



## **Coming Out Stories: *Two Spirit Narratives in Atlantic Canada 2017***

### **KEY FINDINGS**

- Support provided by families and friends of Two Spirit people is only one component of adequate mental health support, especially for LGBTQ2S+ youth, who may experience mental health distress as their coming out process is often longer and more complex.
- There is a need for the development of specific cultural policies and programs to support Two Spirit people, who may move from reserves to urban centres in search of safe and appropriate supports.
- Research exploring the coming out experiences of Two Spirit people should be conducted across Canada, using a community-based research approach that empowers its participants by giving voice to their stories, to gather more evidence to support the development of culturally specific programs.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Atlantic Research Centre (UAKN) provided funding to the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance (W2SA) for its study: *Coming Out Stories: Two Spirit Narratives in Atlantic Canada*. The study identifies characteristics of coming out experiences among twenty Two Spirit peoples in Atlantic Canada both on reserve and in urban centres. It provides an understanding about individual's mental health and well-being during this process and identifies the types of supports Two Spirits relied on when they came out. The researchers aim to use the data collected to make recommendations to improve the supports and programs available to Two Spirit people when they are coming out. Two Spirit peoples have and continue to demonstrate tremendous resilience in the face of historical and ongoing traumas stemming from forced assimilation and colonization into a society founded on patriarchal and heteronormative laws and policies (Canon, 1998).

### **PARTNERSHIPS**

This research was completed through the partnerships of the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance (W2SA), the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network Atlantic Research Centre, the Halifax

Native Mi'kmaw Friendship Centre, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Mount Saint Vincent University, Cape Breton University, Eagle Canada, & Healing Our Nations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study employed mixed methods, including interviews and an online survey, as well as a literature review to document existing research on the coming out experiences of Two Spirit peoples in the Atlantic region. Participants in the interview process were also invited to complete demographic sheets to identify emergent themes and issues; allowing researchers to quantify the prevalence of these themes and issues. Participatory Action Research methods ensured that a community-based approach was taken that centred the voices of participants by incorporating elements of community perspectives, participants' lived experiences, stories, and focus groups. There were four interrelated research questions that guided the approach of the researchers:

1. What are the coming out stories of community and urban Aboriginals living in Atlantic Canada?
2. How can the findings from the proposed coming out stories and on-line survey deepen our understanding of the mental distress (despair, suicidal ideation) experienced by Two Spirits persons?
3. How can these coming out stories and survey data inform the development of supports for mental health and resilience, suicide prevention, Two Spirit cultural identity and awareness?
4. What quantitative and qualitative data do we have on mental resiliency and related determinants of Two Spirits persons living in Atlantic Canada? Where are the qualitative and quantitative data gaps & how might those data gaps be addressed?

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

In this research project, the lived experiences of Two Spirits in coming out to their communities, families and friends formed a collective voice of knowledge, camaraderie and hope. Twenty participants shared their coming out narratives, allowing researchers to capture data on supports and individual experiences with respect to coming out, including challenges and supports identified leading up to –during –and after coming out as well as resulting impacts on mental health and well-being. An intersectional sample of participants from urban, on reserve, student, and adult responses. demonstrated the need for further analysis on the rates of suicide ideation and suicide attempts within the LGBTQ2S+ subgroups.

The researchers found that more research is needed to understand the coming out process of transgender people to provide more culturally appropriate and culturally safe mental health supports. This study provides evidence that transgender peoples face challenges which are unique to them in their coming out process, correlated to an increased rate of suicide ideation. These findings will require further analysis especially in comparing rates of suicide ideation and suicide attempts among First Nations to the general population

regionally and nationally. Furthermore, additional analysis is required to explore the study's findings between the differences in gender where females have higher incidence of suicide ideation and attempts than males.

The narratives clearly provide evidence that Two Spirits come out to friends and family especially for youth between the ages of 13-19 years. This outlines the importance of developing Gay Straight Alliances or similar peer programs in First Nations communities both on and off reserve. Workshops on youth empowerment, cultural identity, Two Spirit awareness and suicide prevention strategies offer proactive and cost efficient preventive programs which could be integrated in school or community activities through grassroots youth councils, youth seminars and gatherings. Partnerships are needed to bridge local and regional youth programs like The Red Road Project, Mi'kmaq Maliseet Atlantic Youth Council (MMAYC) with provincial initiatives like the Youth Project in Nova Scotia. The Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance should increase efforts to develop youth leadership in the Alliance to help build bridges among other youth initiatives outside of indigenous context.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research project aimed to identify characteristics of the coming out experiences of Two Spirit peoples in the Atlantic region and has played an important role in opening the dialogue about the reality of the challenges and hopes by Two Spirits in their coming out process. The Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance (W2SA) intends to use the community evidence-based knowledge, derived from this project, to continue to build relationships and partnerships with health sectors, support organizations and indigenous communities to develop strategies and policies to support Two Spirits and Indigenous LGBTQ youth, adults and Elders in the Wabanaki traditional territory. Further research is needed to understand the coming out experiences of Two Spirit people and the implications of these experiences on mental health, particularly in relation to suicide, in the Atlantic region and more broadly. The W2SA intends to further analyze the findings about mental health distress that are evidenced in both the surveys and interviews. This is not mere research protocol, but a deep need to reflect on cultural identity and culturally specific supports for Two Spirits through ongoing community building relationships.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Further research and programming are needed to understand and support the coming out experiences of Two Spirit people and the implications of these experiences on mental health, particularly in relation to suicide, in the Atlantic region and across Canada more broadly. Researchers identified the following policy recommendations:

- Identify and procure core funding to operationalize the Wabanaki Two Spirit Alliance with administrative and support staff.
- Continue to build partnerships with provincial and regional LGBTQ2S+ organizations for information sharing, knowledge networking and building supports for all youth initiatives.
- Federal funding for policy and research development of culturally responsive health supports for Two Spirits/LGBTQ and youth in general.

- Development of education and awareness campaigns about Two Spirit culture and identity in the Atlantic region.

**For more information on this project visit:**

<http://uakn.org/research-project/coming-out-stories-two-spirit-narratives-in-atlantic-canada/>

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit:

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