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Directions in Gender Research in American Indian Societies: Two Spirits and Other Categories

Abstract

Indigenous social role categories that represent third and fourth gender characteristics, such as the Lakota (Sioux) *winkte* and the Dino (Navajo) *n* and other Native terms, mark the status of these individuals. However, they are often blanketed by the term, *berdache*, in social science literature. Contextualization in an ethnographic frame is essential to greater comprehension of these roles. A critical review of contemporary research and the writings of the Native occupants of these categories has resulted in an all encompassing term: "Two Spirits." Coterminously, Native terms for lesbians are also emerging. However, all Native gay males and lesbians have not accepted the term. This article discusses the concerns of indigenous researchers and others or non-indigenous researchers in this discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

The ***berdache*** role was institutionalized among the Lakota, who reside now primarily in the state of South Dakota. It was often stated in early ethnographic writings and stressed in culturally relative terms that many Plains tribes socially constructed sexual "abnormality" (a Western view at that time) in acceptable ways. This term did not reveal the cultural variance that gave the ***berdache*** role its many forms and functions. This is what many gay and, increasingly, lesbian indigenous persons in North American Native societies find offensive. ***Berdache*** is a label which obscures tribal variation of Native linguistic terms. The anthropological literature is overburdened with categories for ***berdache***. It includes homosexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, and transgendered individuals. By examining this term in each unique cultural context one can see how the various gender roles were played out and privileged. Embedded in such frames of ideology and social structure and analyzed linguistically, concepts of gender variation have given new dimensions to this often misconstrued social role. Symbolic structures and marked behaviors resulted in various appraisals of personhood.

Gender studies in anthropology have proliferated since the 1970s. This may be attributed to the impact of feminist theory and, perhaps, post-modern influences. The role of reflexivity in anthropological writings may also have pointed to the role of individual professional's experiences in cross-cultural settings. From the viewpoint of ethnic minority anthropologists, this examination of "imperialistic navels" by anthropologists may herald greater awareness of subaltern concerns and contributions in the discipline of anthropology.

Life stories and personal narratives of many Natives are proliferating. The University of Nebraska Press, for example, has chosen to collect life stories of many Native peoples. I have referred to these as "I was there-isms!" They are, however, "voices" from the subalterns – and in some cases subjugated subjects as in feminine stories. Many of these "stories" are collected and edited by non-Natives, so the question remains, "Whose voice?" Many do provide rich texts to view individual lives in cultural settings. In my view, such collections must go beyond the journalistic. They must be situated within the local social and cultural matrices. Essentially, a framework of realistic and appropriate ethnography should frame the individual. We should be able to view these representations and contextualize them within power relations, racism, economic and social deprivation in our teaching, research, and counseling strategies. Moreover, this collection of life histories can be a powerful means of understanding life cycles in contrasting Native groups.

I shall attempt to examine the term, ***berdache***, which has been introduced in every beginning course in anthropology and explained as a ***male homosexual***. This, in most classes, has elicited titters and embarrassed glances.

Walter Williams (1986, 1992) traces the origin of the word to Arabic (bardash) meaning "kept boy" or "male prostitute." The term was introduced in the New World and found in the Jesuit relations with Natives who observed men dressed as women among the Iroquois.

As for the Siouan term ***winkte***, Williams relied upon his Lakota "informants" at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. He defines ***winkte*** as "woman to become." He places them in supportive families, as having fondness for children (caretakers) and describes them as "sacred people," "half man and half woman," "half and half people." He also elicited the terms "hermaphrodite," and he/she. Many Lakota people feel that Williams has glamorized the ***winkte*** as being sacred. In his book, Williams (1992) states that

> Many Native Americans also understood that gender roles have to do with more than just biological sex. The standard Western view that one's sex is always a certainty and that one conforms to one's morphological sex is a view that dies hard. Most American Indian world views generally are much more accepting of the ambiguities of life. Acceptance of gender variation in the ***berdache*** tradition is typical of many Native cultures' approach to life in general (p. 4).

Essentially, this view remained in operation for some time but was gradually eroded in the Europeanization and Christianization processes. After about 1950, homophobia on reservations and in Indian communities caused many gay Indian males to move to San Francisco or other urban centers where gay sub-culture provided some form of safety net.

For purposes of this presentation I rely upon the term ***gender*** to refer to a social category which is culturally construed, based upon Native ideologies, and accepted behavior for individuals who evidence certain social and sexual characteristics. Persons who occupy this category are located within a range of gender possibilities, which are defined by their cultural prescriptions. Sexuality refers to a range of sexual actions (after Thomas & Jacobs, 1999).

Since I investigated the Lakota term ***winkte***, I will elucidate how research might be construed by a Native researcher. I do not often personalize my work as an anthropologist, but in this age of reflexivity, perhaps you will bear with me.

From 1969 to 1972, I taught at San Francisco State University. As an ethnic minority faculty member and in those days of expected community involvement, I participated in many events, including the take-over of Alcatraz Island. However, the most ordinary community events were "Pow-wows" or social events in which Native peoples dressed in Native attire and danced to Native music. At these events, I noticed obviously gay and transgender Indian males who participated. In many instances they were shunned or ridiculed by other Indian participants.

In my childhood, we were aware of this social category, which was referred to as **winkte**. Linguistic analysis of this Lakota word is:

win - "woman"
kte - "to be like"
kte - "to kill" (a deeper structural form)
The common vernacular usage was ***winkte*** "wants to be like a woman."

We, as children, were instructed, "There are these individuals – in all cases males (***wicasa***). They are different. They are ***winkte***. Don't make fun of them. They are also Lakota," said our parents and grandparents.

Later, in San Francisco, a well-known Native woman of another Plains tribe said to me, as I was speaking to a gay male, "Isn't it terrible that so many of our good-looking Indian men are gay?" I replied, "You don't know much about your culture do you?" For many Plains Indian societies, a feminine or transgender role was "institutionalized." Contrary to the common designation of ***berdache*** to mean male homosexual, there were traditionally several strands to the ***winkte*** class in traditional Lakota society.

These encounters resulted in a paper "Changing Sex Roles in an Urban Context" which I read at an Anthropology regional conference in 1987. This paper found its way into the Indian and non-Indian gay community. When I later gave the additional linguistic analysis, "to kill women," many non-Indian gay men were offended. But Native gay men somehow viewed me as a mentor, as an accepting person, and therefore were not as critical. As in other parts of North America, gay people came to San Francisco to follow a gay life style and escape a growing homophobia due to Christian influences and the forced legal assimilation to Euro-American life ways due to education away from traditional life.

I rely on the following Native Lakota views on these reasons for the ***winkte*** role.

1. The perduring notion still extant is that some Lakota males were not destined to be warriors. For example, Lang (1998) makes an erroneous assumption about the ethnographic record when she asserts that men who did not go to war were ***winkte***. Not all Lakota men were expected to go to war; "men who didn't want to go war" were not classified as ***winkte***, because not all were of this third gender. We have terms that means strong-hearted – ***chante-tinza*** – that is also used to refer to warriors. Some men did not choose to be warriors because they did not have the orientation to ***killing***. These men were not looked down upon as less manly. Many of these were ***not winkte***.
2. Many preferred to excel in women's crafts – tanning skins, embellishing them with quills from the porcupine, making rawhide containers, and sewing tipi covers.
3. Some preferred to take care of children – naming them in ceremonies where it was believed that a name bestowed by a ***winkte*** brought good luck and fortune to the child.
4. Some went on the war path with warriors – to cook, mend moccasins, and perform clairvoyant rituals (by killing a badger and reading its stomach lining). It is uncertain if any sexual encounters occurred, because warriors often fasted, prayed and refrained from sex during this event – as in preparing for the Sun Dance – our sacred ritual.
5. Others were obviously sexual partners for men. Lakota believed "they look for each other."

My research into views on birthing, sexuality, and expected behavior of the Lakota reveals some possible pertinent corollary aspects. The word for children in Lakota is ***wakan yeja*** (*wakan = sacred* and *yeja - like = "to be")*. Thus, children were viewed as "sacred beings"

– traditionally, never hit but cherished and nurtured by the ***tiospaye*** (extended family). Children were seen as autonomous individuals It was thought that bearing many children detracted from the social development of each child. Children made their own life chances and actualized social roles. Thus, some chose to be ***winkte***.

In traditional Lakota society, excessive sexuality was not condoned. Women practiced a long lactation period lasting up to 4 to 5 years; this custom persisted into the early reservation period. Of course, as the Lakota practiced sororal polygyny (sisters marrying one man), this social script might also have been a factor. It was a common belief that the Lakota woman's life was difficult in a nomadic society and a yearly pregnancy was debilitating. When men pledged to dance in the sacred Sun Dance, they were ***expected*** to refrain from sex for a year before this yearly event. Early reservation records revealed one child per family in traditional families. A three-child family was considered "large." Feminine sexuality has not been carefully examined in so-called "Warrior societies."

My perusal of field notes revealed an interesting note. Akaska is the name of a town in South Dakota. A narrative from Mrs. Lucy Eagleman reveals: A returning war party encountered a ***winkte*** in this area, and shouted the Lakota term ***akaska*** ["to stick to; to accost, to enter (sexually)]." There is no information as to the consequences, but when I asked, "What happened?" I was told, "The ***winkte*** ran away." So as in most traditional societies, the rate of homosexual activity remains shrouded. Were the returning warriors in a secular state? And therefore able to engage in sex? Or was this a threat?

I present another narrative of gay Lakota men in the 1930s. This was the period of administered human relations on all Indian reservations, where colonialism and Christianization practices prevailed. A superintendent of the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota commanded the Bureau of Indian Affairs Police to arrest a ***winkte***, Patrick Hail, cut his long hair and put him in jail. This person was an excellent seamstress and craftsperson. He sewed his mother's (and other women's) dresses and was lauded by other women for this ability. He is pictured in an ethnography. As a child, I viewed him dressed in a woman's blouse and slacks, with curled hair, and wearing lipstick. A grandmother said (translated from Lakota) "Don't ridicule him. He's also Lakota."

My linguistic research has ***not*** uncovered a Lakota term for lesbians. I am not denying that this role was absent from traditional Lakota society. There are few instances in which Lakota women did not marry. Some older widowed women lived together after their husbands died. This was a common practice in the early reservation period and therefore not to be interpreted as lesbianism. Women who chose not to marry usually were embedded in a ***tiospaye*** (extended family) in which male relatives were able to care for them. Thus there seem to be evidences of feminine individual autonomy.

The world of engenderment is extremely varied among American Indian and Alaska Native societies. There have been few analyses of indigenous words which are contextually placed in the lexicon of the attribution of gender by speakers of Native languages. Rather, there is increasingly a designation of terms for those individuals who fit a third and sometimes a fourth gender category, be they males or females in their outward appearances. These terms are often utilized by outsiders who attribute meaning and

gender categories for the occupants of these gender roles. Even though the gender researchers often state that they have checked these words with their "informants," there is seldom a referral to reconfirm the linguistic connotation of these appellations. It is thus encouraging to note that emic analyses are beginning to occur in the field of naming, designating, and attributing the range of gender occupancies in some aboriginal groups (Thomas, 1993). This direction is significant for it is an attempt to deal with the permutations of gender specific categories within a total cultural framework. These attempts should also focus upon the terms; that is, the ways in which they are shared in the cultural group and the ways in which they are seen to differ in the ordinary usage in this cultural group. This latter caveat is necessary in order to give meaning to the cultural construction of gender.

In a recent paper (Medicine, 1997), I noted that the Lakota term for a gay male, ***winkte***, was assuming Pan-Indian proportion in its usage and level of understanding in contemporary "Indian country." The latter term is also an accepted description which glosses the more than five hundred tribes on reservations and federally-recognized enclaves of indigenous peoples. The 55% of Native peoples living in off-reservation towns and in cities are often referred to simply as "Urban Indians." Yet, the term ***winkte*** has meaning in the indigenous gay world.

In an effort to clarify Lakota terminology which gives meaning to words which signify aspects of gender, these words will be examined, and contextualized. ***Wi aja*** (*man*); ***winyan*** (*woman*); ***koshkalaka*** (*young man-youth*); ***wikoshkalaka*** (young woman); ***winkte*** (gay male); ***bloka*** (ultimate manliness); ***bloka egla wa ke*** (thinks being capable of doing manly things); ***wean ketch*** (ultimate womanhood); ***winkte-winyan*** (gay female - first heard in 1993). My aim in doing this is to document the various cultural constructs which are used in discourse among contemporary Lakota people. These words also give an adjectival aspect to gender terminology, and speak to the construction of terms to meet emerging gender categories (e.g. Paula Gunn Allen's term who stated in 1986 that "koshkalaka means dyke"). This attempt is also a response to some of the Native participants at the Wenner Gren conference on gender held in Chicago, May, 1994. This was a continuation of the first conference held during the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting held in Washington, D.C. in November, 1993. At the meeting in Chicago, the gay American Indian and Alaska Native males agreed to use the term "Two Spirit" to replace the controversial "berdache" term. The stated objective was to purge the older term from anthropological literature as it was seen as demeaning and not reflective of Native categories. Unfortunately, the term "berdache" has also been incorporated in the psychology and women studies domains, so the task for the affected group to purge the term looms large and may be formidable.

The Lakota term ***heyoka*** should not be confused as a gloss for ***winkte***. The former may be viewed as a "contrary," or one who reverses his behavior and acts in ceremonial activities. But because Williams only witnessed one ***winkte*** chopping the sacred tree and offering a prayer does not account for his calling ***winkte*** sacred. A contemporary variation in Sun Dance ritual is idiosyncratic as to who is asked to paint the tree. This also is significant in the role ***winkte*** play in ordinary Lakota life. They are not considered sacred.

At present, ***winkte*** individuals are generally accepted among the Lakota. There may be instances of ribaldness or teasing. Homophobia is generally not a part of ordinary Lakota life.

However, a new phenomenon is occurring. There has been an influx of males afflicted with AIDS, who return to their communities from urban centers. This is possibly to receive medical help from Indian Health Services. Because of confidentially issues, it is impossible to obtain verifiable data on the numbers. However, family members care for these persons. Only in one instance was a male afflicted with AIDS returned to a metropolitan hospice. A young gay male from the Rosebud reservation, an "opera singer" whose stage name was White Eagle, made a video of his life but concentrated on his singing career and not on AIDS, which resulted in his early demise.

In some Native communities in North America, homophobia has become brutally evident. Sue-Ellen Jacobs documents the horrendous treatment of a feminine male in a Pueblo community. In addition, many indigenous gay people challenged the belief that AIDS is only a homosexual affliction. It appears to be heterosexual in some communities. However, on hears in Lakota communities, "All Indians have AIDS!" -American Indian Drinking Syndrome!" Again, this is a counter to views of the "drunken Indian" syndrome.

In 1993, Sue-Ellen Jacobs and others organized a unique symposium. Entitled "Revisiting the North American Berdache: Empirically and Theoretically," the symposium was an interaction between indigenous gay people and those persons (native and non-native anthropologists) who had written about the issue. This event was undoubtedly a first encounter of its kind among a marginalized group (in U.S. society) and anthropologists. Tribes were Paiute, Shoshone, Yupik, Taos, Pueblo, two Dakota males, one Lakota female, one Navajo male, two Navajo women and "straight me"! This began almost five years of interactive collaboration which resulted in the book, "*Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality and Spirituality*" (Jacobs, Wesley, & Lang, 1997).

The major outcome of this unique endeavor was that the term "***berdache***" had evolved from the imperialistic and colonial discourse and was onerous to Native participant's gender and sexual behaviors.

This problem of "naming" was an important part of annual "Native American Gay and Lesbian Gatherings." In meeting annually in various parts of North America, the term "Two Spirit" became accepted by participants. Future meetings were to be called "The International Two Spirit Gathering". The first international meeting was held in Minneapolis in 1989. At the Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990, the term "Two Spirit" emerged. It supposedly is from the Anishinabe (Ojibway) ***neizh manitoog*** (*neizh*= two; *manitoog*= spirit). This term needs verification by an Anishinabe or Ojibway -speaking person.

I was told by a Lakota female that the term was Metis. As the Metis ("Half-breed, mixed blood, people in Canada) spoke several Native languages, the Anishinabe referent seems logical. This may give a strong attribution to the spiritual aspects of the social roles of lesbian and gay indigenous individuals as they perceive themselves.

The Native term ***neizh manitoog*** is not Lakota. Walter Williams has only one "informant" who stated, "A ***winkte*** is two spirits, man and woman combined into one spirit." (1992, p. 184). Statements such as these only seem to focus on the individual which is so

integral to Lakota personhood and the self-imagery of Lakota gays. In an unpublished paper, Thomas and Jacobs (1999) write:

> The term is not intended to mark a new category of gender. Instead indigenously defined pan-Native North American term that bridges Native American Indian diversity and sexualities and those of Western cultures (p. 2).

Many apparently feel that issues of self-identity are covered by the term. Two Spirit roles and identities are also referred to by some Native American people as gay, lesbian, transvestite, transsexual, transgender, drag queens and butches, "as well as ***winkte*** and other appropriate tribal terms" (pp. 2-3). This term "two spirit" is a self-imposed category. However, a transsexual of Dakota heritage said she objected to the term as her feminine "spirit was the over-riding one." Thus, as many ask, why not continue using "berdache?" I feel it is a factor in this era of indigenous self-determination. However, some Lakota gays do not accept the term saying, "I feel like a woman!"

Emerging Lesbian Terms

I now pick up the theme of lesbianism in Lakota society. In her M.A. thesis, Evelyn Blackwood uses the term "cross-gender for the female role." I was unable to elicit a Native term for the English designation.

Beverly Little Thunder writes in (Jacobs et al., 1997), "I am a Lakota woman." In this interesting personal narrative, she speaks of life in urban California, with an alcoholic mother, foster home placements, detentions, and involvement in the American Indian Movement. She returned to South Dakota and became involved in Sun Dance ceremonies seeking "Spirit." Upon rejection by the Sun Dance people (AIM) for her lesbianism, and as part of this homophobia, she was told to "do ceremony for her own kind." She began a Sun Dance for "Wimmin" in the California hills. Her involvement in the second conference on the "Berdache Revisited" in 1994 seemed to be an emotional fulfillment for her.

In a recent publication, she indicates that in Lakota tradition, "there's a story about when someone who was born having the spirit of both male and female being able to understand the male and female components. So they are born "Two Spirit." From that it has become a contemporary term that many lesbian and gay men in the Native Community have adopted as a marker for who they are. However, the term Two Spirit does not translate into any Native tongue." She goes on to say that "In our tribe, lesbians were called ***koskalawin***. Historically, they were the women who were trained to take care of the other women who had female problems. They usually opted not to marry. They were the women who adopted orphaned children. They became the aunties and grandmothers to all the children of the tribe. They held prominent positions in ceremony."

Beverly Little Thunder, an Urban Lakota turned "Pipe Carrier" and leader in the Wimmen's Sun Dance, has reinvented Paula Gunn Allen's ***koskalaka*** Lakota for "young man" to ***koskalaka win*** – young man woman. Therefore, can we see a complete self-serving use of Native Lakota words? This, despite my correction of Gunn Allen's use of

koskalaa to mean "dyke" (letter, 1994) to which Gunn Allen replied, "I got the wrong information."

Perhaps, the reconstruction of Native terms may be a part of self-naming of indigenous people who occupy these roles. In any case, the dynamic flux of self-ascription may be ongoing. Meanwhile, back on the reservation, besides the English term he/she, the term ***winktewin*** has emerged to translate as "male gay woman." However, the term for gay male – ***winkte*** – continues in the social discourse of contemporary Lakota people.

I wish, however, to outline what the collaboration of Native peoples, occupants of various gender roles and professionals of anthropology, achieved in the 1993 conference. The first benefit was that a subaltern, disenfranchised group of Native peoples of various genders and nations presented a variable rationale for their own self-naming. The second benefit was that anthropologists listened, but also contributed. Native peoples were not like "my informants" dragged into a professional meeting as had happened so many times before. In general, however, I feel that this honest interchange allowed all of the participants an opportunity to reassess how research can be done to give voice to target populations.

It is important to understand the ethnohistorical record to contextualize contemporary Native life. An understanding of the way gays and lesbians, and others, live and write about their lives adds new dimensions to the discipline of anthropology and to women and gender studies. Some of the participants were interested in categories of gender, others on personhood and the life cycle, and others spoke of spirituality and homophobia. But the discussions were frank, open, and set new standards for participatory research. Many were concerned about the contextualization of the term used for marked individuals in their distinct cultures in contemporary life.

All of us, I believe, viewed this experience as a means of assessing ourselves in our own societies and in the discipline in which we work. I wish to conclude with the directive in research that we examine histories of women that not only openly examines the shifting nature of gender itself, but examines the culture, class, racial and sexual components in differences through temporality. We might attempt to construct histories of ideas regarding women by both genders in Native societies. I take one example, which is the emergence of lesbianism among Aboriginal women. For example, it was not uncommon for Lakota women to choose not to marry.

As an economic necessity, older Lakota women lived together after being widowed or divorced or abandoned (by white partners) in the early reservation period. Thus, one must assess the emergence of contemporary Lakota lesbianism. It is, I feel, by reassessing our theories and research methods of gender roles in any society that the enrichment of anthropology and feminist studies may continue.

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