
Researchers Survey Trauma Faced By “Two-Spirited” People

A report in the most recent issue of *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* examines the various emotional and physical traumas experienced by Alaskan Indians who view themselves as being “two-spirited” (gender-variant) individuals.

The study, “Culture, Trauma, and Wellness: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Native Americans,” was published by five University of Washington psychologists.

The researchers explain that the term “two spirit” was adopted in 1990 by the Northern Algonquin to explain individuals who possess both male and female spirits within their bodies. The current use of the term covers transsexual, transgender, and other gender variant persons.

Lead researcher Kimberly F. Balsam observed:

“Colonization and compulsory Christianity led to the suppression of two-spirit roles in many Native communities. Today, most two-spirits face homophobic oppression from

both mainstream U.S. society and their own tribes and communities.” The ancient roles of these gender-variant individuals often meant being shamans or witchdoctors.

The study involved a study of 197 Alaskan Indians living in the New York area. Of those, 179 gave researchers data on their sexual orientations. Out of this number, 3.4% described themselves as two-spirited individuals; 8.4% said they were homosexual; 2.2% said they were bisexual or unsure.

Each respondent was interviewed by phone for approximately three hours and given a questionnaire to fill out that dealt with cultural participation in Indian ceremonies; exposure to trauma and violence; physical and mental abuse; and substance abuse.

Two-spirited individuals reported higher rates of substance abuse, including hard drugs, and were much more likely to have used mental health services than heterosexuals. They also reported higher rates of childhood abuse at the hands of their parents and caretakers than did heterosexuals. ■