berdache were unable to fulfill demanding male roles, especially that of the Warrior, 3) a religious phenomenon including a widespread pattern of transvestitism and 4) occupational prestige. This creation of theory and labels regarding the “phenomenon” of the berdache is itself an indication of narrow-mindedness, prejudice, or moral objection – an implication that there is something wrong with the berdache. If it were normal and acceptable, no one would need to develop theories, to look to accommodate homosexuality, or to fill a “weaker” role. Hauser’s emphasis on sexuality allows him to establish a sense of order amongst a
non-Judeo-Christian group of Aboriginal people. For Hauser, it is important to have a sense of order and to have answers because the European worldview is based largely on questions, answers and theories. Hauser probably felt safe with the semblance of order he created in a culture that he did not understand.

Hauser’s article is divided into sections. One section, simply titled “Homosexuality,” includes the following introductory definition of the term to which the title refers: “any description of the berdache must deal with the question of sexual orientation, insofar as this is possible, even though social standing is more important” (Hauser, 1990, p. 50). If the latter statement is true, then why is the focus on sexuality? There is much more to the status and culture of the berdache and Hauser clearly admits this. Hauser uses Walter Williams to point out that not all berdache were homosexuals (Williams, 1986, p. 93) and Pierre Deliette to emphasize that not all Illinois homosexuals were berdache (Deliette, 1934, p. 329, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 50). Hauser also quotes LaSalle (1901), saying “they are accused of being addicted to the sin against nature, having men set apart from childhood for this detestable purpose” (LaSalle, 1901, p. 45, in Hauser, 1990, p. 50). It must be noted that Hauser does state that “it is possible that observers merely assumed that the Illinois transvestites they saw were homosexual” (Hauser, 1990, p. 50). Hauser’s statement illustrates that a focus and fascination on sexuality does exist, along with a lack of Aboriginal participation in deciding the focus. As well, Hauser’s statement is also an example of the dependency of chronological referencing. Finally, such literature also depicts Aboriginal people as subjects, not participants. The people were not asked for their opinions or voices.
Centuries of researchers would fall into a similar trap of trusting previous researchers by citing the errors of the generations that proceeded them. This process creates a bias in chronological referencing; if an error was made, there is a good chance it has been documented as fact by more recent researchers. In other words, alternate methods need to be used, not just chronological referencing. An incorrect reference can lead to decades of false interpretations. This makes it extremely difficult to sort through the references. In addition, many of the terms and definitions used were externally determined, and Aboriginal people had little, if any, voice in the documentation. For example, Miller (1980) cites an earlier reference by White (1943) who obtained a reference from 1851 that showed boys being pressured to fill the role of a berdache to argue his point that these berdaches clearly occupy a separate gender status. He points out that “the berdache can be seen even more clearly as occupying a separate status, belonging to neither gender but standing somewhere between them” (Miller, 1980, p. 279). This means that individuals have a choice, or can be forced to switch their gender identity.

If this concept were true, then the berdache would have had a similar choice. “This implies that there is not so much a continuum of human variation in Native America, as there is a set of cultural categories with which individuals can affiliate at will or via supernatural sanctions” (Miller, 1980, p. 279). It could be argued that the French European researchers had an agenda when visiting these groups – to purposefully paint a picture of abnormality and primitive behaviour. What better way to complete this picture than by including a discussion on sodomy, an act clearly contradicting European Christian morals?
According to Hauser (1990), a heterosexual or bisexual berdache created serious problems for his female partners. Hauser goes no further in discussing what types of problems this created, or how he knows the subject’s sexual preference. This demonstrates the point that information is missing and that sexuality is the focus. Why else would Hauser mention that a heterosexual or bisexual berdache causes a problem for the female counterpart and not say why? Such literature is biased and skewed. Hauser again uses Deliette to help argue his point, stating that “the women and girls who prostitute themselves to these wretches are desolate creatures” (Liette 1702, as cited in Katz, 1976, p.10 and Deliette, 1934, p.329-330, as cited in Hauser 1990, p.51). Hauser follows this with another equally disturbing statement:

The dilemma was compounded for married partners, because a cuckolded husband might attempt the revenge characteristic of the double standard maintained by Illinois men: he might drive his wife from his home; have her scalped, murdered, or gang-raped; or cut off her ears and nose. (Hauser, 1973, p.302, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p.51)

This statement’s sole purpose is to illustrate the horror that would be experienced if a woman were to look to a berdache for sexual or personal fulfilment. The literature is clearly biased to persuade people to think of Aboriginal people in a negative light. This aids the Europeans in their quest to disregard the Aboriginal people, and has no place in an objective discussion on the berdache.

Nevertheless, Hauser acknowledges the vast differences in opinion by many of the researchers regarding views on the berdache. Some researchers feel that the Aboriginal communities were ashamed of the berdache, while more recent researchers feel that reverence was the more appropriate emotion. Hauser points out that this difference in
opinion may be because of the misunderstanding and confusion of the roles of berdache and transvestites (Hauser, 1990, p. 53).

Without questioning, interaction, and dialogue, it is difficult to have an accurate historical account. Hauser hypothesizes that there might possibly have been confusion on the part of researchers. Researchers may have mixed up the berdache with cross-dressing (a punishment form for cowardice), hermaphrodites and/or homosexuality (Callender & Kochems, 1983, p.443, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p.49). With no dialogue between the researchers and the Aboriginal people themselves, effective analysis is problematic. Cowards dressed in female clothing but were not berdache. As well, a hermaphrodite might dress and live as a woman, but because of this sexual ambiguity, he could not qualify as a berdache (Angelino & Shedd, 1955, p. 124, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 50).

Hauser (1990), along with Angelino and Shedd (1955), is stating that hermaphrodites are not berdache, but current researchers like Jacobs, Thomas and Lang (1997) place hermaphrodites on the same level as berdache and in their definition of a two-spirit Aboriginal person. Unfortunately, there are many discrepancies in the historical accounts of the identities of the berdache. These definitions and unexplained theories leave the present generation in search of the reality regarding the role of the berdache.

The steps to becoming a berdache is another area clouded in bias and contradiction. However, the documentation on these methods is one of the few areas where the spiritual nature of the berdache plays a central role. It is through this section on spirituality that we finally see that being a berdache goes beyond sexual preference and dress. For example, the Winnebago and Dakota people believed that in order to take on the role of a berdache one is first blessed with a supernatural power by means of a vision-
quest or dream. In both these groups it is told that when a boy or man set out on his
vision-quest or had repetitive dreams about the moon or buffalo (both are female spirits)
and chose to go with them that he was agreeing to take on the life of a berdache (Lurie,
1953; Williams, 1986). According to the Arapahos, haxu'xan (their name for the
berdache), possess this lifestyle as a result of a supernatural gift from birds or animals
(Kroeber, 1902-1907; Williams, 1986). This lifestyle would often include wearing
women’s clothing, possessing the mannerisms of women and doing women’s work. The
berdache were known for their various powers in healing, prophecy and matchmaking.
They also had a special role in the naming ceremony of babies. After the parents had
given the child a name, the berdache would then give the child a secret name as a means of
protecting the baby from sickness and wishing the baby a long life (Simms, 1903; Lurie,
1953; Thayer, 1980, Fulton & Anderson, 1992). They also had a reputation for hard
work, generosity and mediation between men and women (Williams, 1986).

The berdache was at one time a highly regarded figure in Winnebago culture, but
they became ashamed of the custom pertaining to the berdache because “white” people
sabotaged the custom. European missionaries and researchers taught Aboriginal people to
be ashamed of themselves, including the sacred and spiritual components of the berdache.
In fact, in Winnebago society, if a man took on the role of the berdache without the
blessing of the moon, or chose to ignore the supernatural, then he was disgraced and
dishonoured (Lurie, 1953; Williams, 1986). The Winnebago only recognized as a “true
berdache” a person who obtained his status via the supernatural and not through personal
choice (Lurie, 1953). Through the stories of the Winnebago, the spiritual component of
the berdache is validated. The berdache played a very important role among the Winnebago culture and it was a serious and spiritual role.

Williams (1986) believes that a berdache is a combination of physiological characteristics of the male and female and that such a person is a hermaphrodite. He also states that there is an “acceptance of the idea that gender can be combined, other than by physical hermaphroditism” (Williams, 1986, p.21). The berdache who was not a hermaphrodite was physically “normal” but had the spirit of the other sex. This berdache was somewhere between the two sexes and the spirit was distinct from either men or women; they were accepted spiritually as “not man”. Berdache was both male and female by virtue of his physiological maleness and cultural femaleness while at the same time neither male (because of sexuality or paternity), nor female with reference to marriage or maternity (Douglas, 1966).

Among the Keres people, boys were permitted to take on the role of a berdache, but girls did not have the choice. Miller argues that the reason why boys can become berdache while women cannot is because women are considered to be the inclusive polarity which means that they are dominant representing the social construction of the pan-human norm equation of inclusive versus exclusive. Inclusive refers to the dominant, the right side, while man, animals, winter, and exclusive would be everything opposite of inclusive (Miller, 1980, p. 280). Men are the exclusive polarity, therefore men would be enhancing their status, while women would be demoting themselves.

The idea that the berdache were considered a separate gender did not fit into the Judeo-Christian binary system of male or female as the only gender options. The berdache had powers to mediate or cross sexual boundaries and roles. Since the berdache was the
creation of a vision, similar to other shamans, the berdache could mediate between the
divine and human worlds (Miller, 1980; Thayer, 1980; Williams, 1986). This idea was not
present in the Western world view and therefore negative labels were placed upon the
berdache. The Western world view did not have a place for men who understood what it
was be like to be a woman and vice versa. If and when a person took on the characteristic
roles of the opposite gender, they would be considered an outcast in a European
community. It was a way of keeping order in society. It is unfortunate that previous
researchers did not expand on the mediating role in order for us to understand the totality
of what was involved in the role of the berdache. However, the berdache can be analysed
as a symbolic figure who occupied an interstitial place in the religious and social systems
of the Plains peoples. Because of this interstitial nature of his “calling”, the berdache
served as a mediating figure between sexual categories and roles as well as between divine

The role of the mediator was to hold the polarities together; for instance, earth and
sky, plants and animals, fire and water. The mediator between the polarities of men and
women in American Indian religion is a being that is a combination of both elements of
the male and female gender (Williams, 1986; Miller, 1980).

It was from this interstitial character that his mediating
powers spring: as half-man/half-woman he had powers to
mediate or cross sexual boundaries and roles and, since he
was a creation of a vision like other shamans, he mediated
as well between the divine and human worlds. (Thayer,
1980, p. 292)

It was by this ability to be half-man/half-woman that the berdache could simultaneously
violate and reconcile the categories of male and female. The important aspect is the
acceptance of the idea that gender can be combined for other means than just physical
hermaphroditism. The physical aspects are not nearly as important as the spirit of a person. Berdache are spiritually distinct from either sex (Williams, 1986).

The berdache were linked closely with Aboriginal spirituality, were viewed as spiritual and healing specialists, and were present at all sacred ceremonies (Marquette, 1959, p. 129, as cited in Hauser 1990, 52). The Illinois group treated both berdache and shamans with honour, as they were viewed as being on the same spiritual level as manitous, the “generalized essence of spiritual power” (Miller 1955, p. 279, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 52). Hauser is actually one of a small number of researchers who has been able to tell us about the supernatural role of the berdache in their setting. According to Marquette, the berdache attended “the solemn dances in honour of Calumet (the sacred pipe) Marquette, 1969, p. 129, in Hauser, 1990, p. 52). Apparently, they sang on these occasions, but the Illinois forbade them to dance. The above statement indicates that there is so much that could have been learned from the berdache, but too many researchers focussed on sexuality and other more controversial subjects like infidelity and gender. We are also told that councils were unable to make decisions in the absence of a berdache, “and nothing… [could] be decided without their advice” (Marquette, 1969, p. 129, in Hauser, 1990, p. 52).

Historically, a child’s tendencies to become a berdache were often apparent early in life or by the ages of 9-12 (before puberty). The Mohave (their term for berdache is alyha) held a ceremony when the child was approximately ten-years-old. The ceremony was both a test of initiation and of his true inclination to be an alyha. The boy was placed in the middle of a circle, a singer would start singing and as soon as the boy would hear the music he would begin to dance as a woman. If the boy was unwilling to assume the
life of an *alyha*, he would refuse to dance; but if his spirit is *alyha* then he would dance for four songs and then he can be proclaimed an *alyha*. Following the ceremony, the boy was carefully bathed and given a skirt. He was then led back to the dance ground as an *alyha*, and introduced with a new feminine name (Williams, 1986).

Hauser points out that two other researchers, Callender and Kochems, have concluded that there were two main ways for an Aboriginal person to become a berdache. The first means was through an expression in early childhood. The child would express interest in the role of the opposite sex, begin to associate with them and, eventually, be accepted in their new roles by their society (Callender & Kochems, 1983, in Hauser, 1990, p. 47). The second way to attain berdache status was through a vision-quest validation, which permitted the people to recognize the transformation formally (Callender & Kochems, 1983, in Hauser, 1990, p. 47). Those berdache who assumed the role during childhood were seen using tools associated with women’s work such as an axe, spade and spindle, as opposed to more “gender appropriate” tools like the bow and arrow. Due to this preference in tools, these Illinois children were essentially raised as female, wore women’s clothing and styled their hair like women. It was also noted that they were “tattooed on their cheeks like the women and also on the breast and the arms” (Deliette, 1934, in Hauser, 1990, p. 47). Even though these two methods of determining berdache status appeared most often, there were still many other debates and discussions as to how someone obtained the status of the berdache.

In Thayer’s search of the literature pertaining to the berdache, he found that Hoebel (1949) noted that many boys “could not be wrenched from their mothers, and could not live up to the demanding ideals of masculinity” (Hoebel in Thayer, 1980, p.
It was such boys of the Northern Plains that became berdache as a way out of their dilemma (Thayer, 1980, p. 287). Harriette Whitehead (1981), who studied the berdache of the Southwest, examined the River Yurman groups and felt that the common route to leading the life of a berdache was visible in childhood as the child took on the mannerisms of the opposite sex. A male berdache became a woman, or began the process of becoming a woman, as a young child by doing women's work and by picking up women's tools. This was thought to have developed and progressed through behaviour and social roles of one's surroundings. As Liette noted, "there are men who are bred for this purpose from their childhood" (Liette, in Katz, 1976, p. 10). These boys made no use of the bow and arrow but rather used feminine tools like the axe and spindle.

Williams (1986) notes a similar story described by Ruth Underhill in the 1930s regarding the Papago. Parents who thought that their middle child might be a berdache would test him by putting a bow and arrow and a woman's basket inside a small brush enclosure. They would put the boy inside and set the brush on fire. The adults would watch to see what he would take with him as he ran out of the brush. If it was the basket, they concluded that he was a berdache.

Hauser is one of very few researchers who outlined the limited roles of men and women in an Illinois setting. This is extremely beneficial in understanding what roles they were taking on when they crossed gender boundaries. The occupational roles of men and women among the Illinois were as follows: men were responsible for hunting and raids and the only way to acquire public praise was to gain respect as a skilful hunter and warrior (Rasies, 1959, p. 171, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 53). The role of women included: nurturing children, constructing and tending cabins, gathering wood, food preparation,
dressing skins and tilling fields (Deliette, 1934, p. 329, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 53-54). Berdache “gradually became women”, which underscores the notion of women as a social category rather than as a fixed biological entity. Physical biological sex is less important in gender classification than a person’s desire or natural instinct - one’s spirit (Williams, 1986).

Literary sources tend to offer an incomplete testimony of women’s roles. Hauser feels that “this is understandable in view of the more visible role played by men” (1990, p. 53). He feels that European men, who referred to Illinois women as “slaves” of the men, reached this conclusion because they were “unable to cross gender barriers which separated them from the Indians” (Binneteau, 1959, p.67, as cited in Hauser, 1990, p. 53). Social standing amongst women was achieved through birth, child rearing, food preparation, preparing the cabins and dressing skins.

Hauser does an excellent job in discussing the intermediate nature of the berdache, stating that status was not as well defined for the Illinois as it was for other societies. Hauser states that the berdache obviously engaged in gender mixing rather than gender crossing. Mixed gender, according to Callender and Kochems, refers to engaging in certain ritual ceremony because the participation was “associated with non-based power,” and “also depended on their definition as non-women” (Callender and Kochems, 1983, p. 459, in Hauser, 1990, p. 56-57). Crossing genders, in this case, meant wearing women’s clothing, assuming women’s occupational roles, and warfare restrictions, such as not going to battle with other men.

While Hauser’s review of the intermediate nature of the berdache is well presented, he shifts his focus and leaves many questions unanswered. He does this by stating that the
berdache mix gender roles “when they engaged in sex both with men in the female role, and with women” (Hauser, 1990, p.57). He does not elaborate further on this point. The reader is left wondering how Hauser can make statements without any reference or clarification as to what he means by “female role”.

Hauser makes a number of excellent points that other researchers fail to mention. Examples of this include describing women’s roles and defining gender mixing and crossing (Hauser, 1990). However, there is still too much of a focus on sexuality. Instead of focusing on the religious or spiritual component of the berdache, Hauser places a great deal of emphasis on sexuality, glossing over other valuable characteristics of the berdache. Hauser, is certainly by no means the only researcher to deviate from spirituality and to focus on sexuality. He is also not the only researcher who has depended on previous documentation. Many identities associated with the term berdache have been imposed upon the contemporary two-spirit person by early European missionaries, ethnographers and historians. These identities include the many definitions and descriptions of how a person becomes a berdache, whether the status was obtained through a dream, vision-quest or by choice. These are identities that have been placed upon the berdache and are immersed in the contemporary two-spirit identity. Every now and then however, we get a glimpse of the spiritual nature that could lead us to the modern meaning of the term two-spirit.

The berdache, a highly respected person among some of the Aboriginal communities, should be looked at from an “emic” perspective. From this angle we should see that berdache was at once an interstitial and mediating figure, who was both feared and honoured due to the supernatural vocation and power of his life. It is from this
perspective that the berdache should be placed among other figures such as manitous and shamans and groups in religious organizations where, because of their visionary experiences they also came to occupy mediating and/or interstitial positions (Thayer, 1980).

It is this point of taking an "emic" perspective that brings this Chapter to its conclusion. Both Thayer (1980) and Williams (1986) touched on a point that is absent in the history of the berdache: personal reflections. Anthropologists and ethnographers spent such a tremendous amount of time on the aspects of sexual orientation of the berdache that they neglected to write about the peoples' lives. What is missing in the literature are the peoples’ thoughts and feelings of the sacred roles they held in their communities. The modern development of the identity of two-spirit people is also lacking the perspective of the people. Two-spirit people want to move away from the historic term "berdache" as they feel it holds too many derogatory connotations. Two-spirit people are also in the process of healing and understanding the roles of their berdache ancestors. It is a challenge to attain this goal without the aid of Elders and without examining the term "berdache" to its fullest extent. It is also difficult to incorporate the various identities and people to whom the terms "berdache" and two-spirit refer.

It is only in the past few years that researchers have begun to examine the lives of the sacred people known as two-spirited. However, two-spirit people are still not being given a voice in the research. This Chapter illustrates that there are far too many discrepancies among the definitions available in regards to two-spirit people and the berdache. A link needs to be made to help bridge the gap and clear up the discrepancies within the literature. It is the Aboriginal people themselves who hold these answers; it is
their voices and how they make sense of the historical role of the berdache and the two-spirit person that will allow us to make sense of the literature.
Chapter 3: Interview Methods

3.1 Overview

Two-spirit Aboriginal people have suffered a history of shame, negative judgements and falsehood, while their voices were left unheard. Their actions, customs and ceremonies were seen as deviant. European missionaries, historians, ethnographers and anthropologists tended to ignore the voice of the people they were writing about, and the early European voice was not one of empathy or tolerance of diversity. Due to this lack of tolerance, Aboriginal people suffered many horrific losses. One loss in particular was the loss of their voice and traditions. Two-spirit Aboriginal people who were once held in high regard, became a source of shame to themselves and to their communities. In order to rectify this lack, this thesis allows Aboriginal two-spirit people to use their voice. In the process it should allow their version of history to be told and it will also allow the people to define themselves.

This thesis was founded on the concept of a community-based participatory action research methodology. The research involves people who have traditionally been the “researched” in the formulation of the purpose, problems, objectives, and intent of the research, the collection of data, and the interpretation, use, and control of the data and results.

3.2 Methodology: Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a tool used to promote economic and social change in Aboriginal communities (SSHRC Task Force, 1983). This methodology seeks “to empower and elevate the ‘researched’ to participate in and steer the research process...
and to empower the community groups by facilitating participation in decision-making and developing ‘partnerships’ in the research process” (Ward, 1996). As a methodology, it is a meticulous method for recording oral history before much of it is lost (Hoare, Levy & Robinson, 1993).

PAR is a form of qualitative research that puts an emphasis on the respect for individuals and participants as well as a commitment to social change to enable research to empower First Nations communities (St. Denis, 1992; Nickels, 1997). This is achieved by relying on the experience and knowledge of the people and their culture (Hoare, Levy & Robinson, 1993).

As a method and technique for gathering information, PAR is a popular choice when working with marginalised people. There are four reasons that illustrate why this method was chosen. PAR contributes to a balancing of the historical record with an Aboriginal voice; it increases the chance of development effectiveness and longevity; as well, it contributes to a healing of social ills; and the methods are consistent with Aboriginal values (Hoare, Levy & Robinson, 1993; Ward, 1996).

One way that a balance to the historical record can be attained is by speaking with people in the community who are familiar with the subject in question. By doing this, more Aboriginal people and/or communities will gain the confidence and skills to discover ways to take control of their future (Hoare, Levy, & Robinson 1993; Ward 1996). The use of PAR aids project effectiveness and longevity because it increases the likelihood that projects will be successful and will remain an active part of the community’s development. The participation of the people helps them to understand the research process which also equips them to be advocates of change. Participation in the research increases the
investment that the people have in the success of the project. The constant feedback and
debriefing, which is unique to the PAR method, also improves the relationship and
understanding between interviewer and interviewee. This will, in turn, strengthen the
appropriateness of the data that is being collected. Finally, increased understanding, trust
in the data and personal investment of time, increases the participants sense of ownership
of the project (Willegan et al., 1989; Hoare, Levy & Robinson, 1993).

Aboriginal culture and history were often denied because of colonial policies that
have been recognized as prime contributors to the legacy of social pathologies (Elias,
1991; Hoare, Levy & Robinson, 1993). Using PAR contributes to healing these
pathologies by allowing Aboriginal communities to take control over local concerns and
by valuing oral tradition, history and culture (Hoare, Levy & Robinson 1993).

3.3 Methodology Used In This Study

Within the framework of a PAR methodology, a variety of methods were used.
The following sections discuss the methods used in more detail and also discusses how
other researchers have used such methods. These other methods include literary sources,
interviews, reflection and journaling.

People who identify as two-spirited Aboriginal people were encouraged to
participate in this research project. The project allowed Aboriginal people to use their
voice in a positive academic framework. As well, related organizations, for instance the
Aboriginal Aids Task Force and the Gay and Lesbian Association, were consulted at the
initial stages of the project. Generally, the initial idea and concept of this project were
extremely well received, as it is a relatively new area with few resources.
Researchers who work with PAR are constantly faced with a number of challenges that enhance and reflect their work. In this case, due to the sensitivity of the topic being researched, personal reflections will be journalled which should illustrate the growth that was experienced along the way by a non-Aboriginal, female, academic researcher.

3.3.1 Interview Methodology

Initially, the objective was to interview ten people who identified themselves as two-spirit Aboriginal people. However, it was not possible to conduct ten interviews so two qualitative interviews were chosen instead. Unfortunately, it was not possible in the two main interviews to interview a female. Ideally this would have benefited the research and altered the project however, there were no females that came forward to participate. However, this may be a possibility for future projects. There were a few females in the newspaper article that was used. These interviews allowed each individual to work closely with the researcher with the freedom to edit, validate and voice their individual interpretations of how each identifies as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. In addition to the interviews, data were taken from a recent publication that asked Aboriginal two-spirit people how they identified themselves. The publication is a monthly news magazine for individuals who have chosen an alternative lifestyle (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, cross-dressers, drag queens and two-spirit Aboriginal people).

The participants consisted of two males, one in his mid-twenties and the other, in his late fifties. The participants for this project were selected based on “word of mouth” contacts, since attempts in newspapers and postings at organization offices were not
successful. During the interview sessions, a list of general questions was used as a guide and basis for each interview.

The data that were collected was far superior to what were anticipated. Following the initial recorded segment, considerable time was spent transcribing, analysing and revisiting the participant for feedback. It rapidly became obvious that due to the time required for each interview that conducting ten interviews would not have been feasible.

Conducting interviews with contemporary two-spirit Aboriginal people allowed this project to document the history of two-spirited Aboriginal people in the making. Due to the fact that the term is new, it was also an excellent opportunity to record history and change as it was happening. For example, in the initial stages of this thesis, the Rainbow Resource Centre was still known as the Gay and Lesbian Resource Centre. Since the name change, it has made space available for two-spirit Aboriginal people in the centre. Similarly, Nine Circles Community Health Centre was not in place at the onset of this project. In fact, the Aboriginal AIDS Task Force was an initial contact for this project but, due to their overwhelming workload, by the time this project was under way they had amalgamated with a few other services to form Nine Circles Community Health Centre. At the present time, the Aboriginal Aids Task Force has dismantled and become part of the Centres’ overall responsibilities. It was ideal timing to have the opportunity to document first hand accounts of the two-spirit Aboriginal community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The changes that took place had an impact on this project. It was difficult to have peoples’ time to speak with them. As well, do to the changes it made it hard to have people follow through on the project and recommend that people who identify as two-spirit participate in the project.
Historically, the literature that is available on the historical identities that *two-spirit* Aboriginal people have taken on, was one sided, derogatory and lacked cultural and spiritual information. Using oral accounts incorporated both the cultural and spiritual accounts of *two-spirit* Aboriginal people. Documenting this information is absolutely crucial and vital to the history of *two-spirit* Aboriginal people.

Interviews were recorded by audio-cassette tapes, written notes and journals. It was essential to use tape recording as a tool. It was also extremely beneficial in the feedback and debriefing of the interviews as well as, allowing for reflections and further shaping of the project.

A list of basic interview questions was prepared prior to meeting with the participants. Due to the fact that we collaborated and discussed a variety of topics together, the questions were used as guidelines and the participants were free to elaborate or discuss any issues pertinent to the subject that they felt was valid or important to include in the project.

### 3.3.2 Reflections and Journaling: Use in Other Studies

Reflections and journaling are essentials tools used in researching. “Any events described and thoughts recorded by the researcher become observations and reflections respectively” (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). Kirby and McKenna (1989) both describe the important use of reflections in the research process. Initially, when beginning research or interviews, it may be valuable to divide the paper in half so that one side has the notes taken from the interview and the other illustrates the reflections on what the researcher has
just learned. This gives the researcher the opportunity to see where they might need to rework their approach.

The method of reflecting and journaling was used in addition to other methods, and allowed a place for the researchers' ongoing reflections to be recorded. Kirby and McKenna (1989) point out two types of reflections, one based on content and the other based on analysis. Reflections on content are the beginning of the ongoing analysis. The researchers’ thoughts become more focussed on the themes that are present in the data. Reflections on process are equally as important to the overall analysis of the data. Continuous reflection throughout the research process also enables the researcher to become more skilful and intuitive as a researcher (Kirby and McKenna, 1989).

Nickels (1998) used this method in his research on caribou skin preparations of the Nelson House Rocky Cree to aid him in personal growth and to document experiences he encountered along the way. He also used this method to remind himself of where he was coming from as a non-Aboriginal male researcher trying to make sense of his place in the university environment doing applied community-based participatory action research in the sub-Arctic regions of Manitoba.

Ristock (1996) also used this method in her research on lesbian abuse. Throughout her research Ristock documented her thoughts on the different themes she encountered while doing literary searches and interviews. She was thus able to see her limitations and change her questions and thought patterns.

3.3.3 Reflections: Use in this Study

Reflection and journaling have been both valuable and vital in this research project as tools that allowed constant evaluation and learning. They also provide a paper trail for
the research process. Often, it was easy to see the steps and thought patterns that took
place to make this project a completed one. By reflecting, the researcher is free to write,
 draw and do anything that helps rethink components of the project. The finished project is
a completed circle, with a variety of elements that can be elaborated on for the purpose of
another project.

As my research began, reflection on questions and encounters along the way had
already taken place. This tool was very valuable it illustrated since my train of thoughts
and growth as a person and researcher along the way. It was essential for this research to
keep track of reflections and to notice patterns of thought that needed to be adjusted.

3.4 Conclusions

This project used participatory action research as a method of gathering
information pertaining to two-spirit Aboriginal people. By relying on the people who
were most familiar with the culture, Aboriginal voices were used in a positive academic
framework. This method combined with journaling and reflections enabled the historical
beginnings of a new term, two-spirit, to be documented and described.

A unique section of this thesis is that due to the importance of the Aboriginal voice
the interview transcripts is included as part of the thesis and not just the appendix. It was
felt that it was essential to edit the interviews but that it was absolutely essential to keep
the data as apart of the overall project. The large amount of rich data only enhances the
project and puts a voice to project. In the past Aboriginal people were studied, they were
not seen as a participatory component of research. A main objective of this project is to
gain an Aboriginal perspective, therefore the Aboriginal voice is a main factor and
component to this project. In order to follow the Aboriginal voice and understand how conclusions were made, there are many reflection moments throughout the project.

Having reflection moments and commentary throughout the interview portion of this project breaks up the voice and allows for continual attention to be paid to the Aboriginal voice. It also allows the reader to visualize the interviews taking place, making the project both factual and enjoyable to read.

This type of methodology offered a balance of academic and personal reflections. This is a very complex topic that for decades has been misrepresented and misconstrued. Through PAR and people who identify as two-spirit Aboriginal people, a balance was attained. It was important to incorporate an Aboriginal voice that would be heard from their perspective, PAR allows for this perspective to be used.
Chapter 4: Interview # 1

Introduction

The interview segment of this project was the most rewarding and powerful piece because it allowed the personal perspective to be heard from two-spirit Aboriginal people. After a long period of time searching through historical documentation, it was pure nirvana to work with individuals who were able to recognize the importance of the project.

The vast amount of information gathered far surpassed any amount that this project set out to obtain. The genuine nature of the participants allowed for full and rich interviews to be conducted and analysed. Due to the rich data that was collected, each interview became a chapter within this project. Some of the information was edited as it did not always pertain, but the information that is in the next Chapters is vital in understanding the perspective of two-spirit Aboriginal people and how they identify. In order to better understand and follow the information, a commentary of thoughts and reflection is among the data. It was felt that it was important to understand the exact method of thought that was involved in this project. It allows the reader to see first hand accounts of the participation and voice of two-spirit Aboriginal people.

Sample Interview Questions

Preliminary Questions:

1) What is your name (or coded identification)?

2) What is your age?

3) What is your gender?

4) What is your sexuality?
5) Where are you from? Town, City, Province and/or Reservation

6) What band group are you affiliated with?

Research Questions:

Personal History

1) At what age did you realize you were two-spirited? Was this a self-realization or was the notion suggested to you?

2) Was there a particular experience that made you realize that you identified as a “two-spirited” person?

3) Does your community of origin and/or your family know that you identify as “two-spirited”?

4) Does your community of origin use the term two-spirit or does it use another term?

5) Does your community of origin view “two-spirited” people in a positive or negative way? If negative, do you have any insight as to why your community views the concept of “two-spirited” as a negative component of Aboriginal culture?

6) Are there differences in the role of “two-spirited” people depending on the area from which they originate?

Personal Definition

In your own words, what is a two-spirit person?

How did you come to define yourself as a two-spirit person?

Is it possible for anyone to be “two-spirited”?

What do you associate the term two-spirit with?

Homosexuality

Another sex besides male/female (third gender/ fourth gender)

Male and female spirits

“Berdache” or any other term
Spirituality

Other (please specify)

Sexuality Component

Does a person’s sexuality play a part in the role of a “two-spirited” person?

Do you think anyone who identifies him/herself as a homosexual is “two-spirited”?

Do you think anyone who identifies him/herself as a “two-spirited” person is a homosexual?

In your opinion is the term “two-spirited” synonymous with homosexuality? Why or why not?

Spirituality Component

Do you think the role of a two-spirit person is a spiritual role?

Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual individual and how so?

What, if any roles does a two-spirit person play in ceremonies?

Alternate Gender

Some literature suggests that people who identify as “two-spirited” are in fact a separate gender from male and female. Are you familiar with this theory and do you have any thoughts or opinions regarding alternative genders?

If yes, do you identify yourself as a third or fourth gender?

Miscellaneous

Recently there have been some discussions between various organizations, Elders and people who identify themselves as two-spirit people. These discussions/debates are about the use of the term two-spirit and who should and should not be using the term.

Are you aware of these discussions/debates?

What is your opinion on both the discussions/debates?
How and who do you think should be entitled to use the term *two-spirit*?

How do you feel about various organizations such as the Rainbow Resource Centre and the Aboriginal Aids Task Force adding *two-spirit* literature to their resources?

Do you see this as a positive step towards awareness or is this possibly stepping on sacred and spiritual ground that should be left off the shelves?

Do you know any myths or legends, historical accounts/documentation, photographs, or traditional knowledge that you feel will enhance this research project?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me that would help me to understand the term *two-spirit*?

**Interview #1**

Date of Interview: April 18, 1999 – Person #1

Rishona: It is currently 11:30am on the morning of the 18th after my interview with person #1. This interview was with an Elder and because the teachings are held very sacred, the interviewee would not sign any sheets, nor was I allowed to tape-record or take notes during the interview. This is from memory, as soon as possible after as to what I remember from what this person said.

As I began to collect all my thoughts on what the first interview had said I realized that the first thing is to start by saying that there are many discrepancies in the literature.

They lump terms together like “berdache”, *two-spirit* and “contrary” and the literature portrays them all the same. This is not the case at all; all three are different.

Person #1: A *two-spirit* is a person with a twin, they have a twin inside just like you would have, I would have a male inside of me and there is a female inside of a male. That is how this person explained it to me.

How someone becomes a two-spirit is that they recognize that they are equal and they share the same person, but they are equal. So, they are comfortable with both their male and their female. But that does not mean that they dress like the opposite sex.
Someone that is dressing as the opposite sex and is choosing to take on that specific role of the opposite sex then they are not identifying with two-spirits they are only identifying with one and they are giving up the one they are born with.

According to this person there are only two sexes the male and female. That is it. We come from mother earth and the sun is seen as the father. There are only two sexes. There is not this third sex, the idea of the third gender and gender variance comes from “berdache”. That is what they are speaking about, they are not speaking about two-spirit people.

Two-spirit people are very spiritual and sacred and are very comfortable with who they are, they do what society portrays as opposing roles. So for example, this person used childhood to convey that when, if his children were sick or so on he had no problem taking care of them, or doing the laundry, or changing diapers, things like that weren’t uncommon. He didn’t turn his nose up as if it was not a role for him to be partaking in. He is very comfortable with himself and there are life skills that people have to learn.

The two-spirit person does have special roles. Another example that he shared with me was that he was at a ceremony and they needed a female to smoke a female pipe and he was able to because he is seen as “two-spirit’. You know when he did that he was taking on the female part of him.

Another very important thing to comment on is that a “two-spirited” person is not homosexual. They may be but sexual orientation is not part of it. As it is not part of being a contraire or, but it is part of being a “berdache”.

Another point that I found fascinating was that a person can also be “two-spirited” and “berdache” or a person can be “two-spirited” and “contraire” but homosexuality does not seem to play part in it. That is a misconception.

Another thing though that was very interesting was that much that was said in the literature noted that 1990 was the year that the term “two-spirited” was coined. I asked this person about that and he told me that this is by no means a new term and it has been used for years.

Person #1: He remembers his grandmother talking to him about it back in the 50’s it was used generations before that. The reason, or as a reason for why this might be he said is that you know people might be just learning about these teachings and to them it is a new term, the term itself is not so recent.
He stressed over and over again the equality between the male and female spirits within. That being “two-spirited” is a comfortable level and you are able to recognize that. You are not, it is something that you learn throughout your life. He told me that someone who is a contraire, a “contrary” person that is like that from the beginning and they walk backwards. Oh, Dustin Hoffman and Chief George Brown, movie, he said that a “berdache” and “contrary” are both recognized in this film.

There was so much information. I left the interview feeling relieved, as if a fog had been lifted from my head. There are many terms that get mixed up with each other. When you are speaking about a “berdache”, you are speaking about a “berdache” you are not speaking about a “two-spirited” person. In the literature even Aboriginal researchers misconstrue the term. This is probably because they are using the same historical sources that are misconceptions. If they actually look into their own histories and teachings they would learn that they are, in fact, very different terms and not the same. Another reason might be because the “berdache” and two-spirit people might have had similar roles in terms of ceremonies and they were mistaken and lumped under the one term.

Person #1: He kept saying how these teachings need to be changed, you know people need to learn about them. But that it is not an Elders’ place. In order for an Elder to teach these teachings the people had to come ask. They won’t just go out.

He also told me that he was sort of going around and telling me all this different information in a circular form. Like the teachings, but he won’t come out and directly answer me but that if, I work at it, if I work at, I will be able to find enough material to write novels on it and do research. He says that he knows lots of people that see themselves as being two-spirited and that there are two-spirited gatherings in Winnipeg where grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends and people that all recognize the two-spirit teachings go for ceremonies. When a person goes to a ceremony, that when he goes and he prays, he goes into the bush for the summer, that he leaves behind his English name. That is part of being “two-spirited” also, it is being able to separate yourself and know when to use that part.

He uses the example if your car breaks down, you have to open the hood and look at it like a female would, like making a cake or something, you use all these different ingredients and you realize what is missing and you go back and put it in. That is the same with a broken down car, instead of getting frustrated and angry you have to look at the situation and realize what it is you need. He said that all of that is being part of being “two-spirited”. It is being able to recognize and being comfortable with yourself and
know when to use the different spirits within you, for different situations. If the world were being comfortable with this, he feels that crime rates would drop, over half the percent because people would know how to handle situations differently then they do. That we suppress that spirit inside of us and that this “two-spiritedness” is available, is not available but is recognized in all sorts of different cultures and so on. It is inside of everybody and everybody has this ability to be “two-spirited” but people suppress it. He used me for example, I have a male spirit inside of me and this male spirit might want to come out and show itself and it becomes scary and frightening, you suppress these feelings and people become unbalanced. It is all a matter of being balanced with yourself and being comfortable.

I just wanted to add a couple of other things that I remembered. He informed me that anyone and anything can be “two-spirited”. Therefore, something from a blade of grass, to a tree could be “two-spirited”. Simply because they have, they are recognized as spirits they are spiritual entity and within them they are part of mother earth and father sun and they themselves could be “two-spirited”. A bird, a duck, he used many examples from nature could be seen as “two-spirited” to emphasize the point that anyone could be “two-spirited”. It is matter of organizing within yourself that you have the male and female spirit. You have that twin inside of you that can come out or shine and be used in varying situations and experiences. It is a very spiritual thing, it is based on the individual and their comfort level.

As a small child you would not often recognize that you were a two-spirit. This particular person came from a line of medicine bundle carriers and pipe holders and he recalls his father taking on roles that were often seen as women’s, or from the women’s perspective.

Person #1: He also informed me that he himself is a “contrary” and is recognized as such in the community and a “contrary” person as I mentioned does everything backwards so they will ride a horse backwards. They will do all these things backwards. Instead of laughing they’ll cry, and he also told me that a lot of “contrary” people are opposed to the “berdache”. But not always, again it depends.

Sometimes a two-spirit person can be recognized as a child, or that there is this person in the area that is recognized as “two-spirited” person. That they are married, they have children, grandchildren, no sign, no homosexual tendencies, homosexual relationships. But that interestingly enough, there is one person that is seen as “two-spirited” is very effeminate and people that don’t know, often take on the assumption that he must be gay, or must be homosexual. He is married, he has kids, he is the first one to make jokes about it because you have to be able to make jokes about it and play with it because it is a sign of being comfortable with who you are. If you are able to do that, then you are able to teach others and you are able to be comfortable with it. If you can’t make jokes and understand and be comfortable with it then you are not, it is part of being equal
and being balanced. Many of the world’s problems would be eliminated if people were balanced, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This interview was a very valuable lesson. It answered many questions and made things seem clearer. Prior to the interview I was unclear as to the exact connection between berdache and two-spirit Aboriginal people. By using PAR and the voice of the people it became clear that a person can be both berdache and two-spirit but that berdache is a direct result of European literature.

One of the most important pieces of information came from this interview, the fact that two-spirit people have been around as long as this person has been alive. Two-spirit Aboriginal people have been around for hundreds of years. It is most interesting to hear this based on the fact that the literature clearly states that the term is a construction of the recent decade. The Elder interviewed, recalls his own father living his life as a two-spirit Aboriginal person and raising a family. It is interesting that the elder mentioned this, because this is not information that could be gathered from the literature. It is about balance and recognizing both spirits inside of you and treating them as equals.
Chapter 5 – Interview #2

Date of Interview: July 24, 2001, Person #2

The second interview was set out differently from interview #1, in that this interview is an actual voice. The second person that agreed to be interviewed and participate in this project permitted the use of a recording device. This interview in particular, spanned the course of one year and many meetings. Due to the length of this interview, only a portion of it is visible in the project. Both the participant and myself have the interview data in its entirety and upon request it may be viewed.

Preliminary Questions:

Rishona:  What is your name (or coded identification)?

Person #2:  Myungen Nimbe - Standing Wolf [Spirit Name]

Rishona:  What is your age?

Person #2:  33

Rishona:  What is your gender?

Person #2:  Generally speaking I identify with the male gender but other circles identify as 3rd gender.

Rishona:  What is your sexuality?

Person #2:  Bi-sexual, I have had experiences with both men and women.

Rishona:  Where are you from? Town, City, Province and/or Reservation

Person #2:  Ojibway Nation (50 miles north of Winnipeg.)

Rishona:  What band group are you affiliated with?

Person #2:  Ojibway.
Research Questions: Personal History

Rishona: At what age did you realize you were two-spirited?

Person #2: At 4 or 5.

Rishona: Was this a self-realization, or was the notion suggested to you?

Person #2: Oh no, it was definitely on my own. I just knew that part of me identified with my sisters and part of me identified with brothers and I knew somehow, some way it wasn’t the same for them. They were just who they were (laugh) and I was right down the middle. I thought I had the right to have a dress as much as my sisters and I thought I had a right to play as much with the boys just as his brothers.

Rishona: Was there a particular experience that made you realize that you identified as a “two-spirited” person? So, was there something at the age when you were 4 or 5 that made you realize I am not the same as my brothers.

Person #2: Yes. In particular, it was the fact that I knew I was attracted to boys as much as I was to girls.

Rishona: But you were only 4 or 5 so were you sexually attracted to them or you just shared…

Person #2: Just interested in them. It might be that way for all children I don’t know. But I know for me, it was really strong, I wanted to learn more about boys, just as much as I did about girls. Well maybe a little later on when I was 8 or 9 that is when I started thinking on sexual terms. I thought I liked boys just as much as I like girls. Sometimes I only liked boys, other times I only liked girls.

Rishona: Does your community of origin and/or your family know that you identify as “two-spirited” person?

Person #2: They do now, yes. They didn’t before and my community, I don’t know about today, but back when I was a kid in the 70’s, it was extremely homophobic. So anyone who wasn’t really feminine or if you are a girl and really masculine and if you are a boy you were always teased whether you were two-spirited or not, you were teased and ridiculed, and made fun of and all of that. So it was really, really negative violent environment.

Rishona: So even you at the age of 4 or 5 wanted to wear a dress and all these types of things, they didn’t know, your family didn’t know?

Person #2: Well I think because I was such a little kid they just thought that I was just a little curious child. But then as I got older then I started realizing that I really, really was different and I didn’t fit in with boys and I didn’t fit in with girls. I just didn’t.
Everything I liked was basically unique. I wasn’t interested in the same things they all were. So just naturally, I was accepted more by girls then boys even though they always hung around me (laugh).

Rishona: Did you recently just tell your family?

Person #2: No, it was a process over several years in the early 80’s. It took about a month or so for everyone to sort of get used to the idea and it took about five or six years before they all sort of got used to the idea that, that is who I was. It wasn’t just a phase. So it was a very gradual process over several years.

Rishona: That makes sense. Does your community of origin use the term two-spirit, or does it use another term?

Person #2: Most of them do now.

Rishona: So, they didn’t obviously when you...

Person #2: No we started using it about ten years ago. So they are only starting to use it now and a lot of people are more comfortable saying two-spirit then gay or lesbian or whatever.

Rishona: I find that really interesting that you say that the people started using the term about ten years ago, because in some of the literature that I have read. There is some stuff from the First Nations two-spirited organization in Toronto and also in the RCAP in the literature there. It says specifically there that the term was coined in the last ten years. But, I have encountered somebody else who has told me that the term has been around for as long as they can remember. But, it specifically said in this literature that there was a conference actually held in Winnipeg where the term was a collective decision. I just found that interesting because somebody else told me that they have been using it for ages and the word is an English term and if the word has been around forever then why would it be an English word as opposed to an Aboriginal term?

Person #2: Well, what I learned about it is that it came into use around 1988 –1989 somewhere around there. The phrase two-spirit does not exist in the language describing who we are. If you try to translate two-spirit into any of the languages, it means something entirely different. But in some languages it means you are possessed, in other languages it means you are, you have a split personality. So it doesn’t fit in, it is just a contemporary term to identify us a part from the general populous of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered people.

Rishona: So this person could possibly identify with the same way the contemporary people use it, but just have been identifying with it from years ago.
Person #2: The term has been around for decades it is just that it wasn’t commonly used. They are thinking that it might have come from an interpretation from one of the languages. There is a word for who we are in all of our languages.

Rishona: When you say that are you referring to words such as: Winkte (Wink ah tah) and Nadle, Nadlhi (nat lis), haux’an.

Person #2: The way I heard was Natlis. In Ojibway it is either Winkte or that could be Cree. I am not sure, I do not even know all the languages. There is a researcher in Minneapolis, who is a linguist and he has found over 30 different terms he found, original terms to describe who we are. As far as two-spirited goes is that it came out of an interpretation in the late 80’s. At they adopted it at a conference and they have been using it ever since then. We are still different, if you are an Aboriginal person in the gay community, you are still different, you are still not accepted. You are not one of them, so to speak, you may be gay, but you are still Native (laugh).

Person #2: You are still looked at the same way, general society looks at you are Aboriginal. Anyway, I like the term because it does not refer to sexuality, specifically. I was never comfortable with any terms that referred to just your sexuality. There is a whole person there, spirit, mind, and experiences and a life story. If you say someone is gay or homosexual then that is all they are seen, they aren’t even seen as a human being by most people. I just dislike that term. A lot of straight people are comfortable with it because it doesn’t bring to mind any images if you are gay or someone is a homosexual they have these images that come to their mind that grosses them out or whatever. But when you use the term two-spirited it’s like they are more comfortable with it because you are just a little bit different then them and they don’t have to conjure up all those images, that’s my guess. I don’t know, I have never actually asked a straight person what they prefer. But most now that I know, they say two-spirited.

Rishona: Does your community of origin view “two-spirited” people in positive or negative way? If negative, do you have any insight as to why your community views the concept of “two-spirited” as a negative component of Aboriginal culture?

Person #2: Yes there are some people, quite a few, who are advanced in their own development and accept two-spirit as we are they think it is all right and even fewer who think that we are gifted and that we do bring special qualities to our communities or society. A few of them who do.

As far as negative, negative part of it, yes there is a lot of people who still really view it as negative. Most of it comes from Christian or Catholicism and that whole influence. Even in the really orthodox Native cultures today it is still influenced that way because no matter where you came from whether you grew up traditionally or not, the Church still had a big influence on you when you were growing up. A lot of the cultural stuff went underground it was still practised it but they went to Church to stay out of trouble. So anyway, I think that is where a lot of that comes from. Prior to that religion, sort of infecting everyone, I can use that term, two-spirit people were looked at as a
blessing in their societies because of our different abilities that we were born with. Our understanding of men and women and our innate nature to care for people. So a lot of times if there were orphans we took care of the orphans. For widows, widowed men and women we helped take care of them. We took care of a lot of the really sick people. In a lot of the tribes we were the medicine collectors, we collected all the medicines, so we were the medicine people. We were the people who brought the healing to the community. So it was a very special, well establish place in our societies prior to contact basically. Then when the Church started influencing saying what they still say today it effected everyone, everyone’s attitude. So the attitude that most of grew up with is that if you are gay or anything like that, you are to be hated. It’s okay to hate you. It was an accepted thing. For a lot of people still like that, they find out you are two-spirited, they just don’t talk to you, anymore, they won’t look at you and in some cases if you party with them or whatever, they will start fights with you, based on that knowledge. So yeah, the violence is still there and the homophobic attitudes.

Rishona: Are there differences in the role of “two-spirited” people depending on the area from which they originate?

Person #2: As far as I know there is yes. From what I heard, from the Ojibway part of it is where we existed in Ojibway’s society is, we were involved a lot in counselling aspect. Basically, like marriage counsellors, or family counsellors and medicine people. We were the ones that went out and picked many of the medicines and did the medicine ceremonies. Many of us were the medicine men and women. We were the ones who performed all the medicine ceremonies. Counselling aspect of it, my own personal understanding of it is, just because of our, the way we were born is that we have deeper understanding of both genders, the most people do. A lot of men who cannot figure our why women think the way they do and vice versa, they don’t understand why men do the things they do. We were born right in the middle of that we were born with both perspectives, so we are able to counsel both sides, basically. I think that is why we would have been involved in marriage counselling and all that kind of stuff.

Rishona: Is that specific to just the Ojibway?

Person #2: That is what I heard from some of the Ojibway people who did research. One of the other ones, I don’t know if it was from the West Coast, it could have been the Lakota. They also believe that we were involved in the different ceremonies that came, they came through our dreams and it came through the two-spirit people to their communities. The dreams were about the different kinds of ceremonies that we have to do. So, it might have been the Lakota, that believed that our role, that we were referred to as the in between people. We were in between the dream world and the real world that saw us as in between people from real world and dream world. We’d pass the messages back and forth. That’s the only basic ones I’ve heard of, so far.

Rishona: Now you mention a bunch of roles that two-spirit have, do a lot of two-spirit people today are they continuing on with these roles or trying to?
Person #2: Yes, amazingly. I see it more in the personal care fields, a lot of two-spirit people are nurses, nurses aids, they take care of children a lot, nursery to grade three. A lot of them are teachers in that range. A lot of them are the main care givers in families if they are allowed to be. If they are accepted in their families, then they are almost always the main care givers they are the ones that almost always take care of their whole family.

Rishona: It has almost been transferred over to today’s society, so instead of being an educator in a traditional community, you may now be a teacher, instead of healer you may now be a nurse.

Person #2: Yes. It’s like a built in behaviour, I believe anyway that we are born with and today we end up working in fields that are related or similar to traditional lives.

Rishona: Are many of them helping their communities in some way? Do you know any people that are living in their communities doing this type of work?

Person #2: Throughout the US and some I know in Canada. Yes, they are involved in really important positions like that. Back home one of the women, two-spirited, always been involved in health care, diabetes education, counsellor, she has been a chief. So, she is always in the area that involves the whole community. Same with an man in Alberta. I forget which community he is from, but he is involved in a lot of the same work, addictions, terminally ill people and then it has moved to people with AIDS and AIDS education and that kind of stuff. Always, not always but more often then not, involved in areas that involve some kind of care giving. Everyone that I know, child care, wellness, especially helping out with kids. A lot of two-spirit people have a natural ability with kids. Myself, a lot of people wonder why I am not a father because they always say I would be a good father. I just love being around kids, I just don’t want any of my own right now, eventually. So yes I think a lot of it is transferred in to today’s way of life.

**Personal Definition**

Rishona: In your own words, what is a two-spirit person? How did you come to define yourself as a two-spirit person? Is it possible for anyone to be “two-spirited”?

Person #2: Two-spirit person is somebody who has the perfect balance or at least relative balance of the male and female gender identity, the yin/yang type energy. They have the ability to have the same kinds of relationships with men and women. They can easily play both roles. They could mother a child or father a child, whether you are male or female. You could also easily play both roles as a typical masculine or typical feminine activities, and masculine while in today’s world it would be sports, and heavy equipment operator, construction those are all typically male gender activities. A lot of two-spirit people can easily do that kind of stuff if you’re a woman and vice versa with men. A lot of the men cook, sew, bead, take care of kids. That’s the other part of it to, a lot of the two-spirit people in their communities were all the artists. They are the ones who
created all the beautiful artistry, in a lot of the societies. I think that was true for most of the cultures of the world. Particularly here I know that that was true. All the beadwork and head-dresses were made by a lot of two-spirited people. My own identity is that’s the way I see it for me it’s a balance between being a man and woman. I really do believe that there is a female spirit that dwells in my life because I dream about her all the time. I have seen her at different visions/ceremonies and so forth and she is a really strong woman. But my understanding is she is a spirit from a long time ago.

Person #2: One of the visions that I had at the ceremony was she was the woman in that village who took care of everybody. She was this really strong woman and there was a famine or something terrible that went on that affected the whole village. She was the one that went around and helped everybody. She helped them cope with whatever was going on and I don’t know if she died around her late twenties or early thirties or what but she seems to have always been at that age even when I was really young. There is this woman that would appear in my dreams, but the reason I say she is a spirit from a long time ago is from this world anyway she is seeing the modern world of Europeans for the first time through my eyes. When she existed they didn’t have any concepts of who Europeans were, it was just all the people that were in North America. So the few times that she came to me while I was awake, while I was conscious, it was like she was looking around at all these different people and wondering who they were and wondering why some of us look different now. We have different colour skin and hair and so I really do believe that there is a male and female spirit within us. Just from my own experience I can’t help but to believe that. So sometimes we joke around by saying I’ve got to take care of my female spirit now, we will do things that women will do and it is the male spirit that comes out when you want to take care of something a little more aggressively or what have you. It really does seem that way to me. So in my mind that’s the way it works, is that there are two spirits within me the male and female gender.

Rishona: How did you come to define yourself as two-spirit? To take on that

Person #2: August 5th of 1991.

Rishona: So your anniversary is approaching

Person #2: Yes, 10-year anniversary. A friend of mine in Vancouver, she told me there was this big gathering taking place cause I lived in Vancouver then. Down in Eugene Oregon and she said it is all First Nations people, and they are all gay, lesbian, transgendered, bi-sexual and what have you and it is called a two-spirited gathering. Just without even thinking about it the term two-spirit just felt good, the first time I ever heard it. Eventually I asked, I said why do they say two-spirited and she said well that is who they identify us as. I was never comfortable with the term gay, especially homosexual. I can’t stand that word (emphasized). I don’t even like heterosexual or bi-sexual. I don’t like those terms at all because they focus specifically on sex and I don’t like that at all. Everybody’s sexuality is one slice of their entire existence that’s it. The rest of the time you are a human being and you exist and you have every other experience that we all do so I never ever use those terms. People will always say oh, are you, cause all my friends
who identify as gay they see me going out with girls before and they see me with guys so they always say that I was bi-sexual. I just hated that term. So I met other people who identified as being bi-sexual but I wasn’t like them for them it was all about sex, it was about who they could have sex with a man or a woman or what have you.

Rishona: You didn’t feel there was a category you belonged in?

Person #2: Yeah, so after a certain number of years I just thought okay when I am with my gay friends, I’ll say that I am gay and when I am with people who like women, guys who like women also or women who like guys also I will say that I am bi-sexual. When I am with my straight friends I will just say I am straight and that is what I did for I don’t know about five or six years maybe. Whoever was there, that’s who I’d identify with. That seemed to be the only way it would work. So when we went out there and we heard about this gathering I think there was around one hundred and fifty people or one hundred and eighty people there and it was the most incredible one of the most incredible experiences I ever had. It was so, I felt like I had found my lost family, like I finally found somewhere that I’d belonged. Just for the way I was. There was actually a very physically gender bender person that I met there. This elder who was very, very much physically in the middle of the road between being a man and a woman, just different ways, when we sat together. I would think it was a woman and then two seconds later I would think it was a man. I just kept saying she because she was so much in the middle that I couldn’t, my mind just couldn’t put this person into one place. That is when they explained to me about the 3rd gender. There are really 3 genders. There is the male, female and the gender in the middles and that’s where we all belong and that’s what he explained to me. That’s kind of where my definition of what two-spirit comes from. It just made the most sense at that time. We are the ones who are in the middle we have, we are born with the understanding of what it is like to be a women and what it is like to be a man especially, on an emotional level. Emotionally we have the same, we experience emotions the same way a woman does and we can do it with a man because I know in some psychological fields there is a, they know that men and women experience things differently. Basically the man reacts to something and then experiences it emotionally. Women experience it emotionally and then they react to it. Something like that, it’s kind of like they are tilted to the opposite spectrums to each other and we are born with both of those in place that is how he explained it. It just fit so well with me. Finally I got this term that I could use that I could finally identify myself with that works for all of who I am. Because I am always and it focussed more on me as a human being and my spirit as a spiritual being rather then who I have sex with. That’s the way it has always been. So that was when I first identified as two-spirited and very, very rarely will I refer to myself as gay today, just occasionally when it’s the only term that would work for whatever group of people that I’m with, then I’ll say that. But otherwise I don’t use it all.

Rishona: That makes sense. Is it possible for anyone to be two-spirited?

Person #2: I don’t think so (laugh). We have had these discussions before at gathering and some people prefer to call themselves gay/lesbian/dyke.
Rishona: Some Aboriginal people?

Person #2: And to me that comes from the mainstream gay community. But there are...

Rishona: But to them that would be who they are right? Like, if they don’t identify with having both a male and female spirit then and they are a male and attracted sexually to another male then maybe they have chosen the term appropriately.

Person #2: I think so. Whatever fits.

Rishona: If the shoe fits, wear it.

Person #2: Yeah there are people that feel that way and to me that’s fine and there are other people who just say well I don’t need to call myself anything special. I am a woman or I am a man and I am just like everybody else. I don’t really believe that because we are not (laugh). If we were just like everybody then no one would even notice that we are there. But the reason that we stand out and the reason we go through a really difficult time growing is because we are different, we really are different a lot of us are physically different, we are behaviourally different, we are emotionally different then other men or women. I don’t believe we are the same, I really believe we are a third gender.

Rishona: What about people in other cultural groups? Is it possible for other cultures to have two-spirited people? Or is that just for Aboriginal people?

Person #2: Yeah, in terms of the way I understand the term two-spirited, it has to do with your ability to understand both male and female gender to live both roles. Yeah I think it exists in every other culture. We recognize the fact that there is a whole variation between being excuse, the term, heterosexual and homosexual. That there is a whole gradient of people in between but there are some that are mostly heterosexual, but they, once in a while they have the urge to go and sleep with someone of the same sex. Then there are those who absolutely will never ever have anything to do with the same sex. Do you know what I mean? It’s not like you are just one or the other. So, yeah, I think it is possible for anybody to be, to fall into, to me if qualify as being two-spirited you have to fall somewhere in the middle you can’t be on one end or the other. There are gay men and women who are strictly just into their own gender. They’ve never ever had sex with the opposite gender. It was always the same and for them they don’t have any concepts of what it is like to be a woman, like say for a gay man they don’t understand especially a really masculine gay men they just have absolutely no concept of the female world what so ever. They just totally disconnected from the other half of the woman species, to them I can’t see them as being two-spirited ‘cause they don’t have any of us understands, and vice versa with some women, they are like that.

Rishona: Where as a feminine gay male...

Person #2: I would think of him as two-spirited because he would be born...
Rishona: Whether or not he is Aboriginal or not?

Person #2: While I always refer to them as two-spirit if they’re Aboriginal.

Rishona: Just naturally?

Person #2: Yeah, it’s just an identity thing. A contemporary identity term. If I could, if I knew how to say it in their language then I would refer to them in their own language, to what they really are but I don’t so. But I wouldn’t call a non-Native person two-spirited I would just call them gay or lesbian, or whatever, transgendered.

Rishona: If someone is heterosexual or uses that terminology but identifies as two-spirit?

Person #2: That works I mean that, cause yeah...

Rishona: And you didn’t know that from a far you would just identify them as being an Aboriginal man let’s say

Person #2: Well yeah unless they came up and said I am two-spirited. But, yeah that is what I meant you are predominantly one or another or you are definitely down the middle. There are people who I know who are predominantly heterosexual. They don’t go out and have sex with anyone of the same gender but their understanding and the balance that they have between their male and the female sides is so much in place or so balanced that they could very easily sit with a group of other two-spirited people and fit right in and not stand out at all. Yeah, so I believe that two-spiritedness has to do with how balanced you are in the middle there, not necessarily who you have sex with. That’s my basic point.

Rishona: We’ve already some what talked about this as well, but what do you associate the term two-spirit with?

   a) Homosexuality
   b) Another sex besides male/female (third gender/ fourth gender)
   c) Male and female spirits
   d) “Berdache” or any other term
   e) Spirituality
   f) Other (please specify)

Person #2: It would be a few of those. Two-spirited to me, I associate it with (1) spirituality, or spiritual beliefs. Male and female spirits and third gender, I wouldn’t with berdache.

Rishona: No?
Person #2: Berdache, no, it’s my understanding of that term it is like queer, I don’t like the term queer either, it’s like “nigger”.

Rishona: Okay that’s what berdache is?

Person #2: Well, from my understanding of what berdache means, it was the French term for...

Rishona: The passive male in a homosexual relationship.

Person #2: Yes (laugh).

Rishona: I’ve done my reading.

Person #2: Yes, basically that is it, yes, it didn’t have anything to do with who we were as a person, it was just like “fag” or “queer” or whatever right that was just the term they used to describe.

Rishona: Who?

Person #2: The French, it was in some of their literature and it was sort of passed on and it trickled its way up into today and contemporary language. So there are a lot of people that are dead set against using that term at all.

Rishona: It’s extremely derogatory and from my understanding it is a term that was used by researchers and anthropologists to describe …

Person #2: Anyone who is two-spirited.

Rishona: Anyone in Aboriginal communities that might have been, taken on roles that could today be identified as two-spirited, so, healers, medicine people.

Person #2: Oh.

Rishona: Educators, but they would sometimes wear women’s clothing and do women’s work and these researchers would focus on the clothes that they wore and their sexuality as opposed to focussing on what they were doing in the community and/or asking them, it was merely from an observation perspective. Sorry you were going to say something?

Person #2: Yeah, it wasn’t at all in terms of how they fit into their own societies, well they didn’t even recognize that we had societies, most of them anyway. That is the other part that I forgot about, is the warrior societies, they also, a lot of two-spirited men and women made up that society as well. They were considered the braves too, because they were the ones, if your tribe or your village was moving to another spot and you encountered a foreign tribe it was the two-spirited people that went out first. Just
because of the way they were and they were seen as sort of like the powerful people in their society. So, they went out to meet and greet whoever was there first and sometimes they would be killed and other times they would make contact. There are some accounted stories by the European soldiers that came, not the Spanish down South, but up North form the British and the French where they would meet these, well I know they used the term passive a lot then, these men that appeared like women. A lot of times they did that because it threw off the enemy, or whoever it was they were meeting. Because they didn’t know if it was a man or woman coming, a lot of them would not kill a woman. So, this person was able to approach them really closely before they would just kill them.

Rishona: And they didn’t know it was a man or woman based on the clothing they were wearing?

Person #2: Yeah, they would sort of be like gender benders, so they wouldn’t…

Rishona: You have said that before, what do you mean by gender bender?

Person #2: When you can’t tell if it is a man or a woman.

Rishona: So, very androgynous looking?

Person #2: Yeah, androgynous is the term. I know especially in the East that happened, the mentality at that time was that they just wouldn’t kill a woman, cause in general it was always the men that went to war. In the East, the women, it was the matriarchal societies, in the East so they are the ones that ran the communities and the men would go out and fight wars, or hunt or whatever. Any work that involved more muscle, basically the men would go to. Yeah that was another thing I heard.

Rishona: Where have you learned what you know about two-spirit people? Where have you learned it, from?

Person #2: Other two-spirited people over the last ten years from the gathering, a lot from the gatherings, oh that’s the other thing the other modern thing today, is that a lot of the two-spirited people are the more educated ones form the communities. They are the ones that go the furthest in their education, if they don’t commit suicide in their teens, which is very common. They are the ones that go on to university and get their doctorates or what have you. That was the another thing they did a survey in the mid-nineties or something and they discovered that.

Sexuality Component

Rishona: Does a person’s sexuality play a part in the role of a “two-spirited” person?

Person #2: Most of the time I would say yes. For one thing you are not going to experience things the same, if your sexuality is much different from sort of the general
population you are just not going to feel the same and you will seek experiences the same way as others would. So, yeah I think sexuality is an important part of who you are as a two-spirited. There are some, who are completely celibate and they believe that’s just the way it is for them, so they stay celibate.

Rishona: But what would be the correlation between sexuality and two-spirited? Because you have said before that someone can be a heterosexual or placed in that category, married, children and still be two-spirited. You are saying that most of the time for most people.

Person #2: Most of the time it does play a role, basically, if you are attracted at any point or any time in your life to someone of the same gender, that will affect you in a significant way compared to somebody who is only heterosexual or only attracted to the opposite gender. Then that’s the way it is for most people. So, you just experience things the way most people do. But if you are attracted to someone of the same sex then you are just not going to be the same. You are going to do things a little differently, you are going to feel different about who you are. For some people they are just fine with it, they are just like, hey I am going to try this out, they’ll do it. But I think in general, the ability is there to have a sexual relationship with somebody of the same gender. An interesting thing though, in a two-spirited community, you’ll get two feminine men wouldn’t go out with each other, in general. They’ll go out with someone who is more masculine then they are and same with the women, you wouldn’t get two “butch” women going out with each other. They’ll go out with somebody who is more feminine then they are. That’s a common occurrence and there are those who are basically masculine but not really, really masculine. I mean it happens, you’ll have two really “butch” women or two really masculine men together. In general, it is like, say if two feminine men are together and they are going out with each other, people will sort of tease them as being lesbians. As if they were two regular women who were you know getting a little bit to close and vice versa with two really “butch” women. That comes up but I don’t think it is a major issue or anything. It is like a natural selection, if you are both feminine you won’t be attracted to each other. So, it is almost like a heterosexual slice comes out there somewhere (laugh). But, yes I think it has to do with just the fact that if you are not just heterosexual then you are going to behave differently it will affect you differently just by the nature of the beast, it will cause you to be a little more in the middle. If you are a man and you are attracted to another man, even if you are masculine, you are going to have some understanding of what it is like for a woman to be attracted to a man. You have to have some of that emotional or emotionality there in order for that to happen. Do you know what I mean? That’s my understanding of how it would relate to two-spirited.

Rishona: That was going to be the last question, but I will forget this one if I do not ask you. You have mentioned third gender, is there a fourth gender?

Person #2: I have heard people say that, but nobody has ever explained what that is.

Rishona: So, you as a two-spirit person identify with a third gender.
Person #2: Yeah, just because.

Rishona: So you don’t consider yourself male, female you consider yourself something else?

Person #2: Predominantly I identify with the male gender.

Rishona: But you are not entirely, so you take on...

Person #2: No, because there are parts of me that are so much like a woman, that the females in my life, like my sisters or my other female friends think I might as well be a woman because I can understand it so well.

Rishona: Okay. Well what I understood fourth gender to be is that there was male, female, and then there would be male two-spirit people would be maybe third or fourth and then female two-spirit people would be the other. They would take up third and fourth separately. That is how I was explained it. I do not know if that is accurate. But I also heard that if a two-spirit person was in a relationship with someone that was not, how does it work? If you were in a relationship with somebody that is not two-spirit...

Person #2: Which I have been.

Rishona: Then that wouldn’t be, in your eyes maybe that wouldn’t be considered to be a homosexual relationship because you see yourself as being part of a different gender does that make sense?

Person #2: Yes. I have been with women who are just heterosexual and I have been with a couple of men, there was nothing about them that had anything to do with being gay, absolutely nothing. Other then the fact that they were having sex with another man, but it was just that brief little period and then that was it and they just went back to being, living their lives the way they always had. I don’t know how to categorize them.

Rishona: And would two-spirit people be together?

Person #2: Yeah.

Rishona: Right, so a two-spirit male would be with another two-spirit male and that would be...

Person #2: That would be my most ideal relationship, 99.9% of the time I am simply not attracted to anyone who is Aboriginal because I am, I don’t know, I am just not.

Rishona: Because you are?

Person #2: Yeah, because it just feels like they are a relative I feel like on some level we are related, maybe we are, literally related, I don’t know. It could have to do with
that when I grew up on the reserve that all the experiences I had with my own people have been really negative, so maybe that’s it I don’t know. There are a few that I met, I just thought it would be so cool if we could be together because then we could sort of continue on our own cultural path and not have to worry. Because there are people that married non-Aboriginals, when they come to the ceremonies it is always a difficult situation because their spouses can’t participate in the ceremonies. Because they are not Aboriginal, so they sort of have to stay out of the lodge at times, or whatever and that is kind of hard on the relationship and I wouldn’t want to go through that.

Rishona: Yeah that is difficult.

Person #2: I would want my partner to be able to participate fully in everything that is going on.

Rishona: Are you talking about two-spirit gatherings or any ceremony?

Person #2: Just regular ceremonies.

There is a lot of information to digest in this first meeting with person #2. He gives such rich data that it will definitely take some time to reflect upon. Person #2 makes some very interesting points quite early on. I found him to be very informative when he spoke about how the term two-spirit is not offensive and people instantly think negatively when they hear the term gay or homosexual, not to mention all the secondary prejudices that Aboriginal two-spirit people experience, based upon that fact that they are Aboriginal and lead an alternate lifestyle.

He also helps put into perspective the contemporary roles of two-spirit Aboriginal people as for example in personal care homes. This was a difficult hurdle for me to overcome in the literature because it is hard to bring a past tradition into a contemporary world view without having a bridge or link. Once person #2 mentioned the current professions that two-spirit Aboriginal people may do in an urban setting it helped to understand the transfer into the modern world.
Another point that is fundamentally crucial is his definition of who a two-spirit Aboriginal person is. According to person #2,

Two-spirit person is somebody who has the perfect balance or at least relative balance of the male and female gender identity, the yin/yang type energy. They have the ability to have the same kinds of relationships with men and women. They can easily play both roles. They could mother a child or father a child, whether you are male or female (Person #2, July 24, 2001).

I think that this definition is absolutely ideal and puts two-spirit Aboriginal people into perspective. This definition is by a two-spirit Aboriginal person for two-spirit Aboriginal people. Sexuality is not mentioned anywhere in this definition and it is a perfect summary of who they are; people who have the perfect balance of male and female. These are individuals that can have the same type of relationship with both men and women. This definition is so perfect and exactly to the point, that a new definition for two-spirit Aboriginal people, by two-spirit aboriginal is created. This is their voice reclaiming a very beautiful and sacred part of the Aboriginal tradition that has been misplaced.

On a final note for this tape I really felt that when person #2 was speaking about his spiritual side and his female spirit that every researcher should be so fortunate to hear a first account from a truly spiritual Aboriginal person. Physically and visually he is a male, but to hear him describe his female spirit, it becomes very real. This is a balanced person who has a complete understanding of both the male and female genders and can relate to both sexes.

Tape #2 July 31, 2001

Rishona: Do you think anyone who identifies him/herself, as a homosexual is “two-spirited”?  

Person #2: No. Next question. (Laugh)
Rishona: Okay then, well. (Laugh)

Person #2: No, I don’t because, there are people who are just they are strictly into their own gender and they have no interest or understanding of the other genders at all. I have met women like that and men where they just if the other gender fell off the face of the earth; they wouldn’t notice or care.

Rishona: Where as a two-spirit person would care is what you are saying?

Person #2: You have sort of intimate relationships with both genders.

Rishona: I have three parts to that question the next part is do you think anyone who identifies him/herself, as a “two-spirited” person is a homosexual? I think we touched on that a little bit last time.

Person #2: I think for the most part, yes I would say that anyone who identifies as that for the most part is or can have a gay relationships. But I know there are people who aren’t and I have met people who to me are truly two-spirited and they didn’t even call themselves that until it was sort of bestowed upon them by others. Yeah that just had to do with their level of understanding of all the variations of people between heterosexual and homosexual and their understanding to me was so deep that I just felt and thought of them as a two-spirited person. Even though they had never had sex with someone of the same gender they still understood what it was all about. They understood what it was like almost, to the point that it would seem like they would’ve had to of had that experience in order to understand what they did, but they haven’t and I can’t see them lying to me. I mean there was no reason for them to lie, everyone they associated with knows who they are and they had friends who are gay and straight it just didn’t matter. So, yeah basically 80% yes and 20% possible.

Rishona: Okay. So, the last part of that question is; in your opinion is the term “two-spirited” synonymous with homosexuality? Why or why not?

Person #2: Nope, I don’t think it is synonymous. Why not? Because of what I just said there are people with, it is just my own personal definition of what two-spirit is. It has to do with being in the middle and having the full capacity to understand on an emotional, physical and spiritual level what it is like to be a man or a woman. And I think that’s inborn you don’t just become that way along the way, you are born with that kind of insight. So, yeah I can’t say its synonymous because like I said, I have met people who have never had sex with someone of the same gender and they have as much understanding as I do about what that’s like, what that’s about.

Rishona: This is my favourite part, the spirituality section.
Spirituality Component

Rishona: Do you think the role of a two-spirit person is a spiritual role?

Person #2: Yes (with sigh). Absolutely, that was my fourth answer to the your previous question (laugh). That to me is what the biggest missing link is with today’s two-spirit community. Coming from the only community we knew up until a decade ago was this whole “gay”, this whole “homosexual” thing. So we are having to identify with them just because of where things were at with us. I think that is still sort of carry over into today, in that the focus on the sex, sexual part of being who we are wasn’t put there by us it was put there by basically by religion the Church, and primarily Christian...

Rishona: Do you think it is overplayed?

Person #2: Yes. That is why so many people, just if someone is gay that is all they see them, as is a homosexual. Like someone who has sex with someone of the same. They don’t realize there is a whole person there, and I think that is like, it is like an illness to me that has to be healed in that community.

Rishona: Is there a split? I don’t if there are people that are two-spiritied, I mean there are people that are two-spiritied that are not, do not identify themselves as necessarily being homosexuals, so would they, do you think in turn they would be maybe offended? Or is there a split between the definitions and identities, like someone who doesn’t see it as being sexuality role are they less likely to participate?

Person #2: I don’t know I haven’t encountered any splits yet. Just everybody, it is such a new term, that everyone is sort of still working out what the definition, is, for myself I have. I have worked it out for myself and how I consider if somebody is two-spiritied or not. But I haven’t out there I haven’t seen a major split.

Rishona: When you say you yourself have worked it out and you know how you would identify if somebody was two-spiritied, so would that mean that you might consider someone two-spiritied but they may not consider themselves to be two-spiritied?

Person #2: Sometimes, yeah. Sometimes I just in my own mind that is the way I see them, I don’t go up to them and say you are two-spiritied. But I just, that is just the strongest intuitive feeling that I have about them.

Rishona: And are there some people that identify as two-spiritied and really aren’t?

Person #2: Yeah. (Laugh). Yeah, well, particularly men, some of the men that I know, they have no. Actually, not so much with Native men. But a few of them they just have no, they have never had a relationship with a woman. Generally they are the more really masculine types, and they to me if they just don’t have that kind of understanding about the opposite gender or the in between gender then I can’t for myself I don’t look at them as being two-spiritied. See, that is the most important part of the whole definition, is
the spirit part of it. Without that component there, I think we are just lost. If you are just a person that wants to have sex with somebody of the same gender, that’s all you are to me. It is the spiritual component that is the dominant and most important part of being who we are. It is not the fact that I might hop in the sac with another man or that I have been with a woman before or what have you. I really feel that personally sex has very, very little to do with it. To the point that it can be barely included in the definition, because there are studies that have been done with men who are in prison. They are not in any way homosexual. But because of the situation they are in they will have gay sex while they are there. But it still doesn’t make them homosexual, they will just as soon as, they are out of that situation the only thing they want to be with is woman. They have no desire to be with men at all, but because that was the only way to fill that sort of need that they had while they are in prison they had gay sex.

By the same token but on sort of opposite ends of the scale there are people who can sort of force themselves into a sexual situation. But that doesn’t mean that is who they are. And I think that happens with a lot of two-spirited people who sort of think that they have to get married, have kids and have sex with the opposite gender, just to feel normal. But the reason why that happens is because people are so focussed on the sexual part of it. Do you know what I mean? Where as if they focus on the spiritual side of things there lives to me would become much more filling.

Once I identified myself as a spiritual being ten years ago including every part of who I am. The fact that I could have a relationship with a man as much as I did with woman or girls when I was younger. That just seemed so fitting that I finally had an identity for my spiritual self, because up until then I didn’t. Whatever I believe spiritually seemed to have only fit into these religions in a traditional world or in a Church or what have you. They were very specific like you are a man, this is where you are, you are a woman this is where you are, period. Of course I never fit into any of that. So, when the spiritual component of my being was introduced to me, by going to this gathering and actually witnessing this spirit of all of these people while we were there and not paying attention to the sexual aspect at all. That was the most incredible, profound experience I ever had in my life. To be in that group of people of I don’t know 150 or whatever it was and how powerful everybody’s spirits were. How free flowing they were and how strong are understanding and capacity to help each other and understand each other and heal each other that was a really big part of it. There is a certain kind of healing that goes on when we are together like that. It doesn’t happen anywhere else. I get healing when I go to the lodge but there are too many people there that still think that there is something wrong with who I am, so they sort of keep me away in that sort of circular energy that heals everyone is blocked here and there. It is just not as free flowing, I find as it is at the two-spirit gatherings. To me it felt like we were in this big cocoon and this energy was just flowing through all of us. We were all sort of open to it and it was just a really beautiful experience and that’s how I identify myself first and foremost is a spiritual being and the sexual aspect is minor it is just not the reason I identify as being two-spirited at all. It just isn’t. That was my point about these men in jail, just because they have sex with these men in jail does not mean they are gay. So for me just because I had relationships with men that does not mean that’s who I am. So back to this other thing, about that is what I
find the most important aspect that is missing from the whole community, even the gay community at large.

Rishona: On that note though earlier we were talking about how other people have placed sex in the definition. So for example, when I was talking about Sue-Ellen Jacobs and how she has used the term to refer to the former berdache, the transgendered, the transsexuals, gays and lesbians, drag queens, butches, all sorts of things. The one thing that I noticed in that definition is that there was nothing about spirit or spirituality; it was all Westernized terms.

Person #2: 99% of the time they always focus on the sexual aspects of it. The simplest definition that I have come up with for being two-spirited is anything that isn’t feminine or masculine heterosexuality that’s it.

Rishona: If you were to write a book and you were to say, the definition of two-spirit Aboriginal people is anything that is not feminine or masculine heterosexuality. Which means?

Person #2: Anything else (laugh). Whether you are a masculine woman or feminine man or a masculine man with a very deep understanding...

Rishona: It basically means that you can be any person as long as you identify both the male and female spirit inside of you and treat them as equals. So whether you choose to jump in the bed, what you choose to do in the privacy of your own home does not need to be part of a two-spirit persons’ life. Basically, what you do in your own home, in your personal life with somebody else does need to come into a definition of two-spirit people.

Person #2: Yes.

Rishona: Correct. Does that make sense?

Person #2: But it is still inclusive though.

Rishona: You wouldn’t be excluded because of what you do in your home. Right, so nobody would be excluded from this term, but yet it does not need to be part of the definition.

Person #2: Yeah, it is like having gay sex basically is not a qualifier of whether you are two-spirited or not.

Rishona: But it seems to be, when it is listed like that. Gays and lesbians that to me says, if I am having sexual relations with another female that suddenly qualifies me to call myself two-spirit. Do you see where I am wondering about the discrepancies because this is sort of what I am trying to say there is more. I completely agree with you and I was very excited to hear you say, that the spirit is the reason that you have chosen this for yourself and that it is the one thing you don’t hear people talk about enough.
Person #2: Exactly.

Rishona: And I personally. The reason, or the main reason why I am even doing this is because of spirituality, I think that is a large component that has been misplaced. The term that you used links this is what links two-spirit people to two-spirit people of the past.

You know that is what links two-spirit people to anybody. Exactly what you said that is what makes them who they are, the spirit part. Because that is the part that is the least talked about.

Person #2: It is basically excluded.

Rishona: Yes.

Person #2: That is why I think a lot of people are more, a lot are more heterosexual or straight. Gay over the years came to be a derogatory term, but then of course the gay community embraces them, the word queer. I do not like the word queer at all.

Rishona: What do you think of it in the terms of two-spirit people?

Person #2: You mean being included?

Rishona: Yes.

Person #2: I don't know some people do, if they want to, if that is what they feel they identify with then so be it. For me personally, I never would. I jokingly use the term queer sometimes but it is just like "nigger". Black people calling themselves "nigger" now, I find that really sad. I guess gay is probably about the most comfortable term, or the most, the term that I am most comfortable with, in general is gay, just because it doesn't necessarily focus on your sexuality. As much as saying homosexual, I don't know the term homosexual is almost like a dirty word to me.

Rishona: Okay, I see.

Person #2: It is a little less focussed on sexuality. So all those kind of terms I just don't agree with, I would never use them. They all come from the gay community, they are sort of re-empowering themselves by embracing these terms that were used in a derogatory sense against them. I don't know how, but they feel like they get some how empowered by using the terms on themselves. The strange thing is now if I hear somebody who isn't gay calling somebody a queer it is more offensive then if a gay person says it. I still feel that way as well.

Rishona: I have another question for you just on the topic of Western terms and so on. You would associate yourself or identify yourself as being two - spirit. Correct. But you wouldn't call yourself or identify yourself as being gay?
Person #2: Like I said before sometimes I do.

Rishona: Depending on where you are.

Person #2: Just depending on the situation, like if I am with a bunch of people who don’t, who have never even heard the term two-spirited before, then I will just say I am gay.

Rishona: Now I noticed that you are wearing...

Person #2: The rainbow.

Rishona: Yeah, the pride colours, now that is associated with, the rainbow colours are associated with being...

Person #2: Gay.

Rishona: Being gay.

Person #2: Yeah, (laugh) that’s fine.

Rishona: I’m just curious.

Person #2: There are still parts of me that identify with the whole gay community.

Rishona: Of course.

Person #2: There is a lot of that community that is very dear to me and I like the rainbow idea. There are prophecies in the Aboriginal community, different societies or First Nations about the coming of the rainbow people, that is the people that have all the mixed blood. They are the people that will mend all the wars. Maybe it is a mirror.

Rishona: Colours alone are also very significant in the Aboriginal culture alone, are they not?

Person #2: Yeah they are very, very significant. Even in the Midewin, the Midewin flag is almost like a rainbow flag. It has all those colours in it. So, it is like a neat coincidence, if that is what it is, that the coming of the rainbow people. Those prophecies are all similar, it has to do with these people who will come about, who we believe are of mixed heritage. They are the ones, who will mend all the wars and help everyone get along, bring a lot of peace to the world. Coincidentally (laugh), in the gay community a lot of people are very peaceful, very loving, very fun loving and very funny. Very, almost childlike qualities that have survived well into our adulthood lives, in the sort of broad gay community. In the two-spirit community we are finding out that a lot of our roles had to with similar things like that. We were very important people in our societies and we brought a lot of good things, we only brought good things into our villages or families or
what have you. It was medicine, healing, counselling, taking care of windows, orphans and the artwork; it was all really good important things. So, yeah I have sort of embraced the rainbow idea from the broad gay community.

Rishona: Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual individual?

Person #2: Yes. Yeah, I do.

Rishona: How so?

Person #2: There are things that come to me or I can see or experience that I can’t really put into words. There are dreams that I have; they don’t fit in this physical world at all. It just, I don’t know how to describe it, at different times I have tried to explain it but there are experiences that happen in my life that they can’t be anything other than spiritual. Because they just don’t fit into the physical world at all. Our spiritual life to me is very, very intimately connected with our whole, the whole psychic aspect, our intuition. I think intuition is like our spiritual intelligence, that is either drawing us to or repelling us to different situations that we know on some really, really deep level will affect us in this life time, or maybe even after this life time. So, that is a very, very strong part of my life. It is very active important part of my life. There are things that happen, it has to do with people I really love too. There are things that we know that we communicate without really saying words to each other. My dad, adopted dad, passed away in December, it was probably one of the hardest times I ever had with somebody passing away, cause he was one of the most important people in my life. We called him two-spirited because he was like us, he just had this most incredible and he did have relationship with a man when he was younger. But he found out that wasn’t really who he was, it just had to do with the reaction. He had to experience this when he was a kid and he thought that maybe that is what he was, so he tried it out, it wasn’t (laugh). But he was just the most awesome man and when he left this world, it was really, really hard and then I just started hearing him all the time just saying these different things that he said to me while he was here. Sort of reminding me of some of the things that he talked about in our spiritual lives and basically all it is, is that a life ended here but he still goes on. Our relationship is still alive and well, between me and him. I do still hear him talking to me and I still talk to him and I have seen him once in my dreams so far. It is like he went straight on to a really deep place in the spirit world, he went there right away. Some people it takes them a while to get there once they leave here, but he went straight there, where ever that is. Most people might think I am a bit nuts when I say stuff like that, it is just, it doesn’t phase me, sort of speak I just have an understanding that way and that’s the way it is.

Even with my mom, my birth mom who passed away when I was a little kid, she visits all our lives, the four youngest ones, she visited all of us as we were growing up. As each of us, had children she would come and visit us in our dreams and we would introduce the children to her like for those of my siblings that had kids. They would introduce their kids to her and she comes and visits us all the time. In times when I am awake, I just feel her being there like she is just coming to see how we are doing. It’s things I don’t talk about with a whole lot of people because a lot of people because they
have no understanding of stuff like that. It doesn’t matter what religion they are from or whether they are religious or not. Some people just have it, that kind of understanding and other people don’t. I can tell mostly who does and we can talk about it, cause we don’t get to talk about it that often about things that happen to us, sort of our little peeks into the spirit world.

I don’t know if I mentioned it last time, the woman who that I feel whose spirit is in me, she is from a long time ago. My understanding is that she walked the earth more then 500 years ago. She is a really strong woman in her community and she came to me while I was awake. I have dreamt about her before and I have seen her in different ceremonies when we were doing vision quests. I have seen her but I didn’t know that, I just sort of kept wondering who is this woman that keeps appearing in all my visions and all my dreams and so forth. Then I finally understood that is the other reason I really believe in the term two-spirited. I don’t think it just popped out of the blue, I think it was born into English language so we could communicate what it is we are. So, I was sitting there, it was the first time I went to the Midewin ceremonies and everybody had gone to bed. I just wanted to sit outside by the fire until it burnt out, and there was just some burning embers so there was very dim light orangish, reddish light shining on things. We were right by the road and this woman was standing right, I closed my eyes and I was looking at the stars and all of a sudden I realized there was this woman standing there. I was waiting for her to talk and it looked like she was smiling and it almost looked like there were two other women behind her, standing just a little ways behind her. I looked up and I was waiting for her to talk and she didn’t talk and when I looked down I realized she wasn’t standing on the ground, I could see right past, she had a long dress, I guess you can call it. It kind of looked like it was made of buckskin (laugh), some kind of dark brown material anyway. She wasn’t on the ground, maybe about two feet above the ground and that moment I almost got really afraid. I just got this instant sort of panic and it was like she said, don’t freak out you are being silly if you are going to freak out. So I said a little prayer that if this is a good thing then let it be, if it is not a good thing than protect me from it, basically that was my prayer. I just felt really good and was like she came to see me in this physical world. She came to see who I was because I had been going to see who she was all the time in the spirit world in the dreams and in the visions.

Rishona: When did you realize it was the same?

Person #2: That night, when I saw her at the fire. She just came and stood there and had a look at me. She kind of looks like my mom, when my mom was really young. All those kind of experiences they continue to happen through out my life and other times I will be going about and I will just hear voices telling me, sort of warning me about different situations or urging me to go this way instead of that way. I think it is all there for the goodness of my life while I am here. Because none of it has ever led me to somewhere bad, it has always led me away from pain and destruction and violence all that kind of stuff. It’s always led me away from all of that. Whenever I follow it, whenever I follow through my intuition even good things always happen. Something is telling me inside of me that just knows, if something is right or not and half the time it is not a judgement on somebody else, it’s just in here, in my gut. Usually I just follow it and if I
don't then some really bad shit happens and I really regret it (laugh). If I know I shouldn't be doing it and I go ahead and do it anyway then I usually regret it anyway. Prayer is a really important part of my life, it happens all the time, anytime, anywhere. I find prayer is extremely powerful it is not just what do you call that, you know like a construct, just put there by some religion.

Rishona: Do you need to pray, do you pray anywhere or do you need...

Person #2: Nope, I pray anywhere.

Rishona: By yourself?

Person #2: 99% of the time it is by myself. It is privately. Occasionally, and sometimes in sweat lodges I'll just pray out loud, because it is just a safe environment. Other times I will pray with someone. Usually, my Christian friends, they love to pray out loud, they always pray out loud so occasionally when I'm with any of them I'll pray out loud with them. The Christian friends that I like are the ones who understand that what they believe is their own belief and has nothing to do with me or my life. I can really express my own experiences and it is okay with them and that is cool. When people start correcting me or telling me the way it is then I just don't bother. As far as being two-spirited and the spiritual aspect of that, that is what I really believe that is what it is about. Helping everyone not only other two-spirited people, but helping everyone, everyone's journey here be a good one. I have lots of things I have to work out I have lots of problems and lots of setbacks and faults and what have you. But if I had to compare to myself to lots of people I know I am doing really well (laugh). I know for a fact that there are things I need to work out otherwise I think I would just vanish.

Rishona: Well that is a process of life isn't it though, to work and always better yourself.

Person #2: So, I believe that we were gifted with these deeper understanding of situations because that was our place in life, to help people work things through, not to provide answers for them, but maybe provide insight and help draw out the right answers for themselves from themselves. It is always to improve our lives, while we are here. It is not about converting people and getting them to believe what we believe is right or promoting homosexuality or trying to make other people go gay (laugh). I have to laugh because I hear that all the time, I don't know if that will ever go away.

This portion of the interview was a continuation of how person #1 identifies as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. Person #1 makes a very good point that two-spirit has to do with being in the middle and having the full capacity to understand on an emotional, physical and spiritual level what it is like to be a man or a woman. And I think that's
inborn you don’t just become that way along the way, you are born with that kind of insight. So, yeah I can’t say its synonymous because like I said, I have met people who have never had sex with someone of the same gender and they have as much understanding as I do about what that’s like, what that’s about (Person #2, July 31, 2001).

This is so critical in highlighting exactly that piece about sexuality. Sexuality is irrelevant that main characteristic is balance and understanding, if you possess the understanding, it does not matter who you have sexual relations with. It is far deeper then who you have relations with it is a born intuition that you carry with you on your life journey. People who are not having sexual relations with the same sex can still possess the ability to be two-spirited, both Person #1 and #2 feel this way.

Tape #3 Dec. 21, 2001
Side A (The Gathering)

Person #2: Often times we always say, part of the whole best experience of going to the gathering is the actual trip there and back because it is usually far off somewhere. People always have stories of how they got there, usually a really difficult struggle physically getting there, like the car breaking down or whatever. They get lost and what have you, this was pretty tucked into the mountains so you really had to know where you were going. There were little signs stuck up on paper and the moisture made them fold up and fall down. Didn’t have big signs. Anyway, we were leaving there just before the border of Manitoba/Saskatchewan and we drove through the wickedest storm in my entire life ever and one of the girls that I was with she is horrified, absolutely horrified of storms, especially thunder and lightening. She was just turning pale and starting to shake as we were approaching it. It was the hottest day of the summer, last summer when we left it was 37 Celsius here. We are cruising along and thank God there is some cloud coming over there, thin bale and then we get over just past Brandon and we see this big anvil thing coming and on the bottom of it we can see this roll that comes on the bottom. Whenever you see that you know a wicked storm is coming. I forget what they call that. It’s just like this big cloud then there is this thin roll that is rolling towards you. Anyway, those are the things that turn into tornadoes. Especially when you see green and the sky looks green. Of course right at that area you ascend, it is like 800 metres higher and so we are driving into it. It was so deadly there was water all over the highway and it was coming down so fast we didn’t even get a chance to pull off the highway. For us, that was the doorway we went through, even I was scared. It was midday and we could not see ahead of us. All the traffic stopped, I was going about 30 and I was like oh, my God.
Rishona: Were you driving?

Person #2: Yeah, I took over once we got to the storm because both of them couldn’t, one of them was hiding on the floor on the back, she couldn’t even look up (laugh).

Rishona: (laugh)

Person #2: It was so horrifying you literally couldn’t see anything other then about 10 feet of the road around you. It was just grey dark, dark grey. It was very scary. It got quieter and quieter and quieter and at last none of us were talking. What’s happening? Our we going to get swept away, I was expecting to fly off at any second. Oh and the wind was, the trees were bending right over. So anyway we get through this and it is just beautiful, beautiful sunny day. It did something to us psychologically, it was like we left whoever we were our lives, everything was just left behind, we were just these little newborn heading off to this gathering. That is the way it felt. We had a beautiful trip there, strange things happened all the way there. The gathering itself was in this mountain resort and it was just one of the most beautiful places ever. It was a big lodge with rooms, showers and everything and then a big field that went out to the river, I don’t know what they call the river. It was maybe about 200 feet wide and this lush green grass right out to the river and there is where the big fire was and the sweat lodge. Then there was huge 300 feet fern tress on either side just beautiful, beautiful place.

Rishona: Where was it?

Person #2: Near Mission B.C. the Shahalass lodge in B.C., around the August long weekend. We had the most beautiful thing, this is the first time this ever happened, the people, the tribe from that area they came and did and a welcoming ceremony to us. Which was really beautiful a mother, her two sons, and a daughter and their two sons and a daughter, her three children’s two sons and a daughter all came. The father couldn’t come because he was running the fish shop. They sang these beautiful songs and welcomed us to their territory and especially welcomed us as two-spirited people. None of them were two-spirited and it was just beautiful, totally beautiful. These kids were just so proud of who they were, they weren’t shy and they said our kids are going to do this dance for you, welcoming feast dance. They started singing and these little kids just went out in the middle of us and started dancing away which as you know, Native kids are usually shy but these kids had no qualms about their identity at all. This is who we are and they went out and danced and it was really nice. We invited some drums for the pow-wows, we had the local area drum, another drum group, like a bigger drum, and then a prairie drum group, so there were three kinds of drum groups there for the pow-wow. There were people that I haven’t seen in five years that showed up there, which were really good friends, since I left B.C. It was good to see them, the ones who survived (laugh), they are doing really well, they moved on to professional careers. It was really good to see that and to hear that they are doing well. You get so used to hearing that one passed away and that one is a severe alcoholic and this one is in the hospital and this one committed suicide (laugh) like that kind of just goes on and on. So, you are kind of like so how, is so and so doing and you are kind of afraid it...
Rishona: Is that something that is prevalent in the two-spirit community?

Person #2: Yes. Definitely. Especially. Like here, my group of friends here, were always amazed that all of us are still alive considering the lives we lived and the way things were. Like me living on the street and all of us being severely into drugs and a lot of them were into prostitution and all this kind of stuff, right. The fact, that none of us got HIV and survived, some of us have over come are addictions. I think there was about a 100, 120 people around there. About three quarters, were male sort of speak (laugh). Dr. Terry Tafoya was there, he did a really good presentation. There was some conflict because there was this guy there that the grandmothers, we call them, they are only in their 40’s and 50’s but because we don’t really have any elders yet in our community everyone just calls them the grandmothers, including the men. Some of the men are called grandmothers too (laugh).

Person #2: The staff invited all their family to come and meet us just to see what we were like (laugh). It was really nice, come on over, come and have a look (laugh).

Rishona: (laugh) They don’t have three eyeballs.

Person #2: So that was kind of interesting. They did some sweats, but I didn’t go in any sweats. The other part of it to is that people who have issues, it brings their issues to a forefront, as well. So some people have a really hard time when they get there. It is the first time they are experiencing a safe place where they could let it all out and not hold anything in and not wear any masks. So it is like all of a sudden they could just be who they are and a lot of times a lot of pains comes out because most of the time they are repressing it. When you are out there in the world you repress it even more and you put on even more masks to try to seem normal. So you know, a lot of people deal with a lot of stuff they come to terms with a lot of things. But overall it is a beautiful healing experience.

Person #2: Then we did a pow-wow. It was just really, really beautiful. The best thing of all was all of the non- two-spirit people there. Who come and expressed a lot of beautiful things about, you know, there is enough space in this world for all of us. There is no need for all of this crap that people dish out particularly with religions and that we are all part of the family and all this kind of prejudiced didn’t exist before. It is like they know on some level deep down inside of them that we’ve always had a rightful place in our communities.

Rishona: These are Aboriginal people that came and said that?

Person #2: Yeah.

Rishona: From all over or a specific

Person #2: From all over that area, like the singers, some of them were from Edmonton and Interior B.C. and the West Coast. That’s why I was hoping to meet with
Rishona: Is there anything, are there little, you’ve mentioned the sweat lodges that you didn’t go to. Now were they being offered all throughout the day, anyone could go?

Person #2: Yeah.

Rishona: So what would people that weren’t involved in sweats do? Were there other discussions?

Person #2: Yeah. It is like feast after feast after feast for one thing. Most ceremonies are like that. Lots of food. People usually hang out 80% of the time. Everybody is laughing just laughing letting out so much good feelings. Telling stories and jokes and whatever and humour is incredible and we went for hikes a couple times. We went for hikes over these two little mountains. Then you come down and there is this big rocky cliff that you climb down and then we all went swimming in the water there and it is fresh glacier water. It’s cold (laugh) but it is awesome there is something, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the expression living water, like they talk about this living water that adds all this life energy and you drink it and it helps you with your health and everything. Now I know what they mean because all of us that swam in that water, it was like literally, a spiritual bath. When we came out, we were so changed we all felt as if we were high there is just something about it, it just has a kind of energy it’s not like swimming in a lake here (laugh). You come out, you feel like you’ve been cleansed spiritually, mentally as well, not just physically it is just a, I don’t even know how to describe it, it is just a really beautiful feeling. There is no shame, there is no guilt all of that is gone, you come out and you are just a fresh human being almost that is the way we all felt. So it was worth this journey over these two little mountains to get there and we went there every other day. So that was about a three hour journey there and back.

Rishona: Were there leaders, were there people that were leading these things?

Person #2: Yeah. There are usually people that are appointed other than the hosts who run it. The host did an awesome job. It was him and just like I think four or five other people and they just did an awesome job. Everyone was well taken care of and it was very well other activities they did presentations, they did little workshops.

Rishona: What were some of the seminars and workshops on?

Person #2: Well Dr. Tafoya did two, I missed two of them that’s when I went to Vancouver.

Rishona: You missed both his presentations?

Person #2: No, I missed two other presentations. On drugs and alcohol addictions I think there was one on family violence that I missed.
Rishona: What did Dr. Tafoya present on?

Person #2: He did similar to what he did before but with newer information on sexuality mostly related to men or there genders he did a presentation on genders. That is the part I wanted to talk about actually.

Rishona: Did he talk about third gender and fourth gender.

Person #2: Yeah. He talked specifically what those genders were and what tribes they are from.

Person #2: Yeah. I can. Ahhhhhhh... from what I do remember from what was being said was that there is physically a man and a woman and on both sides there is specific genders. For the man there is the gender of being in between a man and a woman, psychologically and physiologically those are two separate genders and same with the women. But the women had an extra gender, and I can’t remember specifically what it is was, but I know that women had another one, or maybe two.

Rishona: So then really there is more then the third and fourth gender.

Person #2: Yeah, there is several.

Rishona: Right. That sounds like there is a fifth and sixth.

Person #2: There are several variations.

Rishona: And these, are the way he was presenting it would have been directly linked to two-spirit people, these people would identify themselves as being two-spirit?

Person #2: Yeah. However they did that in their own languages. There is a woman, one woman who comes she is one of the grandmothers. They always do a comedy skit, they are really funny. Anyway, she was born and raised in the traditional two-spirit way from one of the Southern states not Alabama.

Rishona: Georgia.

Person #2: Georgia I think. No, no it is near the desert. Anyway Southern states or somewhere. What’s above Texas? There is New Mexico. Oh, New Mexico. She was one of the only people that we know that was still raised that way. When she was born they knew she was going to be two-spirited, but they had another name for it. So, for her she was raised and encouraged and accepted in that way with her all her relatives and her community. It was never like she was a big dyke or she was a lesbian. It was just however they say it, that is who she was. She wasn’t a man or woman she was this, the word they use. The only time she ever experienced any negativity was when then they left her area or little town or whatever sometimes they would tease her.
Rishona: Can you physically describe her, why would she have been teased? What made her, how did she not look?

Person #2: I don’t know what she looked like when she was young but at this point she looks masculine. She has big arms, big shoulders, she always has a brush cut and doesn’t wear make-up or anything or pluck her eyebrows (laugh) or anything like that. She is kind of masculine looking. She has kind of a husky voice (laugh).

Rishona: Where is she from, New Mexico? Where does she live now?

Person #2: She still lives down there. So, for her, she grew up knowing it was a good thing, it was positive experience for her. So we all look at her like wow (laugh).

Rishona: I guess you can’t maybe you can’t really answer this, does she identify herself as being, like in terms of sexuality would she, does she classify herself as being two-spirited or does she use the word lesbian? Is sexuality a big part of her life?

Person #2: Yeah, she has another female partner. When we are joking around and everyone is socializing we will use those kinds of terms like dyke and lesbian and all that kind of stuff. But when we are sitting down in the circle, during ceremonies and that she will use her, whatever it is in her own language or she will say two-spirited. Sort of like when it is in a serious context she will say, I don’t know what she says when it is all the women there though, cause they do have things for just the women and just the men.

Rishona: What do they do have for just men?

Person #2: Probably all the same things, specific sweats, certain kind of sweats. Say if they are doing a sweat on healing from abuse, it might be only men. For me personally that’s the way, what I’ve learned with the lodge, the other lodge I’ve gone too, is that, that is the way it is supposed to be, there wasn’t supposed to be co-ed sweats. There are supposed to be two, like one for men and one for women. From what I heard, my understanding is that for two-spirited people, the ones who are very much down the middle they went to either one. It was okay for them to go to either one.

Rishona: Is it still?

Person #2: Some places I have heard of it happening.

Rishona: What about at the two-spirit gathering, were there co-ed sweats?

Person #2: There was before, but the last few I have gone to there hasn’t been, there was at this one.

Rishona: Oh there was.
Person #2: But I didn’t go to it. There was a couple there and then the rest were all just men, just women. So, you still divide it up that way, even though you can be extremely feminine and you only wear women’s clothes.

Rishona: Was there representation of that type of person there, that only wears women’s clothing?

Person #2: Yeah, oh yeah.

Rishona: Do they only wear women’s clothing year round no matter what they do?

Person #2: As far as I know. It’s not like drag you know where they put on a modern dress.

Rishona: No.

Person #2: They look like Kookums, like they will wear...

Rishona: They look like?

Person #2: Grandmothers.

Rishona: Oh, okay.

Person #2: They wear those long like a dress I guess you could say.

Rishona: Like a moo-moo.

Person #2: I don’t know.

Rishona: You don’t know what a moo-moo is, it is like a long one piece, wide...

Person #2: Like a skirt?

Rishona: Like a night gown (laugh).

Person #2: (laugh) Yeah, the ones who have come, that is what they wear usually and they just look like a grandmother most of the time. The women that have come there, they just wear overalls.

Person #2: During a lot of the workshops they had, they always have a little crafts table. So, people go and they make stuff for their give away.

Rishona: Is that a big part of any ceremony, or is that specific to, or more specific to the two-spirit people?
Person #2: Well having a crafts table there, I have only seen that at the two-spirit gatherings. The give away is part of all services.

Rishona: I will tell you why I ask. When I went to the two-spirit organization in Toronto they were telling me how they do lots of arts crafts. I was like okay but what else do you do? And they were telling me how they have arts and crafts on this day and arts and crafts on that day. People come in and do crafts and we have discussions and we do some HIV awareness. I was really confused because now maybe there is something to that though, maybe there is something with arts and crafts being connected to two-spirited people that I was missing.

Person #2: The only intrinsic thing about it for us was that often times I heard that we were the artisans of our communities a lot of times they sat and did all the kind of beadwork and they sort of invented all that stuff. I have heard that with Chippewa who were part of the Ojibway linguistic family. So that is part of our whole, what do you call it, there is a genetic behaviour that we have. That I have no problem agreeing with because you know we are not, even though I could be a fearless warrior, I won’t go out and look for trouble or start trouble or try and prove that I am whatever, right? Where as other men that is what they have to do in order to feel like they are a man. Same with arts and crafts stuff, I could sit down and do lots of arts and crafts and it doesn’t hinder my identity at all (laugh). Where as another man might go that is girly stuff and they will stay away from it. To me that is not prejudice or anything that is built in. I believe that very strongly. I believed that before I heard all of these scientific experiments about that.

Rishona: Now is there a specific, like you have mentioned pow-wows and sweat lodges and those are ceremonies that any person can be involved in are there or were there any ceremonies that are strictly specific to two-spirit people?

Person #2: They did mention different things. There is a way that we dance. Most pow-wows, most everything always goes clockwise or with the sun and if you are two-spirited you go the other way. That specifically only happens at two-spirited gatherings.

Rishona: Okay and what if a two-spirit person is involved in a regular pow-wow. Would they go backwards?

Person #2: I have heard that discussed before and some people said that in certain tribes they did or they are referred to as Windego Cons, they are the ones that did everything backwards.

Rishona: Is there some overlap then between two-spirit people and...

Person #2: The Windego?

Rishona: Yes, the person that walks backwards. What are they called?

Person #2: The person that walks backwards?
Rishona: Yeah.

Person #2: The Windego Cons. That is Ojibway, as far as I know. I don’t know it seems to me that a lot of the Windego cons are two-spirited. So, I would have to say there is some link there or overlapping.

Rishona: So, when they teach two-spirit teachings, are there specific two-spirit teachings?

Person #2: Not since I have been going.

Rishona: So having a man wear a dress would be considered to teach other men what not to do, right? That is the idea behind the backwards, the person that does everything backwards, right? Is that they would do the opposite of what the norm would be.

Person #2: Well for instance at the lodge, the Midewin lodge where I go they have the Windego con to come in. Yeah, actually you are very similar, you are on the right track. In order to know it is daylight you would have needed to have seen darkness, in order to know that it is cold you needed to have been in the warmth. It is similar to that. So they would do different things to know that they are going in the opposite way that the rest of us are supposed to be going. The dancing circles and so forth. That is part of it, the rest of it I am not so sure about.

Rishona: Okay. But at the two-spirit gathering, you guys would go counter clockwise.

Person #2: Yeah, when we dance, and that was really hard for me to do at first. I had never even heard of it. But now it seems natural, it’s because we are different.

Rishona: Do they teach you that, do they say we are different this is what we do that is different from what other people do, or this is how you can, do they say this is how you recognize someone that is two-spirited? Or what if you encounter someone that you, is there anything like that?

Person #2: Specifically. Say even today when you are doing sort of traditional things it is very, very slowly makes its way back into our traditional communities. For instance, a non- two-spirited man wouldn’t go help women do specific things. But if you were a two-spirited man you could go and help them, so you’d know that, that man was two-spirited if he went along with these women to do specific things.

Rishona: What would these specific things entail?

Person #2: Things that are typically women’s work, like gathering water. Most, a lot of tribes the women were always the water bearers and picking medicines. Some tribes that was exclusively the two-spirited people who did that picked the medicines. Of course
today it is about half and half from what I can gather. I am trying to think in modern terms. So, there are specific things that only women would normally do. A lot of women do the beadwork and making all the outfits and everything. A smaller portion of men make their own outfits. But to do the really intrinsic stuff, I mean intricate stuff. I don’t know any non-two-spirited man who does it. It is always women or two-spirited men that do it. But it is not like that is the law, that is the way it happens.

Rishona: No, no obviously there is...

Person #2: That is the way it happens. Normally at different ceremonies it would.

The Gatherings are still a very new and recent piece in the two-spirit culture. A gathering takes place every couple of years and two-spirit Aboriginal people from all over get together to discuss, learn, teach, heal and retreat in a healthy and spiritual atmosphere. This type of knowledge is not available in the literature. To learn that co-ed sweats take place and that two-spirit Aboriginal people are supposed to dance backwards, is rewarding. The Gathering has so many positive affects, and is based on spiritual balance. Sexuality is not discussed. It is a time for sharing knowledge of the past to better each person for the future.

The way person #2 passionately speaks about the journey and the Aboriginal people welcoming them to their home is uplifting. It is incredible to hear of the many people that came from all over to share their stories. It is also good to learn that there are many people who were brought up as a two-spirit, like person #1, and that there are also many more like person #2 who finally found the balance after years of unanswered pain. It is this type of atmosphere that generates a positive outlook. These individuals will be able to teach others and educate others so that people can be who they are without being told it is wrong.
Rishona: I am just trying to understand what makes, basically, what makes a two-spirit gathering, as opposed to gathering for a pow-wow or a feast. What would the main, if you could identify three to five main differences between a two-spirit gathering and a Pow-wow or a feast or a big get together on your...

Person #2: Or any other ceremonies?

Rishona: Yeah. What would be the primary differences that you would be able...

Person #2: The primary, the major difference is that the defined borders of being a man and a woman are not there. We roam freely from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Rishona: That was very well put.

Person #2: The other thing is it’s...

Rishona: Would that be obvious to someone’s naked eye? If someone came that wasn’t, didn’t know where they were or what kind of gathering they were going to, if they saw all 120 of you would they in their heads be able to say: There is a broad spectrum of people here.

Person #2: I don’t know.

Rishona: Or would they just think, or would they be able to look and say these people look like...

Person #2: Yeah, actually, probably every view is expressed by the non-two-spirited people who came. This woman showed up there on the first day and she had just heard about it and she wanted to come and check it out, because there are different ceremonies that travel all over the place. So, she came and she was involved and she was eating with everyone, but nobody ever said gay or lesbian or anything like that. Everyone was just going about their business, visiting, talking and getting ready to go to ceremonies. It didn’t even occur to her for the first half day she was there. She just thought oh, these are all these people la, la, la and she didn’t think anything of it. I don’t know how she finally came to the, got clued in that it was not your usual gathering, because otherwise nothing in particular stood out to her. I mean there is a lot of women that look like women there is a lot of men that look like men.

Rishona: Absolutely that is why I am asking.

Person #2: Those that are all in between didn’t really stand out because when you are in that environment it’s...

Rishona: Just people.
Person #2: Yeah, just people and there is no hard edges it is all soft rounded edges, you know. So everyone just blended in very easily and it wasn't. So I think overall she walked in to that whole community of the way things were. It didn't even occur to her that things were, because if you go to a regular ceremony there is, to me (emphasized) there is men are always trying to prove that they are men, at the Midewin ceremonies. They are always having to define themselves by their differences with the women. The women, are always having to prove that they can get the job done, that is what I find at regular ceremonies.

Rishona: That would be another main difference.

Person #2: Yeah with a regular ceremony, where as here it is, there is no proof. I find everyone a lot more honest at the two-spirited gatherings. Because this is all I know, this is what I am expressing, this may or may not be right, but this is all I know at this point in time. That is how they express it and it's...nobody ever has to prove much, it does come up occasionally. But I find that at regular ceremonies people have to do that all the time. It seems like the men more then the women. Oh well, I am a man this is what I have to do. The role playing is really apparent at regular ceremonies.

Rishona: Do people try to play into who they think they need to be?

Person #2: Yeah, it’s very evident to me. It’s like oh I am a woman I have to do things this way, I have to be like this, I have to cry more easily, you know whatever and the man it’s like I have to be stronger to absorb the pain. Where as at the two-spirited gatherings it is like it doesn’t matter if you are a man or a woman. If you are butch or feminine you just express what you feel and it doesn’t matter who you are, you could cry or laugh, I think that is a really important difference. For me I feel it is a sense of relief when I am there it is like I don’t have to play any roles it’s like this is who I am, here it is, that’s it. When I do that at the regular ceremonies people just don’t know how to respond to me but is like, I don’t know they just don’t know what to do with me. Even the chief of the lodge doesn’t know what to do with me. I am not going to put on any roles to be there and fit in and they are not equipped to handle me (laugh). Where as other two-spirit people go the regular ceremonies and they play all the roles, they get right in there with all the roles so it is like oh, okay well you’ll go in that category.

Rishona: At the gathering did they discuss any of the current debates that are happening between organizations and elders and people who identify as two-spirit people and who can use the term and who should not use the term. Did any of that come up?

Person #2: Not in any of the discussions I took part in. In terms of the term two-spirited, it is a new term, so when people come up and, they are words that we use in all of our languages so when people come and say this is what it means and that is it. It is like what I say is the correct and true way of using the term, they are full of shit because it is a brand new term. The term never existed, you can’t say two-spirited in any of the languages. The language they use, like the Ojibway language, there is no word for man or woman it is just, you’re a mother, you’re a father, you’re a son, you’re a daughter. I’d be
called Myungen hlimb€, I wouldn't be called him. Do you know what I mean? The words are suggestive, like when we point with our lips. If I went, you know, the medicine is right there, that would mean you are carrying the medicine, it wouldn't be she carries the medicine. Do you know what I mean? So that is why there was no problem with this whole gender thing, cause there was no gender specific language.

Rishona: Is that typical of most Aboriginal languages or just Ojibway?

Person #2: Many except the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, as far as I know. They had a language just for women and a language just for men (laugh).

Rishona: Now when you say that do you mean it was the same language but they had different grammar for men and women so you knew who was speaking it and when they were speaking?

Person #2: Yes.

Rishona: Did you find that most people at the gathering referred to themselves in an Aboriginal term or as two-spirit or as gays and lesbians?

Person #2: Actually all those who know the term, like there were a few people there who knew the term and that's what they would say.

Rishona: So, if they for example they belong, or part of the Winkte, they would say Winkte.

Person #2: Yes.

Rishona: If they were part of Haux'an, H, a, u, x, do you know how to say that? H, a u, x, 'a, n, I only know how to spell them all, I don't know how to say them.

Person #2: No (laugh).

Rishona: Then they would use that term.

Person #2: Yeah, or if they are a Navaho, they would say Natlis. A few times people thought of the Ojibway word but... As far as I can, for me only knowing English, it is hard for me to remember the other names. I don't know, there is a certain kind of cohesion that happens at these gatherings, that doesn't happen anywhere else. Everybody, I don't know, it is like everybody goes into a different mode when they get there, it's like, it's almost as if there is hidden knowledge that we have that we don't even know about that doesn't come out until we get there. People, who have been partying for the last twenty years, will all of a sudden remember all of their ceremonies. Oh and the one beautiful thing that I like best is since all of us are coming from different cultural areas or backgrounds, we are rotating the fire keepers because they light the sacred fire at the beginning and it stays lit for the whole time. You know from almost every imaginable
tribe and culture in North America, they are all there. So, this one morning it was my turn to go and watch the fire early in the morning and everybody has sunrise ceremony, so I did the sunrise ceremony I know about from the Ojibway and Midewin stuff. I have only been to one so I did what I could remember from it. This other guy from Lakota got up and he came and did his and yet another person got up from one of the Ceolotion or one of the Coastal tribes and it was just so neat the way it happened. Because I go there and I am looking after the fire and then the sun was just starting to come up. So I started doing what I needed to do and then this other person came and another one, I think there was four of us all together. But all four of us were doing our own different ceremonies in total, total unison. It wasn’t planned, it wasn’t like we were trying to keep up with each other we were just doing whatever we knew. It was just amazing the way it was so, say at the Midewin one or the Ojibway one they will kind of crack jokes about other tribal people. Well that’s your tribe, we don’t do that here or what have you, right. Where as here it is like, it’s totally accepted and we learn from each other about whatever cultural stuff we know. It’s openly shared and we understand that yes that is Lakota and yes, this is Ojibway and yes that is Ceolution and it is no big deal. I just thought it was so beautiful the way we all did the sunrise ceremony without any judgement or hindrance to one another, all at the sacred fire.

Rishona: And that is a ceremony that comes from your own group, not, anyone can do that right, anyone can do the sunrise ceremony?

Person #2: Yeah, if you know what to do.

Rishona: Right.

Person #2: Yeah, if you know what to do, but that goes with your tribal group, not specifically two-spirited. Stuff like that I really loved and the intermingling of all the different kinds of songs from the different areas, the West Coast songs, the Eastern songs, you know the mid-west songs whatever. They all have different drum rhythms and different types of drums and it was just beautiful the way it all just intertwined so smoothly, that was one thing I really liked about it.

Rishona: I am really curious to know and I was waiting to ask you because you might have just said it. Were there people there at the ceremony that if asked or so forth would not, that there sexually was not, like it didn’t matter if they were asked by someone that didn’t know if they were heterosexual or homosexual, were there people there that would have identified as heterosexuals, but were still two-spirit at the ceremony, if you know?

Person #2: Well there was one woman there that was like that, she didn’t come out and say it, she didn’t talk about having a girlfriend or anything like that. She had children and a husband, but nobody ever just came right out and said it.

Rishona: Right, no, yeah.

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Person #2: But she never, ever expressed the fact that she had a girlfriend or anything like that. She always just said us two-spirited people ... nobody felt like she wasn't two-spirited, do you know what I mean? She was totally part of the group. She was a medicine picker, and she just knew that, that's who she was. I noticed that she never, some of the other women they will flirt around and whatever and she wasn't like that at all. But she was still totally accepted as part of the group but nobody ever asked her specifically. So she may have been, you know, one of these people.

Rishona: But it is not something that came up, it wouldn't have mattered.

Person #2: No.

Rishona: So, someone that was married with kids or so forth and identified as being two-spirit would have been completely 100% accepted at this ceremony and not have felt...

Person #2: As far as I know, yeah.

Rishona: Okay.

Person #2: Because there are people who have come who are heterosexual and they make it a point all the time to say I am heterosexual, I am heterosexual, I am heterosexual.

Rishona: Why do you think they do that?

Person #2: I don't know, most heterosexuals always do that, that is just their nature (laugh), they can't help it (laugh). I have always noticed that though, the ones who are heterosexual who come, who are just specifically heterosexual they always seem to go out of there way to make sure that everyone knows that. Yeah, I find that a lot. Like at the other gatherings where they have come, oh I am not one of you I am heterosexual, they always sort of make a point of getting that across to everyone. I am sure not all, because there are some people who I thought were two-spirited but they weren't, who came to the gatherings and they sort of got up an announced to the group that they were heterosexual. A couple of times, it was, on one hand all we ever hope for is to be included in the broader community, but the resistance comes from when to be included we have to become like everyone else in the broader community and relinquish who we are naturally. That's where the resistance comes from but there is still a very strong need to be accepted and be part of the broader community. So often times we get people who aren't two-spirited will come into the gatherings and they say stuff like you know, we shouldn't be separating ourselves from everybody else in the same way we are naturally trying to work together here. Why have these ceremonies separately when you can just come to the normal, they always say normal ceremonies and live a normal life, like everybody else. For us that is like, a white person coming to us and saying why can't you just be normal like us (emphasized), you know, why do you have to be an Indian (laugh)? But that is what is seems like when people come to us and say stuff like that. Because if it was true, if we could be “normal” in that community we would have been a long time ago, but we are not. We are always,
we are exiled, not by choice we are left out not by choice you know, that is the way it is done to us. They call us by whatever name, you are different, you are not like any of us, stay away or whatever; that was mostly taught to them by missionaries and people like that. So we have to have separate gatherings because of that, if things were okay in our, in the broader communities we wouldn’t even be having specific two-spirit gatherings because we would always be included in everything that is going on. For those of us who do include ourselves in, like for me, the Midewin ceremonies and every other two-spirited person there, it is by choice. It is not so much that I want them to accept me but it is for me to accept them into my world and I think that is the change over that a lot of people make when they start going to regular ceremonies. We realize it is a choice to have them in their lives, it is not the other way around. There are people there that don’t accept me either...

Rishona: That don’t accept you at?

Person #2: At the Midewin ceremonies.

Rishona: Because you’re...

Person #2: Two-spirited, they come from, it is so obvious that there is a heavy Christian influence in the ceremonies of today, it is obvious I’ve even heard the bible quoted sometimes, even though it is supposedly a traditional thing. Almost everyone who is involved in our traditional ceremonies have gone through religious schools.

Person #2 brings up an extremely crucial point in this section. He discusses why two spirit Aboriginal people have their own gatherings. Why is it not possible for them to be part of the larger gatherings? He points out that many Aboriginal people were taken through the European education system religiously and were taught to condemn their way of life. People have always asked them why they can not be normal. He makes a good point that for many two-spirit Aboriginal people they were exiled from the larger European communities as well as their own. If they could have been “normal” they would have been but this is not a choice.
Tape #4 (March 19, 2002) Two-spirit Resources

Rishona: How do you feel about various organizations such as the Rainbow Resource Centre and Nine Circles Community Health Centre adding two-spirit literature to their resources?

Person #2: I think it is a really good idea. I think it’s a really excellent idea because a lot of people aren’t familiar with the term and those who are and a lot of people who aren’t even sure what it means. That little bit of material that have, it is good that they have some resource they can go to learn a little bit more about it or maybe add stuff to it if they know. I haven’t read and gone through what they have there yet. I am not sure what is there so (hahaha). Maybe it’s a bunch of crap. The idea of them offering information in a facility like that I think that Nine Circles is a really good facility too. I wish some Native organizations could come together and work together like that. So I think it is a good place to start anyway.

Rishona: Do you see this as a positive step of awareness or do you see this as possibly stepping on sacred and spiritual ground that should be left off the shelves. I know you kind of answered that already, but I’d like you to elaborate if you could on the sacred and spiritual components; because I think that much of the literature that they may shelf, as anywhere may not show the entire picture. I don’t know how you feel about that.

Person #2: Well. For sure I see it as a positive move because there is nothing out there right now and there is not a whole lot of places anyone can go for any sort of spiritual, cultural or traditional stuff, very few are two-spirit or not. So for someone to come along and say that they are desecrating something sacred by sharing that information I think they are full of shit because we are only relearning a lot about our own history within are own community and nobody out there has the information all down pat in a book that says this is what you can do and this is what you can’t do. We are all just rediscovering that as time goes by just from within ceremonies we get direction or some actual legends that may have survived or stories and even from books that Europeans wrote during the earlier years about who we were and what are impressions of who we were. It is like an amalgamation of all that information and I think that should be available to anyone who wants to learn about it. There are ceremonies that happen that will never be written those will always be private and the media sort a speak would never be allowed into it. I think sharing information is a positive move.

Rishona: Just out of curiosity what would you tell someone like if someone disputed that and felt that was wrong and this is sacred and it shouldn’t be talked about how would you debate that issue with them what would you say to help convince them that it is important.

Person #2: First of all, I would question what their motives were to not share information, like why would they be holding that back and why wouldn’t they make it available to anyone. I would ask them why they continue to act like they have something to hide. I don’t believe that there is anything shameful about who we are and that we need
to keep anything to ourselves. I need to know what other reasons they have other then that is what my first impression would be oh we have to hang on to this little morsel, keep it a secret; which I am totally against to begin with. I think it should be open to everyone and you know we have beautiful spirits too share. I think it is unnecessary. So they would have to convince me of what those reasons are and maybe I might even agree with them.

Rishona:    Alright, do you know of any myths or legends or historical accounts, documentation of photographs or traditional knowledge that you feel will enhance this research project.

Person #2:    Yes. There are photos by oh my god, I can’t remember his name. Around the turn of the century he took tons of photographs of all of the North American Indian Project, I think it was called. I can’t remember his name. Anyway he has pictures of people where you really can’t tell whether they are men or women and their garb is mixed. Something a man would traditionally wear also something a woman would traditional so there are some photographs around so that Dr. Sakoya, I might have mentioned him before. Yeah Dr. Sakoya from the states.

Rishona:    Dr. Terry Tafoya.

Person #2:    Terry Tafoya he has a lot of pictures, well not a lot but some that he keeps with his portfolio or whatever that he uses in presentations. He knows of a lot of myths and yeah there are other people that I have met in the gatherings over the years who have shared their stories about what their roles were and I may have spoken of them. Their roles were to be their families historians. Some are wedding counselors a lot of them were medicine people.

Those books I may have mentioned before Spirit in the Flesh, Two-Spirit People and those are the two books I remember right now. They, collect some of the information that was written by the Europeans over the last couple hundred years.

Rishona:    Have you read both of them?

Person #2:    Yes, but it was within the last ten years (laugh). I just remember some of the stories about how sometimes they would send two-spirit men forward almost like a decoy if strange people were approaching. Other then that I don’t remember much else. I lent them out and they never gave them back.

Rishona:    That’s funny, my Two-Spirit People book is also currently missing. Vanished.

Is there anything else you would like to tell that would help me to understand the term two-spirit as a final thought?

Person #2:    I hope we can recapture in our lifetime in the next several decades is that we can be reintegrated into our own traditional traditions in each of our tribes all over the

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continent and there would be a normalization again. Cause we know that suicide rates among Native teens is really high. Of all the suicides, most are identified as being gay or lesbian and it is not because, they don’t commit suicide because they are gay or lesbian it is because of the way they are treated. The rejection and the pressures that they face by being unable to conform to what everybody else is. But when people grow up in a family situation where they are treated normal, expected to do everything that everyone else can do. There is nothing wrong with them. Two-spirited doesn’t weigh them down in anyway. So that is what I hope we can accomplish in are own tradition. That is what the Gatherings represent, they are always about a healing process. Boast who we are, say screw them, to hell with what you say. More like how can we fit in and how can we contribute?

Rishona: I have one more question that I just thought of. As I was going through some of the stuff that you have previously said we were discussing where the term two-spirit originated from and you were telling me a story of how a woman dreamt of the term. Am I wrong? You were discussing how a woman had a dream and in it was the word two-spirit and that is when she brought it forth to the gathering, the meeting in 1990, when people chose to use that term. Did I dream this?

Person #2: (Laugh)

Rishona: Because I actually couldn’t find it anywhere and I was convinced you told me this story…

Person #2: Well, it may have come to you in a dream (laugh).

No, honestly it may have come to you in a dream but that is the way it may have happened. I know I didn’t tell you the story (laugh). Yeah.

Over time the one story I remember hearing was from the first two-spirit gathering I went to in 1991. There was this middle of the road gender bender person who came and spoke to me and described the difference between men and women and how we are emotionally put together and a two-spirited person is somebody who embodies both of those mechanisms they can understand and experience and feel things the way a woman can even if they are a man, vice versa with women, they can experiences things the same way men do. And anyway it is the embodiment of those two things that people who are two-spirited don’t necessarily have. They don’t, they aren’t born with that understanding of those mechanisms in place. Which is why a lot of two-spirited men are so close to women and vice versa two-spirited women are really close to men. A lot of times they can get along just like that. The differences between who they are is very few or very narrow in distance you know what I mean.

Rishona: Do you know how the term two-spirited originated then? Where it came from and if you went to a gathering in 1991 – was that the first two-spirited gathering held? Because the term just came about in 1989/1990 correct? So, 91’ would have been the first gathering.
Person #2: To my knowledge it was already being used. When the poster came out in Vancouver that year everybody already knew what it was. People who were going already knew what the term two-spirited meant and all I was told at that time was a gathering of all Aboriginal people who were gay, lesbian, transgender, bi-sexual or who just had a deeper understanding of who men and women were. That’s what I was told at the beginning. I was like oh, what is that? And as far as, I think I remember asking a few people at that time and one of the organizations just said that it was a contemporary term to express who we were. The embodiment of both the male and female gender, each gender represents a spirit and so therefore we have two-spirits (laugh) some people jokingly say we are possessed but that’s not true.

Rishona: I don’t know where this dream thing came from, but I must have totally imagined it. I actually can almost see you and I sitting here and you telling me all about this woman that dreamt of this term. And there was a meeting in Winnipeg where the term was originally coined and she said it at the meeting and everyone felt that this was the most appropriate term and I vividly remember us having this conversation but for some reason it didn’t come out in the tapes. That is very unusual.

Person #2: As far as I know the first official gathering was here in Manitoba and that was in 1989, then in 1990 in the States in 1991 and that is the one that I went too. But I know it had its origins here so you may have well have met someone who told you that sorry.

Rishona: How did the term catch on so quickly. Even though you said it was used before how did it suddenly become this official term. We have discussed before how other people have used this term there has been this “following” of people that now identify with this terminology. So I am wondering how it suddenly caught on to the point that there is now gatherings now looking for the literature and I am wondering how the term actually began to catch on in the last thirteen years or so.

Person #2: Well, I know for me personally and a lot of the people that I have spoken with are along similar lines for one thing we never really felt that we were part of the larger gay and lesbian community. Not really being ostracized, but never really feeling like part of that it just somehow didn’t represent who we were and then of course not being accepted in our own communities. I think people embraced that term because it was something that came out of our self. It was on a spiritual level that we could relate to and for me it was the idea of identifying myself with something other than sexuality because I knew that that was not all I am, you know.

In fact, it is hardly who I am (laugh) but we knew we weren’t just like everybody else. Like this typical sort of heterosexual community that... So I think it caught on because it is something that came from within our own community and it took the focus off the sexual part of it and focussed on the fact that we are varying degrees of human beings like between men and women. When you identify as two-spirited the reaction is so different then if you came out and said oh, I am a lesbian or I am a dyke or I am a gay man. You know what I mean?
All those words carry a certain amount of baggage. When you identify as two-spirited people seen to be more open to that term because it doesn’t force them to focus on your sexuality and I think a lot of people caught on to that really fast. But my family, a lot of my family is more comfortable saying two-spirited then saying gay. Do you know what I mean? It is a term that they can throw around and not feel whatever then by saying gay, lesbian or homosexual.

Rishona: Okay, I think we are just about done. I just wanted to... I recently came up with this theory and I wanted to know what you think about it. I was reading through some written information about other interviews that were conducted. As well as this one and I was comparing them and people that were interviewed previously and there were just a few questions that basically asked them, it was almost open ended questions that asked them how they felt about being two-spirited. The interview took place at Nine Circles Community Health Centre and it was interesting because each person and I don’t know if this was done deliberately, I don’t know much about the interview but each person seemed to be at a different stage.

First person – really angry, it basically came out like this is really stupid and I don’t know what this means and this person was in a bad state, abused alcohol – openly said that. Was at this interview but didn’t really feel part of it.

As it went on, someone sort of felt that it was really new to them and they couldn’t really see the difference yet. And they didn’t really understand this whole spiritual component.

And there was a couple of people that said how it is true and they to recognize the fact that there is a spiritual connection. That they were really important people historically and so I sort of came up with this theory that based on how Aboriginal people were treated by Europeans that they had been taught to somehow be ashamed of this very special gift. That many of these people were not taught that it was a positive thing. So, they had not been necessarily...

So, I came up with a circle that starts off with a person and you can add in many things, but it starts off with a person thinking that they are gay. An Aboriginal person that thinks they are gay and then they think it is a negative thing because of all the connotations not necessarily that someone not Aboriginal would go through but a different spectrum of that. You know also because they are not fitting in with their community and all sorts of things like that. There is other elements, and then, they go from being angry and it being negative to talking to people, other Aboriginal people that identify. And they start to learn about the traditional and historical and they start to talk to other people who identify as two-spirit and then they go from there and it is now seen as a positive thing. So it has gone from this angry unhappy negative to learning, which has so many other positive slants where they are now thinking that it is a positive thing and then they continue on and the two-spirit part is a positive and spiritual component. That is sort of how I put it in my head.
Person #2: I really like that theory and it is dead on as far as my own personal experience was the arch in which I came from to where I am now is almost exactly along that line. Coming from a Christian background and growing up with a really intense self loathing about that aspect of who I was and sort of agreeing with everyone on how much you should hate homosexuals and all this stuff, but also at the same time realizing that that’s not all I am that is only one aspect of who I am, you know. I could have relationships with women, I did. What about that part am I to feel okay about that and not this and you know. But I grew up really hating that aspect of myself and I think probably a lot of other people did too, grew up hating that aspect about me. And I did go through all the severe alcohol, drugs and all that kind of stuff. Around the time that I went to the first gathering was the longest stretch, I was sober for a year at a time before that. I think I was drinking for about two years straight. Then I sobered up for about nine months that time and on the ninth or tenth month is when I went to the gathering. That was the turning point for me, that was the turn around where it was okay, now I have found a group of people which we could discuss and experience the other aspects of who I am and that is what I’ve learned. All these people were so happy, so accepting and so at peace with who they were. That was such a profound experience for me to see that in other people. I was kind of like oh my god, maybe it is okay who we are and as time goes on you learn that it’s no mistake that we’re the way we are it’s part of the master plan and it always has been. You know I’ve heard some people say that we are out of balance and I’ve come to believe that we are the people that restore balance in communities because of those differences that we are born with. So that is a learning curve that you go on and overtime you learn all the positive aspects about who you are and the advantages about who you are those are a lot more valuable then the prejudice and hatred that you experience out there in the world. It is so minute to what you can experience by focussing on the part that people hate you know what I mean? So, yeah I think your theory is dead on and I’ve come across all those people myself. Like you know, I’m gay and I don’t need to be described as anything else, and I never argue with anyone, also that this is where they are at and that is fine, for me. I know where I am and I think the more at peace you are with yourself that’s what people respond too, that’s the sort of vibration you put out and very very rarely do I experience hostility towards me now compared to when I hated myself. I did experience a lot of hostility then and even though at the big lodge, the Midewin lodge, people, it’s almost like people have no choice but to except who I am because I am so at peace within myself that they can’t find anything to sort of hate about me (laugh). And I think that’s a good thing and in the end I think that is what the whole journey is about is it’s not about whether everybody else out there accepts who you are, but that you accept who you are. That was the first thing I heard too. That the journey is not out there, it is in here within your own being and when you discover that things just get much easier and I really believe that. That was the one of the first things I heard at the gathering. Probably one of the first speakers I heard there.

Rishona: Alright.
This last section is an excellent bridge to understanding the current two-spirit Aboriginal person and their lifestyle. Since this was the final meeting, there was a lot of clarification and summarization. It was also worthwhile to mention that when asked how they felt about other two-spirit Aboriginal people not wanting to share knowledge about their past, their traditions and their customs, he wanted to know why they did not share.

Person #2 felt this to be a very vital and essential point:

"I would ask them why they continue to act like they have something to hide. I don’t believe that there is anything shameful about who we are and that we need to keep anything to ourselves “ (Person #2, March 19, 2002).

I think person #2 said it best when he was asked for any final thoughts and he had said the following “I hope we can recapture in our lifetime, in the next several decades, so that we can be reintegrated into our own traditional traditions in each of our tribes all over the continent and there would be a normalization again” (Person #2, March 19, 2002).

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Chapter 6: Analysis of Interview Data

The main tools that were used in analyzing the data were the two interviews and a contemporary article that interviewed seven individuals who identify as two-spirited. The article was published in Swerve in March 2001. Swerve is a monthly local Winnipeg news magazine catering to individuals who live an alternate lifestyle (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, cross-dressers, drag queens and two-spirit Aboriginal people). The article featured seven individuals who gathered together at Nine Circles Community Health Centre, in the circle room to openly discuss their place and role as two-spirited Aboriginal people. The interview style varied from the two conducted in this project in a few ways. The two interviews in this project were one-on-one and I had previously prepared a list of sample questions. The interview at Nine Circles was a group facilitated discussion with each person discussing how they identify as two-spirited.

In order to synthesize the data collected in the interviews, it was imperative to reduce it to a simple format. Following each interview, the data was transcribed in raw format, which allowed the opportunity to re- reflect on the information provided. The interview template was pasted on a blank document and the empty spaces were then filled in with the appropriate information. Following the transcription, each set of interviews was printed in its entirety and placed on a long table. At this point, basic similarities and differences were noted. Due to the small number of interviews it was much simpler to view the areas and themes where participants differed from one another. Once the data was placed in categories it became considerably easier to digest them. One factor that aided in analyzing this project was the belief in the participant’s own story.
Interviewing the participants allowed me to follow the path that they took in order to identify as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. It was the opportunity for an oral history to be documented. More importantly, the interviews offer a counter balancing voice to decades of historical literature pertaining to two-spirit Aboriginal people. It is safe to say that because of how Person #2’s ancestors were treated historically, that he suffered trauma and torment because of who he is today, a two-spirit Aboriginal person. Person #2 talks about how his family and community were not so open to the idea that he was two-spirited. He openly discusses how they are not to blame but that they were corrupted by European missionaries and affected by Church teachings. He was ashamed of who he might be and when he confronted the possibility that he was in fact a two-spirit Aboriginal person his family and community teased him.

Everybody has a story to tell; their feelings are real; how they got to the place they are in is real and, most importantly, their story is worth telling. People need to be heard, and need to feel that their stories are worth being told. The topic, however, is extremely complex and the participants’ journeys may all be very different. It is also affected by such factors as colonization, residential schools and other such variables.

Shulamit Reinarz (1992) discusses downplaying professional status during interviews and proposes trying to think of the process as one of learners and listeners. That is exactly how this project met with success. The intentions were simple: listen and then transcribe what was said and then learn from it.

During the interviews, close attention was paid to how the participants spoke about the terms two-spirit and “homosexuality”. Clear and concise documentation was
taken regarding the participants’ reactions to terms such as spirituality, sexuality, gender and culture.

Another component of the interview process was the collection of thoughts on the terms “gay” and “lesbian” and why there seems to be a preference amongst Aboriginal people for the term two-spirit. It seems evident that some people who use the term two-spirit to self identify may also use the terms gay and/or lesbian according to whom they are with (Person #2, July 24, 2001). However, the major focus of the interview process was the importance of sexuality versus spirituality in two-spirited Aboriginal people and which facet of their lives was more important and more definitive of their personality and self-image.

In the beginning many questions were raised about the contemporary lives of two-spirit Aboriginal people. Through the series of interviews many of the questions were answered. The term two-spirit includes the word spirit, which could be interpreted to mean that the term denotes a spiritual nature. Historically, spirituality was a component that was lacking in the literature and played a major role in composing the appropriate questions to draw out information about the missing spiritual component. How could a term that is made up of the word spirit not be based on a spiritual component?

Aboriginal people have begun an exploration back to their roots to explore their spiritual history and culture. Surprisingly, only four out of six interviewed in Swerve Magazine felt that the term had any type of spiritual weight to it. Both interviews that this researcher conducted felt that it was extremely spiritual. In my own reflections I would say this is because of the place they are at in terms of their own comfort level.
A longer more in depth interview with these individuals may help us to understand why they do not consider this role a spiritual one. It is only feasible to hypothesize that it is because they have not yet accepted the balance of the genders within themselves. It is a process to achieve this, especially if you were not brought up to welcome this form of spirituality and status.

Spiritual refers to sacred customs and roles within Aboriginal culture and communities. The syntax spiritual and different were often used synonymously when two-spirit people describe their past to present journey of how they identify as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. For the most part, the spiritual aspect of two-spirited people came out after they began to search for knowledge about who they were as Aboriginal people. Once they began to explore the term two-spirited and everything that it stood it for, then a domino affect took place. A new belief and self-confidence arose and these individuals were more than just “gay”; they were not just sexual beings. In fact, the very same people who feel the term holds spiritual truth also feel that it is not about sexuality, and it is “more than being gay” (Olson, 2001; Person #1, April 18, 1999; Person #2, July 24, 2001).

However, because of the fine line that many of these people walk in being traditional and contemporary and associating with the larger gay community, prejudice has affected some of the two-spirited people. Only four people in Swerve expressed that they had been affected by prejudice. One in particular, Person C, focused on teaching acceptance. Person C struggled with understanding why people do not accept one another and if only we could teach children to be kind.

Just be good to one another. Is that so hard? Why is it? I just want to know. I’ve been attacked by my own people. I’ve been fag-bashed; I’ve
been hurt by our own people. I can just not figure it out. There is so much hate on the streets. The reason is we are not teaching our children the proper way. That is it. We have to teach our children to be kind and gentle and to treat one another with respect (Olson, 2001, p. 10).

Person C, never discusses how he identifies or what the term means. His objective was clearly to break away from negative thoughts and have people be kinder to one another.

Person D discusses association prejudices. In other words when she first came around the gay community she thought it was limited to prostitution, drugs, alcohol, and sex (Olson, 2001, p.10). It is this type of misinformation that perpetuates stereotypes and leads to prejudice. “There is some prejudice in the gay community. We are looked down upon. In the Aboriginal community, some people call us down, they call us fags. That hurts” (Olson, 2001, p.10).

Once a person accepts who they are and their life as a two-spirited Aboriginal person, they begin to ask questions. They ask family and other Aboriginal people who may have knowledge of their histories and the roles they played historically. Five of the people, when asked if they felt they were valued historically, felt they were. “Two-spirit people were valued long ago” (Person D, in Olson, 2001, p.10). Individuals who were not exposed to a cultural upbringing tend to find comfort that two-spirit people held a sacred role traditionally. This is the connection. Having this knowledge gives people a purpose. If you can make a connection to land and a group of people you are giving people a purpose. If people are constantly being told they are bad and their lifestyle is wrong they will believe that. If they are taught the reason why something is the way it is and the connection to today then you are creating a positive link.

It helped me a lot to hear that in the olden days, two-spirit people were respected. Surrounding myself with two-spirit Aboriginal people helps me
accept myself more… We say we don’t care if other people accept us, but deep down we do need others (Person E, in Olson, 2001, p.10).

For those individuals that were not raised with the support and knowledge of traditional teachings, finding similarities between their lives and their ancestors aids in creating balance in their contemporary lifestyles. To get to this place is a journey within itself.

The first person that was interviewed in Swerve Magazine appeared really angry. It basically came out that this is really stupid and the person did not understand why they were there or knew what the term *two-spirit* meant. “To be honest, this whole two-spirit identity thing doesn’t make sense to me” (Person B, in Olson, 2001, p.10). This person was in a bad state. The subject (we call person B) abused alcohol, and while being at this interview, said he did not really feel part of it.

I’ve never had any cultural training, so to look what I feel and who I am through those eyes seems empty, and there’s nothing real backing that. I’m trying to come to terms with it and knowing it and it still feels not real, any more than being in church for that matter (Olson, 2001, p.10).

Person B was at the beginning of his journey and could not really make of anything at this point.

Others were already reaching a point where they could relate to where Person A had come from and were accepting balance and spirituality in their lives. “In my language two-spirit means more than gay, it has a spiritual aspect” (Person D, in Olson, 2001, p.10). Person G was very happy that Person D had mentioned this because within the two-spirit community there has been much discussion over who can use this term.

We have come up with this term; it is ours to use. Yet white people are using this term. They say it means male and female, but it means more than that. We are reclaiming who we are, as berdaches, as people of the tribal
nations who had roles for two-spirit people (Person G, in, Olson, 2001, p.11).

It is interesting how each person interviewed, whether in Swerve or the two in-person interviews, all in some way have taken something from the term two-spirit. Each person is on a journey either to continue to learn their traditions or to learn them for the first time. For many of them, they were not treated with respect and are now accepting who they are as two-spirit Aboriginal people. These are the people that will be vital in ensuring that history does not repeat itself. These are the people who can teach the traditions. For many of them their families are now just realizing what a gift they are as people.

I was outed to my family by a cousin, and was shut out by them for six years because of what Bible teachers said to my parents. They believed I was tied to a very sick part of the world. In the late 80’s my older sister became involved with traditional teachings and got my parents involved. They learned that to have a two-spirit person in the family was a great honour and all of a sudden I was re-accepted into the family. I thought the teachings must be okay if suddenly I’m accepted in my family again. So I’ve been learning for the past ten years (Person F, in, Olson, 2001, p.11).

This pattern seems to be quite common. Person #2 had a similar experience and is now very involved with the Gatherings and being a positive balanced person.

One major difference between the two in-person interviews and the two from Swerve is how the individuals in Swerve believe that to be two-spirit is more than being gay but they still discuss things in terms of sexuality. The two in-person interviews both acknowledge that it is not synonymous, having same sex relations is not a defining characteristic. This may be a result of where the individuals are on their path of balance. Person #1 was brought up in a traditional home that recognized his gift and treated it as such. He was fortunate that he came from a long line of medicine carriers who were also
two-spirited (Person #1, April 18, 1999). Person #2 believes that he has so much more to offer than sex. He is a person first and a sexual being later (Person #2, July 31, 2001).

The five interviews from Swerve are not quite all there yet or have chosen to identify in a different way. Person A identifies two-spirit as a gift and it is part of his spiritual direction. He also says “I’m out in my work and my life and have always been that way, although my family didn’t know what gay was” (Person A, in, Olson, 2001, p.10). Person D had a similar thing to say “My co-workers and the kids know that I am gay. I didn’t have to tell them. The speech pattern and body postures told them what I could be” (Person D, in, Olson, 2001, p.10). She does, however, say that in her language two-spirit means more than gay and has a spiritual component (Person D, in, Olson, 2001, p.10).

This is very fascinating and it would be interesting to see where their thoughts are in five to ten years from now.

Person E also identifies as being gay and two-spirit but has taken an interesting point of view. He sees it as an easier way of voicing and identifying who he is. It is more difficult to say your gay.

When I heard the term two-spirit that helped me with what I was going through. Instead of labelling myself as being gay or bi-sexual, it was better to say I was two-spirited. At least I didn’t have to say I was actually gay (Person E, in, Olson, 2001, p.10).

He does say that it helps him to know about the old days and that he has chosen to surround himself with two-spirit Aboriginal people as it helps to accept himself (Person E, in, Olson, 2001, p.10). No one is clearer about separating the two terms than Person G. She is very clear by saying “I can’t make a separation; therefore, I see myself as two-spirit. I’m so glad that Person D said that two-spirit means spiritual as well as gay (Person G, in,
Olson, 2001, p.11). This is a common theme. People are uncertain how to identify and what to do. I believe this is based on years of being unwanted and shamed by society for identifying with both the male and female. Interestingly enough, not one of the people interviewed in Swerve referred to two-spirit as a balance between men and women. They spoke briefly of their lives in the present and took comfort in the role of their ancestors in the past.

My theory about the journey an individual takes in order to identify oneself as a two-spirit Aboriginal person is based on how Aboriginal people were treated by Europeans. Over the course of time they had been taught to somehow be ashamed of this very special gift. That many of these people were not taught that it was a positive thing. It seems that all the people interviewed both in this project and in Swerve have a story to tell about how they arrived at the conclusions of who they are. When we thematically sort through the very rich data, it is apparent that there is a definite path which quite simply analyzes and defines how two-spirit Aboriginal people find a balance in today’s world. Of course this is not firm fact, but it seems to work for this project and these participants.

The theory can be called an Identification Model and can be thought of as a line that starts off with an Aboriginal person believing he/she is gay. Due to their education from European influences, this is seen as a negative aspect. The person is struggling with their own identity and often turns to drugs and alcohol to alleviate the pain. Naturally, the person’s behaviour changes and relationships change with families and communities. The person questioning their identity then begins to speak with other Aboriginal people and this angry, constant negative component begins to shift. The person then begins to learn about traditional Aboriginal culture, and the learning process is underway. The person
discovers and learns that this negative burden is in fact, a tremendous gift from the Creator.

From this point, the journey takes the person who is questioning their identity, to learn about traditional and historical components of what it is to be a two-spirit Aboriginal person. They continue to talk to other people and link up with other people who identify as two-spirit. A transformation takes place where the individual goes from feeling alone, and not part of anything, to an epiphany of acceptance and identification of a concept that has deep spiritual and scared roots within their culture. The path begins with anger, loneliness and unhappiness and progresses to education which has so many other positive slants where they are now thinking that being a two-spirit Aboriginal is a positive thing. The individual continues on and the two-spirit part is a positive and spiritual component. This is how it all comes together in a format that is clear and concise.

Obviously, it is slightly different for each individual. When the theory was explained to Person #2, he said the following, “I really like that theory and it is dead on as far as my own personal experience was the arch in which I came from to where I am now is almost exactly along that line” (Person #2, March 19, 2002).

 Coming from a Christian background and growing up with a really intense self loathing about that aspect of who I was and sort of agreeing with everyone on how much you should hate homosexuals and all this stuff. But also at the same time realizing that that’s not all I am that is only one aspect of who I am, you know (Person #2, March 19, 2002).

It seems that only Person #1 did not have any type of transition into understanding the role of a two-spirit Aboriginal person. This could very well be attributed to the fact that Person #1 was taught by grandparents at an early age about the elevated status of this role. It was a part of the culture and tradition. Person #1 was never taught to be ashamed of this role, but was proud to recognize, treat and understand both the male and female
spirit inside of him (Person #1, April 18, 1999). It is very important to draw attention to this point. This point illustrates the very complexity of this project. The literature and all who had a voice in this project are very clear that they were unaware of this term or anything to do with it until the recent past. The elder is very clear on the term being part of his life forever. It is possible that this community was aware of the term and that it was not as wide spread until the more recent past. During the interview person #1 did not know why people thought it was a new term or a new concept. Due to the history of the term and all that is surrounding how a person speaks about this phenomenon it is no wonder that varying points are not only heard but valid.

On the other hand Person #2 has had an incredibly fascinating journey and most enjoyed sharing stories of his life. He is very clear about who he is and how he has reached his place of balance. Unlike person #1, person #2 was not told of these traditions by family members but was often ridiculed and tormented for being different.

In order to keep some continuity and to allow Aboriginal people to have a voice, it is imperative that organizations step up to the occasion. Two-spirit Aboriginal people identify as such in a variety of ways, as seen throughout this thesis. Many of these individuals or individuals that are entertaining the notion that they know they have gift, need to be able to access data and knowledge. It is vital that knowledge of traditional and contemporary two-spirit Aboriginal people reach Aboriginal communities and organizations. They need to be the bridge to protect the knowledge from being lost and more instrumentally to keep youth from having a bad self image because of shame.
Transition to the Term Two-Spirit and Two-Spirit Organizations

This next portion of the Chapter examines the transition to the term *two-spirit* from the terms *gay, lesbian, bi-sexual* and *berdache*. It describes how the term caught on, who was using it and who was prohibited from using it and why. Along with the trend towards this inclusive and powerful term, many organizations, affiliated groups, and gatherings were established to recognize the beliefs and cultural heritage of *two-spirit* Aboriginal people. How and why this happened needs to be examined.

Examining contemporary organizations and gatherings provides the opportunity to see and understand the people such organizations and gatherings are servicing. As well, it helps to gain an understanding of why these groups have added *two-spirited* people to their resources, and their goals and objectives. This serves as another source of contemporary information that will assist in identifying *two-spirit* Aboriginal people. It is also considered an alternate method of pinpointing a definition for the term *two-spirit*. It allows knowledge to be passed on and shared amongst staff and the people using the service.

This will not be an in-depth analysis, but rather a brief overview of the organizations’ goals. The information for the overview discussion was obtained through documents supplied by the organizations and informal interviews with the staff employed by these organizations. This will aid in understanding the variety of services provided by each group.

The term *two-spirit* is a term that came about at a conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990. Exactly how and who initiated the introduction of this term is not clear. However, the term is logical and fits the people identifying with the term perfectly.
The basic concept of being *two-spirited* is this: each individual is made up of a spirit; if you recognize both the male and female spirit within you and treat them as one, then you are *two-spirited*. The people in attendance were those who had, in the past, been labeled as *berdache* and were currently lost souls who felt that they had no place and no identity. They did not feel a connection or link with in the gay and lesbian larger community – they felt they were more than just sexual beings (2-Spirited 1st Nations, 1998; Person #2, 2001).

Throughout the conference, people shared their own experiences and stories. This lead to a domino effect where people began using the term *two-spirit*. It was comfortable, it was safe and it was of the peoples’ own choosing. The term gradually became commonly used to identify and describe an entire group of people. This group included everyone from the former *berdache* to contemporary homosexuals. Jacobs, Thomas and Lang (1997), in their definition, include a variety of terms. Those terms in Aboriginal languages and those with a spiritual flare were not accounted for.

It is well known that before European contact, some traditional communities had names for those people that housed both the masculine and feminine spirits (2-Spirited 1st Nations, 1998). These names had a much greater purpose than just to identify the people – these names reflected a recognition of the sacredness of two-spirited people. It was thought that “two-spirited people will walk where everyone else is afraid to and will go where no one else will” (Two Spirited, 1997).

Spirituality was a large reason for the use of the term. It is a term that encompasses all meanings and is based on the spiritual and sacred components of the Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal people had their own terms in their own languages that
they used to identify themselves. *Winkte* (pronounce wink-a-tah), *ookwe* and *haux’an* are a few examples of terms that are used in Aboriginal languages to describe the spiritual people who identify both the male and female spirit inside themselves (RCAP, 1996; Two-Spirited, 1997).

Two-spirit females and males are seen as a mixture of masculine and feminine and not something completely different from both man and woman. In fact, two-spirited men and women are viewed as separate genders of their own. This is regardless of whether their status and/or roles may be a combination of the culturally defined roles of men and women (Jacobs, Thomas and Lang, 1997).

Two-spirited people today have been faced with the influence of Western European ideas and Christianity. The binary system of how men and women were viewed, along with their purpose of procreation, influenced people that this was the only way to live and anything else was sinful. Gender variance and same sex relationships have come to be seen as identical by many Aboriginal people. Currently, there are still some males and females, both on and off reservations, that carry the traits of an alternative gender. Jacobs, Thomas and Lang (1997) report that many Aboriginal people who live as gays, lesbians, bi-sexuals, as well as those who identify as alternative or two-spirit gender, face rejection and discrimination both on and off reservations.

Due to the shame that had been placed on Aboriginal people by Europeans, Aboriginal people who recognized that they were “different” were often forced to choose the gay or lesbian label to fit their needs. There are obviously few exceptions to this phenomenon, but were often picked up by a grandmother or more senior member of the
family who was familiar with these characteristics (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 1998).

Since the term two-spirit caught on, many organizations have begun to research and use this terminology to suit the organization’s needs. In actuality, there are few Two-Spirit organizations in North America. One, in particular, is located in Toronto, Ontario. When visiting and exchanging ideas with the organization, it became apparent that the way in which they have chosen to identify the organization is suitable for them and the users of the facility. The two-spirit organization in Toronto offers a variety of programs, one of their most utilized being volunteer care teams for people living with HIV/AIDS. Other programs include counseling, anti-homophobia education, newsletters, condom distribution and beading craft afternoons. These programs are in place to offer education and support to those in need. The organization insisted that these were people who are gay and lesbian, but use two-spirit as terminology (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 1998).

A major theme and component of the organization was that it offered daily arts and crafts programming. Ironically, this did not seem significant at the time and seemed rather odd. However, upon further education and an interview with person # 3, it became evident that two-spirit people were often the artisans and crafts people of the communities. The organization also offered programs and counseling for those people living with HIV and AIDS (Two-Spirit, 1997).

A portion of the literature from the organization touches on the sacred and spiritual roles that two-spirited people held within their communities. However, the bulk of the literature pertains to sexual orientation and related topics. If the term two-spirit is
about taking back part of the Aboriginal history and culture, while incorporating spirituality, then where in this organization does spirituality play a part?

The two-spirit organization in Toronto put together an instructional manual to assist people in leading a culturally appropriate and sensitive workshop on *two-spirited* Aboriginal people. A portion of this manual includes an overall focus on what the Federal and Provincial governments have done in terms of laws affecting gay and lesbian people.

The manual includes a brief history of the roles that *two-spirited* people played in their communities. It illustrates the vital role that *two-spirit* people held within their communities such as, “medicine people, visionaries and warriors” (2-Spirited people of the 1st Nations, 1998, p.10). The manual also identifies that two-spirited people have a role today, including “counseling, healing, being pipe carriers, visionaries (seers), and conducting oneself in accordance to our belief, which is to respect all life” (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 1998, p.10).

The manual defines *two-spirited* Aboriginal people as “Aboriginal people who identify themselves as gay or lesbian” (2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 1998, p.10). They balance this by also stating that the term refers to more then just a person’s sexual orientation and who they sleep with. However, aside from mentioning their place in today’s society, little spiritual acknowledgment is made.

Due to the population demographics of Aboriginal people that are infected with HIV and the AIDS virus, the organization has taken an active role in incorporating education and tolerance stand points towards teachings on same sex relationships, HIV and AIDS. Another beneficial piece to this manual is that it includes other available
resources and similar groups in various locations and cities throughout Canada. This is a major piece in terms of linking up people with knowledge and resources.

Overall, the manual is a well-balanced combination of past and present. Spirit and spirituality are components of this teaching, and it is the only resource examined that makes mention of the International Two-Spirited Gathering. Out of the four resource organizations examined for the information that they contribute to the two-spirit Aboriginal community, it is the only one that has any type of documentation that is current and was developed by a person that identifies as a two-spirit person. The other organizations lack any information and resources.

Another resource for Aboriginal people that identify as two-spirited is the Rainbow Resource Centre. The Centre is a resource for anyone who identifies as gay, lesbian, transgendered, transsexual, bi-sexual, or two-spirited. The Centre has a library that they are looking to expand and keep current. It offers a variety of focus groups, support groups and resources for people who identify outside of heterosexual parameters. The Centre’s resources pertaining to two-spirit individuals are minimal. In fact, this project allowed this projects’ resources to be shared with the Centre.

Among the initial brochures and pamphlets distributed by the Rainbow Resource Centre, the only mention of two-spirited Aboriginal people was in one of the headings. Other than that, there is no mention of two-spirited Aboriginal people anywhere. There is a list of support groups but none for those people who identify as two-spirited. Unfortunately, this results in such individuals not making use of the Centre and not gaining access to the resources they need. This is another valid reason why these organizations need to be linked and coordinated.
It is vital that places offering services and resources be connected to one another. It will only benefit all the people wishing to be involved. It should not and does not matter which level someone identifies on, they are who they are and are entitled to use any service they wish. If one feels comfortable placing a label or identity upon oneself, then one is entitled. However, if an organization is serving this population group, then it should become part of the organizations overall objective to be inclusive and gain knowledge and understanding in order to better service the people. It is fair to say that many of these organizations are implementing this objective, but they still have a long road ahead before this is achieved.

At the onset of this project, the Aboriginal Aids Task Force was an initial resource for information about people who identified as two-spirited. However, the people that used this organization were those living with HIV and AIDS. Today the organization has combined with a few other organizations in Winnipeg, Manitoba to make up the Nine Circles Community Health Centre. Currently, the Aboriginal Aids Task Force is being dismantled and dispersed evenly throughout the other areas in the Centre. The Centre does not label people but at the same time associates the term two-spirit with gays and lesbians. However, they have made much progress toward searching and locating information about people who identify as two-spirit.

Nine Circles has a library that they are currently updating and hoping to add information relevant to and pertaining to the lives of those who identify as two-spirited. The Centre also has a very large spiritual component; despite the fact that they are mandated as a health Centre to serve those living with HIV and AIDS, the Centre has taken a very holistic and Aboriginal world view approach. The facility has a circular room
that is used for smudges and ceremonies. As well, it can be used as a meeting place that is non-threatening and very spiritual.

Spirituality is a large part of Nine Circles Community Health Center. Through their holistic view it is evident that they work to help balance a person. This balance includes mind, body and spirit. Nine Circles Community Health Center strives to achieve all of these components under one roof (Nine Circles Community Health Centre, 2002).

The Centre recognizes that Aboriginal people make up a large number of the Centre’s users and therefore are going to great lengths to best serve this population dynamic. One way that Nine Circles Community Health Center is achieving this goal is through education of both staff and patrons. Some areas included are, Aboriginal culture and HIV/AIDS and methods of teaching the public about HIV and AIDS awareness. It is a very user-friendly environment. Many of the patrons are also educators that go through an intensive volunteer program. The program usually takes them on a new journey that enables them to go out into the larger community and teach the public about a variety of topics including HIV/AIDS (Person #4, 2002).

Recently the Nine Circles Community Health Center advertised to fill two positions pertaining to the lives of two-spirit Aboriginal people. The Nine Circles Community Health Centre is aware, regardless of how the individual chooses to identify, that a significant number of the Centre’s participants are, in fact, two-spirited. Nine Circles Community Health Centre does not question how two-spirit people identify as two-spirited, but respect this position. They have made a strong attempt to fill a place for them at the Nine Circles Community Health Centre. This area of service is relatively new to the Centre and they are just at the initial stages of developing resources in order to
improve their relations with the Aboriginal two-spirit community. With proper education and focus they should be able develop a strong relationship of balance, trust and respect. The International Two-spirit Gatherings, on the other hand, have a very spiritual role. Once a year, a different city and delegation host the Annual Two-Spirit Gathering. The Gathering is a safe environment for people who identify as two-spirit to come to and to connect with other two-spirit people. The Gathering is usually held over a minimum of three days and offers a variety of ceremonies and discussions. Sexuality is not a focus nor a requirement for attendance. The only requirement is that you are Aboriginal and identify as a two-spirit Aboriginal person (Person #2, December 21, 2001).

Once at the Gathering, a person is free to choose which discussions and ceremonies they wish to participate in. Some of the ceremonies at the gathering include a variety of sweats and dances. There is no drinking or use of illegal drugs allowed at the Gathering and the people that attend are from all over North America. They come to share their own personal histories of how they identify and how they began the journey to lead their lives as, two-spirit persons. They discuss the special qualities they possess, housing both the male and female spirit inside themselves. It is a true blessing and, at the Gathering, attendees offer thanks to their Creator for allowing them to mediate between male and female spirits (Person #2, July 31, 2001).

The Gathering allows the participants to be free to the spiritual elements around them and to connect with other people who identify as two-spirited. “There is a certain kind of healing that goes on when we are together like that. It doesn’t happen anywhere else” (Person #2, July 31, 2001). The environment is safe from judgement and negativity.
People are there to learn and communicate – they learn what is happening in other communities and are given the opportunity to share their perspectives and stories.

The gathering itself, at this present time, is probably the most stable and grounded element within the larger two-spirit community. Presently, the gathering is an open environment to anyone who identifies as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. The gathering brings together all components of the two-spirited world leaving behind drugs, alcohol and sexuality. It is a spiritual, intellectual, restful retreat that combines academia, healing and motivation. Presentations and discussions take place with keynote speakers and panels on subjects like history and contemporary knowledge. This environment is the ideal situation for a person identifying as a two-spirit Aboriginal people. Other organizations should be tapping into this fountain of contemporary, current information.

These four organizations, clearly illustrate that there is a need within the community to service the Aboriginal two-spirit population. It is up to each organization as to how they choose to serve the community and for what purpose. However, it is now time to adapt, change and incorporate any knowledge, information referrals and services to this population demographic.

It is also clear that through the brief description of each contemporary organization that they too have their own definitions of how a two-spirit Aboriginal person should identify. The organization in Toronto defines two-spirit as someone who is gay or lesbian. The Rainbow Resource Centre treats two-spirit Aboriginal people as an extension of gay and lesbian but have not defined the term and offer minimal resources. The International Gathering, only asks that you identify as two-spirited and leave sexuality behind for the gathering and focus on spirituality. Finally Nine Circles Community Health Centre has
also not clearly defined those who identify as *two-spirited* but recognize that they are part of their consumers and resources need to be made available. It is obvious that *two-spirit* people, like many other groups of people make up varying sects and are different. Each organization offers what they can and if it suits the person’s needs then they are welcome to be a part of that organization. However, it is for this reason that organizations need to be linked up and have a liaison that can act and represent the varying views and opinions and direct people to the appropriate resources.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The term *two-spirit* can be used and defined in a variety of ways. Historically, they were viewed as the satanic low lives that could not understand the simple binary system of men and women. The system, as stated in the Bible, said that men and women are placed on this earth for the purpose of procreation. Therefore, Aboriginal people who did not come within the parameters set out by the Europeans were forced to go underground or hide their culture. The settlement of Europeans in North America caused an uproar in the sacred harmonious communities of Aboriginal people. The new settlers forced their ideas, customs and language upon the Aboriginal people, making them give up their beliefs and trade them for new ones. This was the beginning of the journey from the then *berdache* to the now, *two-spirit*.

Many clues throughout the literature and the interviews have indicated that there is much more to being a two-spirited Aboriginal person than sexual orientation. Sexuality became the main focus, and Aboriginal people have lost sight of the spiritual and sacred meaning.

The interviews indicated that the term “two-spirited” has been around for decades. The Elder that was interviewed was taught by his grandparents all about the role of a *two-spirit* Aboriginal person. He recognizes both the male and the female spirit and feels that his role leads to an elevated status. At ceremonies he is able to perform both the male and female roles. He also states that he is not a homosexual, nor does he understand from where this definition arose (Interview #1, 1999).

As a spiritual person he takes his role very seriously and with a tremendous amount of pride. He feels also that the misconception of homosexuality may be a result of
researchers and their skewed perception. He feels that the berdache is something very different: many homosexuals may be *two-spirited*, but it is not a requirement.

During this project many different ways of looking at Aboriginal *two-spirit* people were chosen. Historical literature was examined to learn as much about *two-spirit* Aboriginal people as possible. This is the path that led to the concept of interviewing contemporary *two-spirit* Aboriginal people. The literature was lacking and did not appear to shed much light on the sacred and spiritual traditions of the elevated status of *two-spirit* Aboriginal people.

As a continuum on the search to seek out just who *two-spirit* Aboriginal people were, the path led to organizations and services. The organizations that were tapped into, were in a similar predicament. They too, were beginning to look back and explore just who these people were and are today. Due to the fact that these organizations each have their own specific needs and *two-spirit* Aboriginal people have many definitions, it did not aid in a further pin pointed definition but rather emphasized the need to have *two-spirit* Aboriginal people voice their own definitions.

It was evident through the discussions with the few organizations that there needs to be a link to help bridge the communication breakdown and service the *two-spirit* Aboriginal people in all the areas required. Due to the variety of definitions, each organization is looking to become more prepared to service both spiritual and non-spiritual individuals, as well as those who identify with a more contemporary use of same sex relationships.

The interviews with the participants, combined with the historical and contemporary literature, as well as discussions with the organizations clearly indicate that
two-spirit Aboriginal people have a place both in the past, present and future of all communities, not just Aboriginal. Due to the wide variety of definitions and knowledge, they can be assets in many ways. They are a true example of a group of people who are making a positive change in how they are viewed by themselves and others. Two-spirit Aboriginal people have an invested interest in their communities and the interviews indicated that they are concerned for the youth, who have not come full circle in accepting their special gifts from the Creator (Person #2, March 19, 2002). By speaking out and educating people, they are hoping to eliminate the negative components of the circle of two-spirit Aboriginal people.

These conclusions were largely due to the Identification Model theory of how a person reaches the place of self-identifying as two-spirit person is an excellent tool. Upon discovering the theory, everything fell into place and it became much easier to synthesize the data. When person #2 was asked about the Identification Model and whether it was valid or not, he agreed that for him it was exactly the path that he took in identifying himself as a two-spirit Aboriginal person. When analyzing the data and looking at everything that was said it became very clear that the majority of the participants that were involved in this project could be placed into the Identification Model theory. For many of the participants they were unhappy individuals who felt very alone and lacked an identity. Upon hearing the term two-spirit and following the steps of the model, they gained an identity. The model is a tool that is a continual work in progress and over time can be expanded upon and changed according to further research.

After interviewing other people and analyzing the data a further exploration of the current relationship between two-spiritedness and spirituality was reviewed. It is my
belief that this research can help restore a spiritual tradition, which seems to have been misplaced. This thesis has allowed another perspective and definition of *two-spirit* Aboriginal people to be put forth. It was with their voice and it is their story, one that needed to be told and needs to be heard.
Appendix: A

Research Consent Form

Rishona J. Slutchuk (Researcher)
Dr. Fred Shore, Native Studies (Program Advisor)
University of Manitoba

The purpose of this study is to research and explore what the term two-spirit means to those who use it to self identify. The reasons for this project are to collaborate with two-spirit people living in Winnipeg and give them the opportunity to be heard. As well, this project will be submitted for a Master of Arts Degree.

Name of Participant ________________________
Place ________________________
Date ________________________

During the interviews a series of recording devices may be used by the researcher. These devices may include any of the following: note taking, video recording, tape recording and/or cameras. The resulting translations or transcriptions and/or images will be used for the purpose of researching and documenting "two-spirited" Aboriginal people. All information will be strictly confidential. Participants have the right to refuse any of these forms of recording.

The researcher will not use the recording devices, whether they are note taking, video recording, tape recording, photographs from a camera and the resulting translations or transcription and/or images for any other purposes without written consent from the participants.

All information will be strictly confidential. Information from this project will be stored on the researcher's computer and disc/s. Following the acceptance of the Master of Arts Degree all information will be copied to disc/s, deleted from the hard drive and stored in a safety deposit box. In reports of this project, individuals identified will be completely protected and any information that may reveal a part of the participants identity i.e) community origin, will be properly coded to ensure anonymity.

All participants should be aware that their participation is voluntary. Participants have the right at any time to withdraw from the research study and/or refrain from answering any question, without consequence. Interviews will take place in a suitable environment that is equally comfortable for both parties. Participants should expect data collection to take anywhere from four to twelve hours. At no point will participants feel rushed or pressured during the interview and if more time is required then another meeting will be scheduled.

This research study has been approved by the JFREB. Each participant will be left with a copy of the consent form in the event that there are any complaints regarding procedure may be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat, 474-7122.

As well, any questions may be referred to Dr. Fred Shore, my research advisor at 474-6084 for referral to the Ethics Review Committee.
I have read the above information and understand the terms of the consent form. I agree to take part in the research study of "Two-Spirited" Aboriginal people.

Signature of Participant

Date ________________________

I agree to use the information According to the terms outlined above.

Signature of Researcher

I would like my own name used YES or NO
I would like another name used YES or NO
26 July 2001

TO:  Rishona Slutchuk (Advisor S. Heald)
     Principal Investigator

FROM: Wayne Taylor, Interim Chair
      Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)

Re: Protocol #J2001:064
    “The Identification of “Two-Spirit” Aboriginal People”

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.
Research Consent Form

Rishona J. Slutchuk (Researcher)
Dr. Fred Shore, Native Studies (Program Advisor)
University of Manitoba

The purpose of this study is to research and explore what the term "two-spirit" means to those who use it to self identify. The reasons for this project are to collaborate with "two-spirit" people living in Winnipeg and give them the opportunity to be heard. As well, this project will be submitted for a Master of Arts Degree.

Name of Participant: Lorne (Minoan-Niibiwe-standing Wolf) Olson
Place: Downtown Winnipeg
Date: July 29, 2021

During the interviews a series of recording devices may be used by the researcher. These devices may include any of the following: note taking, video recording, tape recording and/or cameras. The resulting translations or transcriptions and/or images will be used for the purpose of researching and documenting "two-spirited" Aboriginal people. All information will be strictly confidential. Participants have the right to refuse any of these forms of recording.

The researcher will not use the recording devices, whether they are note taking, video recording, tape recording, photographs from a camera and the resulting translations or transcription and/or images for any other purposes without written consent from the participants.

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As well, any questions may be referred to Dr. Fred Shore, my research advisor at 474-6084 for referral to the Ethics Review Committee.

I have read the above information and understand the terms of the consent form. I agree to take part in the research study of "Two-Spirited" Aboriginal people.

Signature of Participant

Date July 24/81

I would like my own name used YES or NO use spirit name.

I would like another name used YES or NO

Signature of Researcher

I agree to use the information According to the terms outlined above.
Bibliography


Person #2. Personal Communications. (March 19, 2002). Winnipeg, Manitoba.


