

**Inque[e]ry:**

**The Lesbian, Bi, Trans and Two-Spirited**

**Women's Research Network of B.C.**

Focus Group Report

Aboriginal Women in Prince George and Area

Facilitated and Prepared by Carlene Dingwall

August 1, 2002

## **Preamble**

Carlene Dingwall facilitated a focus group in Prince George on July 31, 2002. Originally the group was scheduled to meet on July 22, but was postponed due to an emergency for one of the participants. The group consisted of four Aboriginal women participants whom self-identified as:

- 1) Two-Spirited-Saulteaux-Cree
- 2) Two-Spirited-Lesbian-Metis
- 3) Two-Spirited-Non-Status-Cree
- 4) Lesbian-Metis

The group met from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Traditionally, Aboriginal people meet, socialize and work around the sharing of food as it is viewed as a respectful way to honour the participants or “guests” in an event. Thus, the group began with the sharing of a meal where a general discussion and trust building ensued. The general themes that emerged from the questions provided by the facilitator are documented below.<sup>1</sup>

## **Principles of the In[queer]y Network**

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the phrase “queer women” is used to include lesbian, bi, trans and Two-Spirited women.

The facilitator provided the group with a copy of the working principles of the network. Clearly much thought and work has gone into the development of the principles as they cover a range of issues related to the ways in which network members choose to relate to each other and to the research undertaken. Overall, the group was very excited about this provincial resource. Each member expressed interest in becoming a member of the network as each is involved in research at a local, provincial and/or national level.

#### Network Parametres

The group felt that there is a general lack of clarity that prevented them from getting a clear picture of the parameters of the Network. For example, the principles do not outline who is involved in the network (what membership looks like). The phrase, “the Research Network is ...committed to the creation of an accessible, inclusive, and diverse network of people who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, (two-spirited) or queer and who are doing research on issues related to that identification” provides a clearer definition of the parametres of the network and could, in fact, be a “mission statement” that heads the principles of the Network. The questions that emerged included:

- 1) How do you define queer women’s research? Does research conducted by non-queer women constitute queer research?

- 2) Will the network track all research in B.C. that is about queer women's issues, or only that which is conducted by queer women? For instance, is the research listed and cited in "Made in B.C." conducted by queer women only, or is it a review of research about queer women's issues?
- 3) How can the participants of the group become members of the network?
- 4) Can the members of the group receive a list of the members of the network?

### *Working Principles*

A perspective shared by each member of the group was expressed by one member, "As an Aboriginal woman, I am responsible to my people and my community. The work I do needs to be accessible and available to everyone. I do not want to be involved in academic masturbation." Overall the group feels that the language of the working principles needs to be more concise and less academic. The principles appear to be a mixture of ethical and procedural guidelines. It should be relatively easy to hold the principles in one's mind and articulate them. In other words, both the language and the content need to be accessible, not only to the members of the Network, but to everyone who may be involved in a research project embraced by the Network (for example, see Appendix One). Ethical procedures are not entirely clear and could be fleshed out more.

Concern was expressed that the network could be a "censoring" body that determined 'appropriate' queer women's research. "The Network should be for lesbian women for

whatever research they want to do. In addition, the group felt that research conducted by non-queer women about “lesbian issues” is o.k. “it’s important to have allies”. “There needs to be input from others, not just lesbians”.

### *Emerging issues*

- 1) Provide information to focus group on how to become members of the Network.
- 2) Mission statement to form part of the working principles that outlines the parameters of the membership both to the Network as well as definition of research embraced by Network.
- 3) Develop a separate and distinct set of guidelines for collecting, collating, conducting and disseminating research.
- 4) Ensure that communication within and from the Network is accessible and inclusive.

### **Naming the Network**

There is overall enthusiasm and support for the name of the Network. The word “In[queer]y” is particularly well-liked. The group felt that it was strong and implies that the Network is by and for queer women. Moreover, the group felt that the terms queer and lesbian are words that include bisexual, transsexual and Two-Spirited so that In[queer]y is an inclusive term that works for the header. The discussion centred for a while on whether someone reading the title might think that there was an “inquiry based on the Network being conducted.” A suggestion arose that the title could read, “In[queer]y: An exploration of Lesbian, Bi, Trans and two-Spirited Women’s Research Network of B.C.” There was concern that the confusion may result in an “in[dyke]ment”.

*Two-Spirited*

There is resounding support for the term Two-Spirited to be included in the title. Three of the four Aboriginal women identify as such and all feel that it is important to state Two-Spirited in order to be inclusive. There is no issue regarding whether the term is for use specifically by Aboriginal people.

The times when terms should be reserved for use by a community or self-identifying group or individual is when there can be derogatory connotations attached to the term. For instance, terms like dyke, queer, and Indian need to be used by people who identify as such and probably not others as each of these terms have been exploited in negative ways. The term and concept 'Two-Spirited' does not have these connotations and can be respectfully used by all.

While the term Two-Spirited is a respectful identifier, it is not without a multitude of nuances of meanings. Some of the meanings expressed include:

“It signifies other than heterosexual”.

“It means you're balanced”.

“It is self-defined”.

“It is a definition of a partnership”.

“It has a spiritual meaning. Traditionally Two-Spirited were Medicine women and men who were honoured and protected. They had special gifts, were gifted with the medicines and were healers. They had a balance of the masculine and feminine-yin and yang”.

“We are recovering the meaning of two-Spirited, as colonization along with residential schools wiped this term from many communities. We were given homophobia as a replacement”.

All group members agreed that the concept, “Two-Spirited” is self-defined. One Metis woman does not define as Two-Spirited because the concept has not been internalized for her. “Embracing the concept is a process, and as part of the process I recognize that feel included in the category, not excluded even though I don’t identify as Two-Spirited at this time. There is so much that has been taken away from us and I see Two-Spirited as both a sexuality identifier and a spiritual identifier. I am not quite sure how they fit together for me right now”. Another group member said, “so many terms used to label Aboriginal people have been politicized- like Metis, status and non-status Indian, Native... Two-Spirited isn’t political and for that I am grateful”.

#### *Emerging Issues*

- 1) Ensuring that the concept and words “Two-Spirited” are included in the Network.
- 2) Continue to explore the various meanings of Two-Spirited.
- 3) Keep the politics away from the term “Two-Spirited”.

#### **Inclusion of Aboriginal Women**

Non-heterosexual Aboriginal women face many barriers. The intersection of race and sexuality is complex. As Aboriginal women, we feel a responsibility to our communities and ourselves. Being Aboriginal is a core of our identities. Generally, it is not something that we can choose to come out about or not. It is something we negotiate on a daily basis with the rest of society. The lack of queer Aboriginal women’s voices is not due to lack of social activism, it centres around the necessary work that is being done around race issues and around the additional barriers that being queer presents. “The smaller the group,” one woman stated, “the more pressure there is exerted to conform.”

The group discussed and validated the belief that homophobia is a very serious issue in Aboriginal communities, particularly in the rural and isolated communities here in the North. “The Church introduced homophobia and residential schools corrupted sexuality and firmly cemented the notion of conformity to non-traditional norms”. It is generally not safe to be “out” in an Aboriginal community. In some communities, those that are out are tolerated, but marginalized and often seen as sexual offenders or impaired. Generating inclusion of queer Aboriginal women is a difficult prospect because one cannot just go to these communities and start asking where the queer women are because they probably won’t be found.

Many queer Aboriginal women leave their communities and may or may not choose to be out in their new community. Some people are not aware of the roots of the homophobia that exist in Aboriginal communities and are willing to dismiss the communities as non-progressive. As Queer Aboriginal women with ties to these communities, we are often in a conflicting position of both defending the community to outsiders while trying to educate the community and create a safer place to live in ways that allow us to express all facets of our identities.

Many Elders that may have known Two-Spirit traditions have died, which leaves recovering this knowledge difficult and easy to dispute by those community members who do not want to acknowledge a position on homosexuality that honours the fluidity of sexuality. One woman in the group who works with Aboriginal communities on issues including homophobia stated: “I have spoken to a lot of people in the Carrier Nation trying to find out what the Carrier traditions for Two-Spirited were. And the answers I get range from, ‘we never had anything like that’ to ‘we don’t and never did talk about it’. Maybe they did and maybe they didn’t but not knowing is frustrating. It’s hard to build on”.

While there are barriers that exist in trying to include or create an Aboriginal network of queer women, the group is certain that it can happen. They cited the focus group as an

example of the beginning of this kind of network. One woman stated that “this kind of development needs to happen from within. It can only happen through word of mouth-us talking to us-spreading the word in an informal, safe way”. “We need Abo-regional reps”. Another woman continued, “we know who the Aboriginal lesbians are and we can start spreading the word through the lesbian telegraph. It’s the only way it will work”. Another point was brought up that even the internet as a resource is an issue as many communities are still without access to the internet and email.

Moreover, including Aboriginal women means being prepared to provide the kind of support some may need, such as travel expenses. In addition, gatherings need to include food and take time for socializing and trust building. “There are Aboriginal women who are more disadvantaged than us. This kind of thing can be really intimidating. They will need our support and we’ll need to make a commitment to this”.

### *Emerging Issues*

- 1) The network can reach out to Aboriginal women by ensuring that each region has a queer Aboriginal woman who is willing to make contacts and ensure that safe communication processes are in place and followed.
- 2) The Network can help ensure the inclusion of queer Aboriginal women by helping to provide the resources that make participation possible.
- 3) The Network can help ensure participation of queer Aboriginal women by being sensitive to their issues and by recognizing that we, in turn, have responsibility to our communities. Thus, inclusive and accessible processes and language are paramount to participation.

### **Research Topics**

## Aboriginal Women: Focus Group

---

The discussion in the focus group revealed that there are many research topics of interest.

The following is but a glimpse of the research in which the focus group has interest.

- 1) Trauma and addictions: how these keep lesbians in the closet/ heterosexual lifestyles.
- 2) Lesbian Women in uniform.
- 3) Recovering Two-Spirited traditions and values in various Nations.
- 4) Suicide: homosexual youth.
- 5) Dyke Theatre: Film, Art, Theatre, Writing and Social Action.
- 6) Transgender Women: it seems safer to live life as a lesbian rather than transgender.  
Polarizing the polarized.
- 7) Lesbian Parenting.
- 8) Homophobia in Aboriginal Communities: How to break down the barriers.
- 9) “Gender Outlaws” in the Justice System: young women who do not dress like “girls” are treated poorly within the system. What are the effects on the system and on these young women?
- 10) Politics in the Lesbian Community.
- 11) Spiritual Processes for two-Spirited People: Traditions, roles, ceremonies, etc.
- 12) Fancy-Dancing: The intersection of race and sexuality: Alliances and allegiances.

Each member of the focus group was given a copy of “Made in B.C.” How exciting to have this as a resource. This paper generated both enthusiasm and commitment to the Network. Members expressed interest in contributing to the body of work represented by the paper. Moreover, the members of the focus group identified a further 7 queer Aboriginal women who may be interested in the Network.

## **Final Words**

The focus group was an interesting and thought provoking experience for all involved. The group felt that the discussion created the opportunity to create and maintain a community of people based on shared experience. This is both survival and empowerment. The group made a plan to meet in several weeks to continue the support and, in the meantime, to see if we could generate involvement of other queer Aboriginal women. “This is exciting” was stated several times. The group expressed hope that there would be follow-up with the focus group by the Network and an invitation for further involvement.

## **In[queer]y:**

### **The Lesbian, Bi, Trans and two-Spirited Women's Research Network of B.C.**

The In[queer]y Network is committed to the creation of an accessible, inclusive, and diverse network of people who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer or two-Spirited women and who are doing research on issues related to that identification.

#### **Network members are committed to:**

- 1) Sharing information with network members and communities
- 2) Developing and maintaining respectful, inclusive and equitable relationships
- 3) Supporting each other to learn new skills and to recognise our strengths and limitations

#### **Commitment to ethical research:**

- 1) Collaboration with communities to ensure research supports the needs and goals of the communities
- 2) Assuring that research conducted is inclusive, accessible and respectful to researchers and communities
- 3) Developing awareness of implications and consequences of research
- 4) Promoting positive personal and social awareness and change