



two spirits

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### PREVALENCE

It is very difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of transgendered individuals. According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) approximately one in 30,000 men and one in 100,000 women seek sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). Other sources suggest much higher numbers of transsexuals. "In the Netherlands, where transgender status is less highly stigmatized, the prevalence is approximately 1 per 11,900 males and 1 per 30,400 females. In Singapore the ratios are even higher, with 1 per 9,000 males and 1 per 27,000 females. There are no accurate estimates of the remainder of the transgendered population who do not opt to have SRS, but may choose to live either full time or part time in a gender role different from their apparent sex at birth."

Quote by Petra Doan, retrieved December 1, 2005 from [http://www.plannersnetwork.org/publications/2001\\_146/Doan.html](http://www.plannersnetwork.org/publications/2001_146/Doan.html).

# Two Spirited Elders

## A Resource Fact Sheet for Aging Transgendered People In the San Francisco Bay Area

By Laura C. Strom, lcstrom@gmail.com, Created for Gerontology 705, Aging in a Multidimensional Context, Dr. Brian de Vries, December 2005.



### SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS

Two Spirit is an over arching term adopted in 1990 by Native people to cover people who might be termed gay, lesbian, dyke, femme, transgender, transvestite, transsexual, inter-sexed, hermaphrodite, and queer among other terms. Many tribes have terms for a third and fourth gender, besides male and female. Some tribes held Two-Spirited people in high regard, while others did not. What is important to know is that Two-Spirited people were acknowledged and a part of nearly every tribe. Terms for Two-Spirit exist in over 155 tribes.

*Two Spirit is a term which honors the experience of and is preferred by many transgendered people.*

According to Wikipedia the definition for *transgendered person* remains in flux, but the most accepted one currently is:

*People who were assigned a gender, usually at birth and based on their genitals, but who feel that this is a false or incomplete description of themselves.*

A *transsexual person* is a person who has gone through the process of sexual reassignment surgery to bring their physical body into alignment with how they see themselves. **M2F/Transwoman** is the term for a biological male who identifies as a female. **F2M/Transman** is the term for a biological female who identifies as a male.

A transgender symbol, a combination of the male and female sign with a third, combined arm representing transgender people.

Image retrieved December 1, 2005 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgender>



Photo of the author's Two-Spirited friend, used with permission. Photo taken by Robin M. Ward.

*This Two-Spirited person identifies with the term Agokwa, an Ojibwa term for a Two Spirit person. Ojibwa considered them inspired by Manitou (God). The title of this photo is "Robin at Prospect Hill, Martha's Vineyard, MA 1998".*

## CURRENT RESEARCH/THINKING

Transgendered people are undergoing the same battle that gays and lesbians fought with the mental health profession in the 1970's. **The current diagnosis for a transgendered person according to the DSM-IV-TR is Gender Identity Disorder. Dressing as the opposite sex is classified as a paraphilia called Transvestic Fetishism.** In 1973 gays and lesbians successfully got "homosexuality" removed from the DSM.

The Native American societies considered gender to be fluid, something that could be influenced by dreams or visions. Leslie Feinberg interviewed Wesley Thomas, a professor of anthropology from Indiana University for *zer* (transgender term for his/her) radical book *Transgender Warriors*. Thomas, who is of Dine ancestry, did extensive fieldwork with the Navaho/Dine and states **"Where I began to identify gender on a continuum—meaning placing female on one end and male on the other end—I placed forty-nine different gender identifications in between. This number derived from my own understanding of gender within the Navaho cosmology"** (Feinberg, 1996, p. 27).

***The Navaho/Dine term for Two-Spirit is Nadle which means "being transformed". The Nadle was considered sacred and holy in this society.***

Transgender activists argue the real issue with Gender Identity Disorder and Transvestic Fetishism is our society's current refusal to accept anything other than binary gender hegemony.

Another issue for Two-Spirits wishing to undergo **SRS (Sexual Reassignment Surgery)** is the mental health professions hold power over the standards of who and when a person can receive the surgery. In the 1960's Harry Benjamin established a criteria for SRS with his work *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. However Benjamin's thinking still supported a dualistic thinking of only two sex genders which leaves out anyone who wants to live outside of this binary construction. This dissatisfaction led to the adoption of The Transgender Model in the 1990's.

This population continues to be plagued by an extraordinarily high murder rate. According to Frontiers Online, **the murder rate of transgender persons is 17 times the national average, the highest rate of any minority group.** They cite a recent report of the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission indicated that 100% of hate crimes against transgender persons in Los Angeles County were violent—the highest rate of any reported group.

Very little is known about the aging of this population. What is known is that between 1.75-3.5 million Americans age 60 and greater identify as part of the LGBT community. One of the issues faced by transgendered aging people is not feeling comfortable being served by organizations specializing in older adults. Since transgendered people may face ostracism by their family of origin they may have fewer sources of support as they age. They may rely on friends, partners or a chosen family which are often not recognized legally. This population is more likely to live alone putting them at greater risk for poverty, poor nutrition and depression.



"Wood nymph". A Two Spirit M2F. Photo taken by Robin M. Ward. Reprinted with permission.

New Leaf, non-profit LGBT counseling services, 103 Hayes Street (near Market St.) San Francisco, CA, Tel: 415-626-7000  
[www.newleafservices.org](http://www.newleafservices.org)

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States  
<http://www.siecus.org/>

"Transgeneration" a program featuring transgendered people  
<http://www.sundancechannel.com/transgeneration/>

The International Journal of Transgenderism, peer reviewed, scientific articles, <http://www.symposion.com/ijt/index.htm>

***Crazy Horse had several winkte (Lakota term for Two Spirit) wives. Winkte are considered holy.***

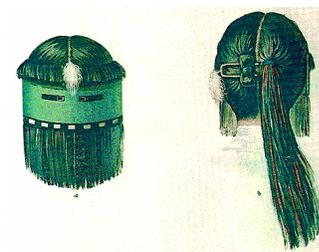


"Charlie the Weaver" (Navajo Nadle) (on right) with friend. Circa 1895.

## RESOURCES

In an exciting move, the city of SF has started Project Openhouse which will be a senior housing project for LGBT seniors with about 200 units scheduled to open in 2008. For more information see <http://www.openhouse-sf.org>

Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits—  
[www.baaits.org](http://www.baaits.org)



*The mask of the Zuni Two-Spirit Kachina Ko'lhamana (a god/dess) has a hair style that features a traditional female whorl on one side, with the long straight hair of the male on the other.*

Retrieved and reprinted October 30, 2005 from <http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/3044/slide2.html>



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## *Tips for Counselors working with Native American Two-Spirit People*

The term “Two-Spirit” is an over arching term adopted in 1990 by Native people to cover people who might be termed gay, lesbian, dyke, femme, transgender, transvestite, transsexual, inter-sexed, hermaphrodite, and queer among other terms.

The old anthropological term “berdache” (bur-DOSH) is insulting. The meaning is akin to “catamite” meaning a young boy who has sex with older men.

Many tribes have terms for a third and fourth gender, besides male and female. Some tribes held Two-Spirited people in high regard, while others did not. What is important to know is that Two-Spirited people were acknowledged and a part of nearly every tribe. Terms for Two-Spirit exist in over 155 tribes.

**Two-Spirited people are especially at risk for substance abuse and suicidality because of the double intersection of Native Americans and GLBTQQI.**



Engraving by Theodore de Bry depicting Vasco Nunez de Balboa's 1513 massacre of forty two-spirits by having his dogs rip them apart.. Circa 1594.

Imbedded in the attack on the religious practices of Native peoples is an attack on Two-Spirits rooted in homophobia. Early explorers considered Two-Spirits and sodomy to be an abomination, and considered diseases which wiped out up to 80-90% of all Native peoples God's retribution.

**The Two-Spirit identity was traditionally more about the role the person took within the tribe (doing work of the opposite sex) rather than a sexual preference. Persons who married Two-Spirit peoples were not necessarily considered Two-Spirits themselves.**



We'wha, in Washington D.C. Circa 1886.

**We'wha** was perhaps the most famous Two-Spirit or lhamana (Zuni term). As a Zuni Princess Ambassador, We'wha spent six months in Washington, D.C. in 1886, even meeting President Grover Cleveland. No one doubted We'wha was a woman.

**Native Americans consider gender to be fluid.** It can be determined by dreams, vision quests, messages from Spirit. When working with Two-Spirits, ask what this role means to each individual.

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**By Laura C. Strom, lcstrom@gmail.com**  
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