

# First Nations' Perspectives of Gender

Grades 10-12

## Curriculum Connections

This lesson fits well with the curriculum for Social Justice 12, Social Studies, English 12: First Peoples, and BC First Nations 12.

## Learning Outcomes

- to develop an understanding of and respect for two spirit identities.
- to compare indigenous and 'Western' beliefs about gender.
- to assess the impact of contact with Europeans on First Nations' beliefs about gender

## Context

The goal of this lesson is to provide students with an introduction to how some First Nations groups in North America traditionally viewed gender roles prior to European influences.

## Preparation

- Make an overhead of the picture below ("Balboa's Dogs Attacking a Group of Panamanian Sodomites" etched by Theodor de Bry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century).
- Photocopy the article "Two Spirit: Past, Present & Future" and the worksheet on "First Nations Perspectives of Gender."

## Lesson

1. Show students the picture (below) on an overhead. Ask them to interpret what they see in pairs and then discuss as a class.
2. Hand out the article, "Two Spirit: Past, Present & Future." Read through as a class.
3. Have students complete the worksheet (page 55).
4. Discuss students' responses as a class.
5. Ask students to imagine they work at the museum where the picture from the beginning of class is housed. Ask them to write a script of what they would tell visitors of the museum about the picture. You might allow students to conduct research about the picture before writing.

## Assessment

Collect students' scripts for evaluation. Does the student apply critical thinking skills (questioning, comparing, summarizing, making judgments)? Does the student demonstrate an understanding of two spirit identities, both pre-contact and post-contact? Does the student demonstrate open-mindedness and respect for diversity?



## **First Nations' Perspectives of Gender**

1. After reading the article about two-spirit identities, compare and contrast the beliefs about gender traditionally held by some First Nations groups with those traditionally held in 'Western' cultures.

First Nations perspectives

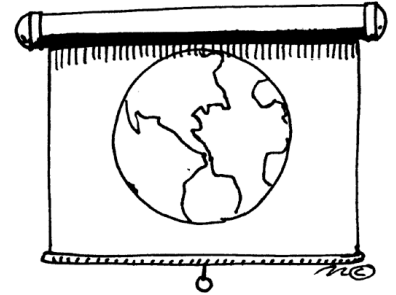
'Western' perspectives

2. Summarize the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation as it's presented in the article.

3. The author writes, "The existence of two-spirit people challenges the rigid binary worldview of the North American colonizers and missionaries, not just of the binary gender system, but of a binary system of this or that, all together." What do you think this means?

## Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Gender

Most babies are labeled as being biologically male or female at birth, but the process of becoming a man or a woman is heavily shaped by our culture and society. As such, the definition of what is appropriate for a man or a woman varies widely among countries, among religious faiths, and among different eras. In addition to differences between men and women's roles, looking back in time and across cultures, one finds that not all societies rely on only two gender categories. No less than seven gender categories existed amongst the Chukchi people of Siberia in the 1800s. Many First Nation tribes include a third gender category now called "two-spirit." In Oman, there is a third gender called the xanith. It is apparent from written historical records that there have been differently gendered people in virtually every society in every time period (Blanchard & Steiner, 1990). In schools that are increasingly multicultural, it is important for teachers to prepare students to be global citizens by teaching them to understand cultural influences on gender identity.



## Two Spirit: Past, Present & Future

*By Harlan Pruden, Co-founder and Council Member for the NorthEast Two-Spirit Society*

On the land we know as North America, there were approximately 400 distinct indigenous Nations. Of that number, 155 have documented multiple gender traditions. Two-spirit is a contemporary term that refers to those traditions where some individuals' spirits are a blending of male and female spirit.

The existence of two-spirit people challenges the rigid binary worldview of the North American colonizers and missionaries, not just of the binary gender system, but of a binary system of this or that, all together. The two-spirits' mere existence threatened the colonizers' core beliefs; the backlash was violent. Historical sketches, housed at the New York City public library, depict two-spirit people being attacked by colonizers' dogs. Word of this brutal treatment spread quickly from nation to nation. Many nations decided to take action to protect their honored and valued two-spirit people. Some nations hid them by asking them to replace their dress, a mixture of men and women's clothing, with the attire of their biological sex. After years of colonization, some of those very same nations denied ever having a tradition that celebrated and honored their two-spirit people.

The two-spirit tradition is primarily a question of gender, not sexual orientation. Sexual orientation describes the relationship a person of one gender has with an other-gendered person. Gender describes an individual's expected role within a community.

Within traditional Native communities, there was an expectation that women farmed/gathered food and cooked while men hunted big game. Although there was division of labour along gender lines, there was no gender-role hierarchy. Within the

Native social construct of gender, a community could not survive without both of the equal halves of a whole. The Native commitment to gender equality opened the door for the possibility of multiple genders, without the idea that a man was taking on a lesser gender by placing himself in a woman's role or vice versa for women assuming men's roles.

### **Gender Roles of Two-Spirit People**

People of two-spirit gender functioned as craftspeople, shamans, medicine-givers, mediators, and/or social workers. In many Native communities, men's and women's styles of speech were distinct; sometimes even different dialects were spoken. The two-spirit people knew how to speak both in the men's and women's ways. They were the only ones allowed to go between the men's and the women's camps. They brokered marriages, divorces, settled arguments, and fostered open lines of communication between the sexes.

Their proficiency in mediation often included their work as communicators between the seen (physical) and unseen (spiritual) worlds. Many of the great visionaries, dreamers, shamans, or medicine givers were two-spirit people. In some traditions, a war party could not be dispatched until their two-spirit person consulted the spirits of the unseen world and then gave their blessings.

When a family was not properly raising their children, it has been documented that two-spirit people would intervene and assume responsibility as the primary caretaker. Sometimes, families would ask a two-spirit person for assistance in rearing their children. In this respect, two-spirit people were similar to modern day social workers.

It is traditional to present gifts at gatherings to those who exemplify the "spirit" of the community or who have done the most for the community. Two-spirit people were respected and honoured with gifts when they attended gatherings. They did not keep the gifts, but passed them on to spread the wealth.



### **Remembering Our Traditions**

Since the time of colonization many Natives have forgotten the "old" way. Many converted to non-Native religions, which did not accept traditional spirituality and community structures. However, there are groups of elders and activists that have quietly kept the two-spirit tradition alive. In some nations that have revived this tradition, or brought it once again into the light, two-spirit people are again fulfilling some of the roles and regaining the honour and respect of their communities.

The two-spirit tradition is a very rich one that deserves a closer examination. The LGBT activists engaged in achieving equality for all should remember that there was a time when people with a blend of male and female spirits were accepted and honored for their special qualities. Two-spirit people are a part of the fabric of this land and stand here today as a testament of their collective strength and fortitude.