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Farewell, LGBTQ+ Competency.

Rest In Peace. May You Never Be Needed Again

ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ psychology and LGBTQ+ competency are two concepts which, on the surface, appear constructive, even liberating. In this article, I discuss their downside. The premise that an LGBTQ+ person will receive better care if the staff have LGBTQ+ competency applies not only to gender and sexual minority people, but also to other minority groups about whom cultural competence can supposedly be obtained. Developing specific competence to serve a certain social group has become a common strategy in health care and other fields (e.g., Fish & Evans 2016; Harper et al. 2013). While this may well be a very nice thought, in this article I want to paint a more nuanced picture and discuss why the idea of "LGBTQ+ competency" is also problematic – perhaps even completely naive.

When this text was originally published in a textbook on LGBTQ+ psychology in 2017 it was the playful and edgy end chapter of the anthology. It pointed to an imagined future where LGBTQ+ competency would not be needed. Since then, its main argument seems less edgy and more central. The public debate has evolved towards polarization, virtue signaling, moral posing, and the choking anxiety of constantly being on the correct moral side. Simultaneously, the toxic consequences of cancel culture seem to have increased. This text is about helping professionals develop the bravery to continuously be "good enough" rather than having to defend their cultural competence. It has inspired Swedish scholars from a range of different professional fields, including health planning, psychology, dentistry, physiotherapy, and pedagogics, so now it is time to introduce it to an English-speaking audience.

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The problem with LGBTQ+ competency

DESPITE ITS GOOD intentions, the discourse surrounding cultural competence rarely grants subordinated groups the dignity of subjecthood. Instead, it often reinforces their objectification and exotification. Unfortunately, injustices and oppression are seldom a simple matter of poor information. The idea of building competency stems from the idea that LGBTQ+ people or other marginalized groups are different from "normal people," meaning that, if we are to understand and engage with them, specialist skills are necessary. If we look at this construction of competency critically, we can see it as a discriminatory phenomenon that cements people into categories rather than dismantling the often-harmful structures those categories create. And so, the minority group we hoped we would liberate instead risks being recolonized[1] (Butler 1991/2005). Perhaps the greatest paradox and irony is that often, as LGBTQ+ people, we exoticize ourselves in a bid to justify our existence. Yet the cost of our visibility it is that we tailor ourselves to suit normative expectations.

Othering

The idea that everyone should be given a place in society is beautiful – but also a bit rosy-eyed. LGBTQ+ psychology adds to what mainstream psychology has forgotten, and LGBTQ+ competency teaches "regular people" to understand and engage with the Other. But implicit in this is the idea that those who live within the norm need no special psychological framework – they are already part of fundamental psychology. Normativity enjoys the privilege of invisibility, while those outside it are assigned an extra cultural layer that demands explanation.

As postcolonial theorist Mrinalini Greedharry (2008) observes, cultural psychology often focuses on understanding people in contexts different from the white Western one. Likewise, LGBTQ+ psychology positions itself as a supplement, while psychology for non-LGBTQ+ people retains its status as the universal model. The feelings and behaviors of those outside the LGBTQ+ group can thus be explained through "regular" psychology.

The intention may be good, but the practice often falls flat. One common mistake is placing the focus on the differences rather than on the norm. In 2003, the Swedish Police ran a recruitment campaign that serves as an example of the othering that can arise when we do not understand that the problem is the norm itself. A major campaign to recruit future police officers looked to enlist people with "different sexual orientations" or "different ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (Ovander 2003). Different from what? "Different" tends to mean deviation from an unspoken standard or perhaps even subordinate. Similarly, ethnicity tends to mean person of color (not white); sexuality often means bisexual or homosexual (but not heterosexual), and the "other" gender is always female (see de Beauvoir 1953/2012).

Competence as a sleight-of-hand that masks power

The construct of LGBTQ+ competency shifts the perspective from questions of privilege and subordinance to questions of education and facts. The danger of such discourse is that it ignores self-reflection by focusing only on knowledge (e.g., Paul, Hill & Ewen 2012). If we simply learn about the Other, we do not need to look at ourselves as participants in societal hierarchies; we do not need to see our own privileges for what they are. Hence, we are not required to think about ourselves as sharing culpability in an unfair power structure. Focus is carefully shifted from our individual privileges to the knowledge we need about the other person's culture so we can engage with the other.

Even if our instinct to understand comes from kindness, it is a subtle top-down perspective, and it risks exoticizing the subject. We can learn tidbits and stereotypes about all sorts of colorful and intriguing groups: when Muslims fast, what spices are used in Asian cuisines, the meaning of Sámi holidays, how gay men have sex, how lesbians become parents, that trans men can give birth, that some deaf people want cochlear implants and others do not. It is also possible to learn to say "partner" instead of "girlfriend" or "boyfriend." Or to use the singular "they" instead of gendered pronouns. All this can be done without engaging with our own privilege.

The word "competence," in other words, often quietly and brilliantly erases the matter of privilege, responsibility, and power. This results in hiding oppression underneath the seemingly neutral, non-political act of discussing cultural differences. Intersectionality-focused social work researcher Izumi Sakamoto (2007) warns that when culture is portrayed as something neutral, or culture is discussed without an explicit analysis of power, there is a danger of perpetuating systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Creating stereotypes and losing nuance

The idea of obtaining competence about members of a certain social group presupposes that we disregard the variations within the group we are looking at. The concept of competence often requires stereotypes and simplified truths. Nuance fades easily; stereotypes become accentuated. Complexity is flattened when one is expected to be competent in a bouquet of supposedly stable and essential identities. We LGBTQ+ people are assumed to be gay and happy, harboring no disagreements among us, regardless of which segment of the community we belong to or which movement we embrace. It is easy to be reduced to a series of letters, which, just like sprinkles in all the colors of the rainbow, come together on the same cupcake of sickly-sweet solidarity. However, reality is not always so simple.

Laura Abrams and Jené Moio (2009) use critical race theory to argue how the discourse of cultural competence itself is a self-contradiction. They point to the obvious paradox: that cultural competence discourse requires an essential object about which knowledge can be obtained. At the same time, however, practitioners of cultural competence believe that true anti-discrimination work is always anti-essentialist.

Strategic essentialism

Nevertheless, if a person is completely invisible, it is difficult for them to assume the role of subject. How can one critique or deconstruct the norm from a place so marginalized that it barely registers? Hence, many human rights movements have used a different approach for liberation:

strategic essentialism. The term *strategic essentialism* means that a person temporarily assumes an essential identity for the purpose of driving politics forward (Butler 1991/2005; Spivak 1987). Based on this reasoning, it can be argued that working toward LGBTQ+ competency is a political act of strategic essentialism. However, when we adopt normative terms, we risk becoming digestible objects rather than autonomous subjects.

Whether the risks of strategic essentialism are worth it depends to a great extent on the historical moment one inhabits, and on how far along one is in the process of liberation. There was a time when progress for homosexuals meant the state considered them merely "diseased," rather than being criminals[2]. There was also a time when a registered partnership was a significant public recognition of same-sex romantic relationships, though later this designation exemplified discriminatory special legislation and a type of second-rate marriage that lacked many of the legal benefits afforded to people in different-sex marriages[3]. In other words, different times have different strategies. My point is that the discourse of LGBTQ+ competence is something that, sadly, will never liberate us. It is a strategic step along the way, but not our destination.

The feel-good trap of cultural competence

Another danger of the cultural competence discourse is its tendency to cast the practitioner as a moral hero (Pon 2009). The sense of doing good by developing cultural competence is not as harmless as it may seem. It imposes expectations of gratefulness onto the minority population being learned about. Even more concerning, perhaps, is that research into moral self-licensing has shown that humans often see goodness as a type of inner debt economy. If we have just done something morally right, we often permit ourselves unethical behavior afterward – as though kindness earns us credit (see for example Blanken, van der Ven & Zeelenberg 2015; Merritt, Effron & Monin 2010). If people are fundamentally driven by a wish to be good rather than a desire for deeper insight into what they want to change about themselves and how they will relinquish their

privileges, then any gains from anti-discrimination efforts are fleeting and superficial at most. The result is that subordinate groups must accept others' *beguiling generosity* – a term coined by professor of psychiatry and psychoanalyst Salman Akthar (2012) to describe the kind of goodness driven by a narcissistic desire for recognition for altruistic actions.

The problem of voluntariness

Another dilemma of the competence discourse is that it builds upon voluntariness. Seen this way, treating LGBTQ+ individuals is a chosen mission, a niche interest, rather than a core professional responsibility. Consequently, nobody can expect to acquire specialist competency in all minority issues, just as nobody can be expected to have specialist knowledge of all areas of psychology.

If LGBTQ+ competency, anti-racism competency, class competency, and gender competency are placed on an equal footing with neuropsychology, organizational psychology, psychotherapy, forensic psychiatry and so on, they become voluntary. Within the paradigm of cultural competence, ignorance is no longer seen as bigotry but merely as an absence of training. Professionals can escape the label of being prejudiced; they're just "not experts in that area." Thus, incompetence becomes a low-cost alternative to confronting the uncomfortable truth that one might be arrogant, biased, homophobic, racist, sexist, politically incorrect, or viewed as such.

Furthermore, defining the nature of competence is difficult. What is absurd is that gay and lesbian psychologists who have lived in an LGBTQ+ context for their entire lives often question whether they can call themselves LGBTQ+ competent if they have not taken the right course or been certified by specialist organizations. This highlights the re-colonizing logic of this discourse. A study by David Paul, Shauna Hill, and Shaun Ewen (2012) into the quality of care for Indigenous people in Australia playfully pointed out that considering yourself to be culturally competent is the ultimate proof of incompetence – and perhaps they were right.

Unconscious discrimination factors

From a psychological perspective, the greatest failing of the competence discourse is that it overlooks unconscious factors like oppression, biases, and discrimination. It treats dominance and subordinance as a problem of education. Unfortunately, issues of privilege, repression, and unfairness are seldom so simple that they can be corrected by information alone. People with privilege tend to want to keep it, and those who are confronted with their privilege often deny that they have it (e.g., Moss-Racusin, Molenda & Cramer 2015). Experiments in social psychology have shown that power and privilege can bring out the worst in us, and we often justify our own advantages by arguing that we have earned them in one way or another (Piff 2014; Piff et al. 2012).

The tradition of psychoanalysis has the longest history of emphasizing unconscious factors in the psychological lives of humans. However, in recent decades, cognitive-oriented psychologists, social psychologists, and neuropsychologists have increasingly become interested in implicit processes[4] (Stoycheva, Weinberger & Singer 2014) about how we so easily create unconscious stereotypes about subordinate groups.

Child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Henri Parens (2007) argues that well-intended biases are an element of normal attachment and child development, as a child discriminates between safety and in-groups/out-groups. In other words, it is an important task in the child's developmental psychology that they learn to tell the difference between family and strangers.

Other psychoanalytical thinkers have formulated oppression in terms of the majority holding an unconscious need to have minorities to look down upon. For example, people in the majority often project their own unwanted characteristics onto subordinate groups[5] and dissociate from vulnerability or have an unconscious narcissistic desire to maintain their power (e.g., Akhtar 2007, 2014; Layton 2002, 2006; Young-Bruehl 1996[6]). Additionally, other psychoanalytical theorists (e.g., Davids 2003; Layton 2002) have pointed out that people are unable to avoid internalizing society's power structures, and extreme stress, anxiety, and insecurity have led us all to be more inclined towards racism, homophobia, or prejudice.

Similarly, mentalization pioneers Peter Fonagy and Anna Higgitt (2007) believe that threats to basic attachment security awaken uncertainty and bias in all of us. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the frailty of the cultural competence discourse is not just that it ignores unconscious processes behind oppression, but it also ignores the fact we are all inclined to have biases. Within this frame, nobody will ever be fully educated or fully competent.

Reactionary political correctness

The obvious danger with the construct of competence is that we teach people how to say the right thing and which attitudes are correct. People can learn how to respond, which words to choose, and how to send out the right signals. It is easy to display subtle Pride symbols like rainbow flags around a clinic, for example. Likewise, a midwife can learn to say the right things to the lesbian couple without actually considering them equal parents. The psychologist can learn to say the right things to their homosexual patient, while deep down still believing that heterosexuality is slightly more normal. A waiting room can be decorated with an LGBTQ+ certified diploma and pink triangles, without it signifying much more than the clinic director's good intentions. However, learning the "right approach" and "right signals" does not automatically trigger the exploration of personal unconscious biases and dark sides.

I am convinced that most LGBTQ+ therapy clients are aware that this display of "competence" is not genuine. Life has made many of us LGBTQ+ people astute at identifying underlying communication, and many have well-calibrated discrimination radars after having experienced so many disappointments. As more and more professionals learn how to behave "correctly," the landscape quickly becomes confusing.

If we are unsure of whether the therapist believes the normative is more desirable, how can we securely and unconditionally explore the conflicts within ourselves, such as heterosexual sexual fantasies, ambivalence in trans identity, or failure to attain the ideal of biological motherhood? The risk is that LGBTQ+ competence training has the opposite effect, making it harder for our LGBTQ+ clients to navigate.

Child psychoanalyst Norka Malberg (personal correspondence, April 24, 2015) has called political correctness a *reaction formation*, a type of psychological defense in which a person consciously denies problems, such as underlying homophobic feelings. To compensate for the sides of themselves that they have not acknowledged, they manage the conflict intellectually by becoming politically correct or perhaps even unnaturally enthusiastic in their gay-friendliness. This was noted by researchers Terri Conley and colleagues (Conley et al. 2002), who interviewed homosexual and bisexual participants about the mistakes heterosexuals make when they want to appear unprejudiced. They found that superficial political correctness was by far the most irritating mistake.

The tyranny of consensus

Reducing oppression to a matter of missing information erases the rightful anger and grief of LGBTQ+ people and other minorities who have lived through generations of exclusion, violence, and neglect imposed by the majority. (Drescher 2002, 2015a, 2015b). If historical oppression is merely seen as ignorance and everyone is expected to carry on without discussing power, responsibility, and guilt, the significance of those injustices is profoundly diminished (Dixon et al. 2010). When attaining cultural competency is the goal, we fail to acknowledge the pain felt by all the LGBTQ+ people who were deemed to be diseased or who were shunned by their families. We skip over the terror of those targeted by hate crimes or bullying in the workplace or at school. We blind ourselves to the injustice of being forced to undergo electroshock "conversion" therapy or being branded a criminal. We overlook those who were never able to marry, the couples who could never inherit from each other or who lived in secrecy.

Many of my homosexual friends have spoken about the inner conflict they felt when they were invited to heterosexual weddings at a time when they themselves did not have the legal right to marry. The heterosexual friends gleefully expected, without hesitation, that everyone attending would be happy, regardless of how often the subject and focus

on the unique love between a man and a woman came up during the ceremony. Both the psychiatrist Salman Akhtar (2014) and anti-racism researcher Gordon Pon (2009) have written about how minorities are expected to be "forgetful" and overlook certain details.

From (in)competence to self-reflection

The construct of competence also invites a naïve black-and-white fallacy: either you are competent, or you are not. It is tempting to believe that there are enlightened, LGBTQ+ competent people, and people who are unenlightened and incompetent. This way of thinking divides the world into the good and the evil, and lets us off the hook from having to face our own privileges and contradictions. We avoid examining our less flattering tendencies, such as dominance, fear, or acting out our privileges at the expense of others. We are all vulnerable to biases, and ignorance of our own appears to be a common human sin. That is why real anti-discrimination work always begins with the self – with one's own privilege, contradictions, and duplicity (e.g., Aron 1996; Fors 2018; Fors & McWilliams 2016; McWilliams 1996; Orange, Atwood & Stolorow 2001; Suchet 2007; Tummala-Narra 2016; Worell & Remer 2003).

Constant reflection is necessary; it is not simply a case of being pro equal rights or against all forms of oppression. Unfortunately, it is not so simple. Theoretical analyses do not always align with power-aware actions in practice. Self-reflection and questioning your own privileges must also be translated into action, over and over again. Only then are we able to discover the blind spots within ourselves. On two occasions, I have uncovered high-profile feminist psychologists being paid under the table for clinical work. When I confronted them with the fact that a) subverting the normal payment channels left patients unprotected by their legal rights, and b) that their actions showed no solidarity, neither considered what they had done as an unfeminist act. These experiences have made me wary of over-valuing theory or identity labels over actual practice.

Farewell, LGBTQ+ competency

Despite all these problems with the idea of cultural competence, there are still clear advantages that are difficult to ignore. A meta-analysis of nineteen studies (published 2000–2012) on cultural competence in the health care sector showed moderate patient health effects, although the magnitude of the effects was difficult to measure precisely (Truong, Paradies & Priest 2014). Other studies also suggest that cultural competence can increase patient safety and reduce incorrect diagnoses (e.g., Bjorkman & Malterud 2007; Nakash & Saguy 2015).

Perhaps the dilemma is that there are no simple answers. Sometimes, we must adopt essentialist categories to pursue specific policy goals. However, we must not be swept away and blinded by the categories to the extent that we eventually believe them ourselves. The illusion of freedom can be deceptive. We must always take on new strategies and adapt. We are never really done.

Maybe Freud (1930/2011) was right when he wrote about civilization and culture as an attempt, but never a complete success, at taming the human tendency to be drawn to greed, competition, and primitive aggression. He reflected on the tendency of individuals to emphasize minor differences in order to elevate themselves at the expense of others – a dynamic he called the *narcissism of minor differences*.

My interpretation is that work with biases, injustices, and discrimination must always be a continuous process. The perfect, completely unbiased person does not exist – and anyone who claims to be entirely free of prejudice might, in fact, be quite dangerous. Being a "good enough" psychologist does not mean that you never make mistakes or never have prejudices. It means being open to exploring your own blind spots, biases, and privileges – even when it hurts, and even when it shatters the image you had of yourself.

Exploring yourself requires courage and self-reflection. We must begin with ourselves and dig where we stand. If we are to truly see the other, we must first see ourselves. Farewell, LGBTQ+ competence. Rest in peace. May you never be needed again.

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NOTES

1. Butler (1991/2005) believes that the concepts of identity threaten to re-colonialize marginalized groups. As Butler proposes that gender and sexuality are social constructs, to be a "lesbian" is to be trapped in the basic assumption of essentialism. She writes: "To write or speak as a *lesbian* appears a paradoxical appearance of this 'I,' one which feels neither true nor false. For it is a production, usually in response to a request, to come out or write in the name of an identity which, once produced, sometimes functions as a politically efficacious phantasm. I am not at ease with 'lesbian theories, gay theories,' for as I've argued elsewhere, identity categories tend to be instruments for regulatory regimes [. . .]. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies." (Butler 1991/2005, 59).
2. In 1944, homosexuality was decriminalized in Sweden in favor of the disease discourse (Norrhem 2001). Until then, one camp believed homosexuality was the result of poor behavior or loose morals, while the other thought it might be something congenital or a disease that an individual could not help having. In 1979, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare gave homosexuality a clean bill of health; however, the WHO waited until 1990. Homosexuality remains a criminal offense in many countries.
3. Registered partnership was introduced in Sweden in 1995. When marriage legislation became gender-neutral in 2009, the option of entering into such a partnership was eliminated.
4. This includes research on attributing, implicit memory, implicit learning, automatized behaviors (Stoycheva, Weinberger & Singer 2014).
5. One example of this is how same-sex parents were long subjected to (and maybe even now, to some extent) carrying the collective anxiety and fear of being bad parents.
6. In her classic book, *The Anatomy of Prejudices*, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1996) describes oppression as a social defense on an unconscious level. She presents several types of social defense (narcissistic, histrionic and paranoid/compulsive) and believes there is a tendency to overgeneralize similarities around different forms of power structures. Young-Bruehl reasons that different types of oppression appear to have several psychological functions among the majority. She has highlighted how throughout history, people have either had a narrow interest in only understanding the power structures that affect themselves directly, or they have made the mistake of overgeneralizing the mechanisms behind the power structures and applying them to all contexts or see them as being the root of all evil.