

Getting out of the box: Intersectionality, non-binary identities, and the future of LGBT Psychology

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Welcome, and thank you for attending my Presidential Address. It is such an honor and a privilege to have spent this year as the President of Division 44. It's something that I have always wanted to do since I first walked through the doors of the suite in 1995 and found my professional home. After I was elected, many people asked me how I felt about giving the Presidential Address. The truth is that it is one of the most exciting things about this year for me. The integration of personal experience, professional work, and vision for our community into a single speech is something I could always see myself doing. The specific topic of my address – getting out of the box – came to me last year, and throughout the year I have engaged with it and developed my ideas. I'm so excited to have so many of you here, and to add my voice to the ongoing discourse regarding the future of LGBTQ psychology.

Here is an overview of what I will cover today: First, I will introduce my topic and talk about my own positionality with respect to it. Next, I will discuss some current challenges in LGBTQ communities in the U.S., and then explore two issues that are at the forefront of LGBTQ psychology now: intersectionality and non-binary identities. Finally, I will conclude with a new paradigm for thinking about the future of LGBTQ psychology.

Before I say anything else, I want to take a moment to offer enormous gratitude to the many people in Division 44 and in my life who have provided me with support, inspiration, and ideas for this address: the Division 44 Executive Committee including David Pantalone, Allen Omoto, Erin Deneke, and Antoinette Kavanaugh for their dedication all year; my Past President mentors, including Ruth Fassinger, Arlene Noriega, and Michael Hendricks for their sage wisdom and advice; the Division 44 Executive Board members who have worked tirelessly with me on my initiatives, especially Carlton Green, Carlton Green, Cirleen DeBlaere, Chris Davids, Mira Krishnan, Nathan Grant Smith, Jayme Peta, Dawn Brown, Jacks Cheng, Stacey Williams, Richard Sprott, David Rivera, Gary Howell, Stephanie Budge, and Josh Wolff; the Leadership Institute for Women in Psychology, which I participated in this year; the organizations that collaborated with us on my initiatives, including CEMA, NLPA, AAPA, SIP, Divisions 35,

51, 45, and 51; my Presidential Assistant and former graduate student, Wyatt Evans; all of my past and current doctoral students at Palo Alto University; my dissertation chair, co-investigator, and lifelong mentor Esther Rothblum, who traveled all this way to see my Presidential Address; my parents Marcia and Richard Balsam and my kids Tori, Matthew, and Leah Balsam-Ashling for their ongoing support. Thanks to all of you, and in particular to Leah (age 10) who recently posed some questions that are at the heart of this talk:

“If someone’s gender is non-binary, can they be ‘gay’?”

“How does someone who is non-binary fill out a form if it asks for their gender?”

I want to contextualize my talk by thinking about the time in history in which I have served as Division 44 President. My presidency spanned a time of great turmoil and change for Division 44 and for LGBTQ communities. The period between 2015 and 2017 included dramatic gains in LGBTQ rights, a multi-faceted backlash against our rights, and sociopolitical upheaval in U.S. society at large. During this entire time, the content of any speech I gave or statement I made required continual updating, as the 24-hour news cycle unfolded in front of our eyes.

Another important context for my talk is the concerns I heard directly from our membership. At the beginning of my President-Elect year, I asked people what issues they thought were important for Division 44. Pretty consistently, I heard from the most marginalized within our communities – people of color, bisexual, transgender, and non-binary members and students – that the division was not adequately addressing their concerns, that they were not systematically represented or included. And so I am going to say it – our division has a problem with racism, sexism, biphobia, transphobia, and other oppressions. As LGBTQ psychologists, we are not immune to these oppressions that are woven into the fabric of our society and culture.

This is not to say that we are excluding these groups overtly or intentionally. It is also in no way meant to place blame on any individuals or on those who held leadership positions before me. Rather, these conversations with members and students were a siren call to me that we needed to go further and think more deeply about how to take our “inclusivity” to the next level. We needed to start getting *out of the box* with our thoughts and our actions.

My presidential initiatives grew out of these conversations and the sociopolitical context of our times – Orlando, the growing backlash against LGBTQ people, the threats posted by the U.S. presidential election. Now, having worked on these initiatives all year, I can see that a unifying theme is this “getting out of the box” metaphor, with intersectionality and non-binary perspectives playing a central role. We can’t address intersectionality without thinking in non-binary ways, and we can’t address non-binary identities without thinking about intersectionality. This came to the forefront in the Division 44 name change process that I had the honor of facilitating this year. This process mirrors the larger “alphabet soup” problem facing LGBTQ communities. As our understanding of the complexity of identity grows, communities are asking themselves who are we, and what do we call ourselves? These questions are not just surface or cosmetic, but represent real and substantive issues of inclusion and equity. Just as in 2007 and 2008 our division discussed how issues of sexual orientation and gender identity fit together when we added “T” to our name, in 2016 and 2017 we are reconsidering what the boundaries are of our community and our mission.

And so for me, with all of my initiatives, with all of the developments in society and politics, with the discussion regarding the name change - all paths led me back to this central question of what it means to *get out of the box*. This question is timely, as our boxes are not working so well for us in 2017. At the same time, we can't lose sight of some of the benefits of the "boxes" of identity labels for LGBTQ people – for self-definition, as a political tool (Serano, 2013), in creating community, and to differentiate our needs (Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007). Labels allow us to be counted and recognized, to fight back against oppression in an organized way.

And yet rethinking the box is necessary for two important reasons. First, on an individual level, getting out of the box can help us to truly know our selves authentically and honestly, to thrive and grow. Second, on a community level, it can promote the inclusion, rights and well-being of diverse LGBTQ people, so that we all can thrive and grow together. We need to be thinking both as psychologists and as advocates for LGBTQ people. As psychologists, we care about people's health, well-being, and personal growth. As advocates, we care about things like justice and equity. In Division 44, we have unique training to be able to address both.

Part of my process of thinking about this, after a long and busy presidential year, was to get out of my own literal box - my house in suburbia – and take a week-long personal retreat in the redwood forests of Humboldt County in northern California. For me, this is a sacred place of inspiration and creativity. In my early 20s, I would sit for hours under the shade of a redwood tree and write in my journal. Nearly 3 decades later, I returned to this same spot to reflect and write things that would become public, rather than remain private.

In doing so, I was reminded that this process of self-reflection is critical to any diversity work and especially to work exploring the concepts of intersectionality and non-binary identities. This work requires that we look at *ourselves* in terms of identities, power, privilege, and oppression. Acknowledging our social locations helps us realize there is no one objective LGBTQ truth. It helps us contextualize our own thoughts and helps us see our own biases, disrupting assumptions of objectivity and commonality within LGBTQ communities.

My own positionality

Reflecting on my own positionality, I thought about the ways in which I have never felt like I fit into a box. First of all, I was born in 1966. I am a Generation Xer, forever sandwiched between two very large and vocal generations. I have lived my life in the shadows of the pioneering Baby Boom generation. I now find myself adjusting to the new ways of thinking and communicating that Millennials bring to the table. My life as a Generation Xer has given me a unique vantage point from which I can understand generational challenges within LGBTQ communities. I often find myself as the "middle-person", translating one generation to the other. This role, and my generational identity, is something that I have reflected upon a lot in this last year as I turned 50.

Another way in which I have not fit into a box is in terms of my sexual and gender identities. For me, these two identities are intricately intertwined. My appearance and mannerisms, as well as my interests, have always been closer to the feminine end of the spectrum than is true for the stereotypical "lesbian." I wasn't a tomboy as a child, I am horrible at sports, and I never cut my hair shorter than its current length. I also had relationships with cisgender men until my late 20s. In other words, nobody's

“gaydar” was going off when they met me. Thus, although I was aware of attractions to women early on, I was unclear as to where I fit within the lesbian community. I did not feel welcomed or reflected.

The “boxes” that I have used to describe my sexual and gender identities have evolved over time and are still a work in progress. I came out first as “bisexual,” then later as “lesbian”, then as “queer,” and now as “queer femme.” It is still a work in progress, and I can’t predict where my identity journey will take me in the future. I do know that to some extent, my adoption of labels has been motivated by a desire to find community, to be less of an outsider. That was particularly true when I first adopted a “lesbian” identity. At the same time, I think there has always been some degree of self-censoring, no matter how subtle, as I have attempted to fit myself into one of these LGBTQ boxes at any given time. In that way, these “boxes” have gotten in the way of me being fully who I am.

I think that one of the most profound developments for me personally has been to start thinking of gender as a non-binary. I started out a few years ago doing research on individuals who identify with a non-binary gender identity, with my doctoral student Arielle Webb. What began as a study of others quickly led to a process of self-examination. Exploring the nuances of gender led me to question if categorizing people into “non-binary” and “binary” is, itself, another binary. I respect and honor the fact that there are many people for whom a non-binary identity is what is most true for them – whereas I do identify as a woman. Yet it is also true that non-binary perspectives have made me rethink my own gender, and think about the ways in which I myself am not entirely binary. For example, my perceived gender expression really depends on context. I am “femme” by any lesbian standard, yet when I am around heterosexual and cisgender women, I often feel quite butch by comparison. I have also questioned how non-binary perspectives on gender relate to my sexual identity. What if it is not about being attracted to “men” or “women”, but instead a more complex array of characteristics altogether?

As a Jew, I have also experienced a sense of being an outsider and not fitting into a box. The dominant White, Christian narrative never quite applied to me. Similar to my queerness, my Jewish heritage is one that is not always apparent, and I am often assumed to be generically “White” unless I disclose otherwise. And yet this identity has shaped my perspective in real and tangible ways, with the experience of anti-Semitic microaggressions and the shadow of the Holocaust.

My identity as a mom has also been one that has defied easy categorization. Since 2004, I have been profoundly transformed by the process of parenting my three children, now ages 13 and 10. In some ways, becoming a parent increased my mainstream social capital, as I fit in more with dominant narratives for women and, more recently, with the new dominant narrative for “lesbian moms.” However, after my relationship with my partner of nearly two decades ended, I no longer fit neatly into this mainstream lesbian box either. Being a single mom means that most of the cultural discourse about motherhood doesn’t quite apply to me. Sharing custody of my kids means that I spend some of my time as a suburban soccer mom and some of it as a queer adult in social circles that do not involve children. My parenting experience is definitely outside of the box.

The final piece of my own positionality that I want to explain is my journey of becoming aware of my own whiteness and privilege. This is a lifelong process that I am actively engaged in, with many critical incidents along the way. Coming out in my 20s and experiencing microaggressions that were not intended as such by the perpetrators, that came from people who loved and cared about me, gave me a new way of understanding how I was inadvertently doing the same thing to people of color. I can’t say this without problematizing it, because I will never know what it is like to walk through the world as a

person of color. Still, this was one of the first critical incidents in my self-examination as a White person. Later experiences included working in an urban community mental health center in the 1990s and conducting research on multiple minority stress with LGBTQ people in the mid-2000s. My commitment to anti-racist work within LGBTQ communities deepened as a result of my Division 44 Presidency, and it is the issue I am most committed to moving forward.

Current challenges facing LGBTQ communities

As LGBTQ people, we are facing challenges on two fronts. In society at large, we have seen tremendous progress as well as unprecedented backlash. For a Division 44 audience, I don't need to highlight the threats that we face as LGBTQ people in this country in 2017. We all know these threats, we all live with them on a daily basis. But what we less often are willing to admit are the challenges *within* LGBTQ communities that are intricately linked to these broader societal issues. The "progress" we have experienced has disproportionately benefitted the most privileged within our communities – those who are White, socioeconomically advantaged, cisgender, and gay or lesbian. In fact, the very discourse surrounding our most notable advances – marriage equality for example – has erased those who do not fit this "box" of what it means to be LGBTQ. This has been referred to as "homonormativity" – the narrowing focus of what it means to be LGBTQ. I strongly believe that as we have progressed, we have done so at a cost to those who are more marginalized. Our communities have moved towards an assimilationist, rather than a radical, view of sexual and gender identity. We have whitewashed and gentrified "LGBTQ."

While progress has been enjoyed by the most privileged in LGBTQ communities, the backlash has disproportionately harmed those who are not – people of color, people without financial resources, transgender or gender non-conforming people. The horrific massacre on June 12, 2016 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando brings this into stark view, highlighting the ongoing violence and fear of violence that LGBTQ people of color live with on a daily basis. Our homonormative discourse has focused on issues such as marriage equality to the exclusion of other issues such as violence and safety. Indeed, the increased police presence in San Francisco during the weeks following the Pulse nightclub massacre led the Black Lives Matter contingent to withdraw from the Pride parade, citing concerns about police violence against people of color. The "More Color, More Pride" flag, with brown and black stripes added, was unveiled at the Philadelphia Pride this year, and the controversy that ensued was further illumination of these issues within our communities. The "No Justice, No Pride" movement at the Washington, D.C. Pride challenged Pride for becoming assimilationist and exclusionary, stating "...there can be no pride for some of us without liberation for all of us" (2017). These movements challenge mainstream LGBTQ organizations to take intersectional concerns seriously – to think systemically about oppression, rather than presenting unidimensional versions of LGBTQ. They force us to rethink what it means to be "safe" and "included."

Other challenges within our communities have intensified with the rapid pace of communication in the 21st century. Social media of late has been full of debates about "call-out culture" and inclusion in LGBTQ communities. I believe that there are several underlying questions in these debates that merit consideration:

Who gets to claim "oppression"?

How and under what conditions can we speak about groups that we are not a member of?

What is “safety” and at whose expense is it provided?

How do we hold each other accountable?

How do we step back from in-group tensions and see the broader oppressive forces that shape them?

How do we acknowledge when we have made mistakes?

And underneath these, the biggest questions for us, as LGBTQ psychologists in the 21st century, are

How do we stop perpetuating systems of oppression and domination?

How do we truly move toward LGBTQ liberation?

I believe that the answer to these big questions can be found by developing a new paradigm of what it means to be LGBTQ.

Toward a new paradigm of LGBTQ: Intersectionality and non-binary identities

The term “intersectionality” is often credited to the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), who used it to describe how sexism and racism are experienced by Black women. However, it is also important to acknowledge the contributions of other foremothers of this construct such as Black Feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, as well as other Woman of Color scholars such as the Combahee River Collective, Gloria Anzaldua, and Cherie Moraga. Collins (2017) reminds us that there is no one definition of this term, and Moradi and Grzanka (2017) discuss the importance of “responsible stewardship” of intersectionality, in which we must acknowledge the contributions of multiple voices to the development of our understanding.

Within LGBTQ psychology, many scholars and researchers have contributed to our understanding of intersectionality, including (but not limited to) Oliva Espin, Lisa Bowleg, Anneliese Singh, Bonnie Moradi, Paz Galupo, Patrick Grzanka, and Ilan Meyer. In particular, the work of Beverly Greene has been seminal in advancing our understanding of the “triple jeopardy” facing lesbian women of color (1995) and other multiply marginalized groups. Dr. Greene also explicated the ways in which dominant groups can undermine coalitions within and between marginalized groups via a “divide and conquer” strategy (2013) that ultimately weakens LGBTQ communities.

Intersectionality as a framework challenges us to look beyond simple categories of “difference” at underlying issues of oppression, power, and privilege. It challenges us not only to critique, but also to ultimately dismantle these systems. However, as the concept of intersectionality has become more mainstream, so has its definition, which has become almost synonymous with a “multiple identity” framework, rather than a framework reflecting a deeper understanding of underlying systems of privilege and oppression (Grzanka & Miles, 2016; May, 2015). This gentrified framing of intersectionality erodes its power to help us transform our research, our practice, and ultimately our society. “Intersectionality” as a buzzword loses its potency as a tool.

Intersectionality has also been problematized within the psychological research. Bowleg (2008) discusses the difficulty of conducting intersectionally-informed quantitative research, given that diverse identities often serve as independent variables in research studies. Qualitative and mixed methods have been posited as solutions. However, as Moradi and Grzanka (2017) note, substantively applying intersectionality is challenging in any methodology. For example, how do we measure discrimination for

participants who experience racism, sexism, heterosexism and other oppressions? One solution to this dilemma has been to use a measure like Williams and colleagues' (1997) Everyday Discrimination Scale and then ask them which of their identities the discrimination is based on. However, we have to ask – is this measurement meaningful to participants? Does it really reflect the intersectional nature of their daily experience? Another solution has been to assess intersectional constructs. For example, I developed an LGBT People of Color Microaggressions Scale (Balsam et al., 2011) that captures some phenomena that occur at the intersection of sexual/gender and racial identities – for example, sexual racism in LGBT communities. However, these tools by definition focus on some intersections, but ignore others. In sum, there are no easy solutions in research.

In addition to intersectionality, non-binary gender identities are another construct that is emerging as central in LGBTQ psychology. These identities are not new, but have been recognized within indigenous cultures historically. Some examples include the Fa'afafine in Samoan culture, the Hijra in South Asia, and two-spirit and other non-binary identities within American Indian/Alaska Native tribes and nations. Over the past five years, the visibility and awareness of non-binary gender identities has dramatically increased within U.S. LGBTQ communities, as described in the Non-Binary Gender Identities Fact Sheet that we developed during my presidency (Webb, Matsuno, Budge, Krishnan, & Balsam, 2017). The identity labels that individuals are claiming for themselves are proliferating far beyond “man”, “woman” and “transgender”, including genderqueer, androgyne, pangender, demigender, bigender, intergender, gender-fluid, gender-creative, and others. A small but growing body of psychological research indicates greater risk for victimization and minority stress, as well as depression and anxiety relative to binary transgender populations (e.g., Budge, Rossman, & Howard, 2014; Sterzing et al., 2017). Most of the existing research is drawn from community samples of transgender people, and there is much that we still do not know about the experiences of those with non-binary identities.

Additionally, I would argue that non-binary gender is an important framework as a way of thinking about gender for everyone. How are we all constrained by the view that gender is a binary construct? There is a history of this type of critical examination within feminist psychology – for example, Sandra Bem's seminal work (1974) on psychological androgyny. For all people, it is valuable to think about how we all are constrained by thinking of gender in binary terms. Even biological sex, often assumed to be more binary and fixed than gender, is now being understood to be more complicated, with an interplay between biology and behavior that is bidirectional and dynamic.

It is important to note that we can't think critically about sex and gender without also questioning our existing sexual identity categories. If the categories of “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” are based on the gender of partner(s), then what happens when we take non-binary gender into account? Along these lines, we have witnessed the emergence of new sexual identity labels that encompass non-binary perspectives such as queer, pansexual, polysexual, asexual, demisexual, sapiosexual, and others.

In this new critical and complex framework, it is clear that coming out journeys are not always singular or linear. For example, an individual might first question their sexual and gender identities, then come out as a butch lesbian, later as bisexual, and finally come out as pansexual and genderqueer. Another individual may identify privately as gay, but remain in a heterosexual marriage. Still another person might hold a gender identity that is fluid over time, and thus not fit neatly into any sexual identity category that assumes a single gender. As psychological researchers, we have to ask ourselves how any

of these individuals would answer questions on our quantitative measures. How would they fit into the “boxes” we have constructed?

Indeed, similar to intersectionality, non-binary gender and sexual identities force us to rethink all of our research methods and measurement tools. For example, Galupo and colleagues (2016) found that monosexual and cisgender individuals saw measures of sexual orientation as being more face valid than plurisexual (e.g., bisexual or other non-monosexual) and transgender people did. Thus, even constructs that we have articulated and developed tools to assess within LGBTQ psychology become problematic when we look at them from outside of the box. How do we assess, for example, “internalized homophobia” in a person with non-binary sexual or gender identities? Do we assess “internalized stigma” more generally? How do we capture both the unified and the differentiated aspects of being LGBTQ? Where do we go with our new understanding of the complexity of LGBTQ lived experience?

The future of LGBTQ psychology: A new paradigm

“Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart... live in the question.”

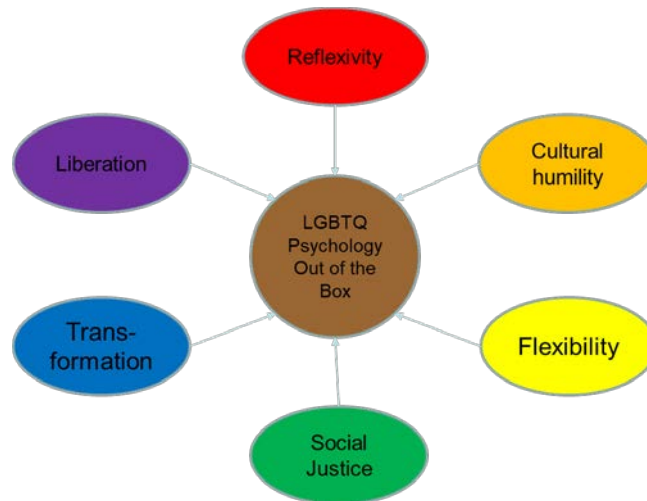
“The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens.”

---Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

This final section of my talk addresses my vision for the future of LGBTQ psychology. At this moment in history, we face major threats from our sociopolitical environment and additional within LGBTQ communities. We must think critically and creatively about how to address both. I have argued (Balsam, 2016) that we are now at a crossroads, and we must develop new paradigms that incorporate intersectional and non-binary thinking. In other words, *it's complicated*, and we have to embrace this complexity to move forward.

As we do so, we can draw from a number of important theoretical frameworks. Feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and liberation psychology theory all challenge us to look beneath the surface at systems of power and privilege. All of these frameworks challenge us to make the invisible visible. We have a powerful history of radical activism within LGBTQ communities. Being LGBTQ used to mean having more freedom to explore gender roles, life scripts, relationship forms. As we have become more mainstream, we have lost some of this non-normative, questioning stance. We have to make room for it again. A monogamous, “same-sex marriage” is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all ideal. LGBTQ psychology needs to *get out of the homonormative box*.

LGBTQ psychology can also embrace collaboration and cross-fertilization of ideas with other scholarly disciplines. We cannot possibly understand the full range of LGBTQ experiences from the perspective of psychology alone. As we think critically about our positionality as a discipline, we can embrace interdisciplinary collaboration that will stretch us beyond our comfort zones to new ways of thinking. This is a hallmark of intersectionality scholarship. For me, the arts – literature and film – always open up new ways of seeing and understanding life experiences that are different from my own.



This is my proposed new paradigm for LGBTQ psychology, out of the box. It is comprised of six concepts – one for each color of the rainbow – that will shift our thinking about our professional work in LGBTQ psychology.

Reflexivity involves both intra- and inter-personal dimensions. Intrapersonal reflexivity means looking within and cultivate critical self-examination of identities, privileges and oppression. We must develop awareness of our own biases, question long-held views and perspectives. We must re-examine our own identity journeys – are they linear or circular? Did they lead us to a box, or out of one? Interpersonal reflexivity requires us to bring this same thoughtfulness to conversations with others who are different from ourselves. We can't shy away from difficult dialogues, but we need to reflect on our own reactions and be willing to admit to our own mistakes. In the 21st century, it is too easy to take in information in a shallow way, too easy to react quickly. Reflexivity means slowing down and bringing mindful awareness to our work.

Cultural humility is defined by Hook and colleagues (2013) as the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” (p. 2). It is process oriented rather than product oriented. Within psychology training, we are moving away from a model of “cultural competency” to a framework of being “multiculturally oriented” (Hook, Davis, Owen, & DeBlaere, 2017) – not unlike having a theoretical orientation. Becoming culturally humble takes courage, but is crucial to our work in LGBTQ psychology.

Flexibility is increasingly recognized as an ingredient of positive mental and physical health. It is crucial for meeting the changing demands of the 21st century. It is also one of our strengths as LGBTQ people. On a personal level, our process of coming to terms with gender and sexual identities that differ from cultural norms demanded flexibility. As psychologists working with LGBTQ people, we have all learned skills to think flexibly about our clients, students, and research participants. Drawing upon our flexibility, we can approach the challenges of our times with a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” perspective. In the dialectics of change, dialogue between opposing viewpoints can lead to new syntheses of ideas.

Social justice perspectives become imperative when we incorporate intersectional and non-binary perspectives into our work. When we fully embrace these perspectives, we see that by definition, working within LGBTQ communities involves supporting others who do not “share” all of our identities.

We need to move beyond focusing on our own oppression and instead learn about oppression experienced by others. We need to work together to dismantle systems of oppression for everyone. We must move beyond a gentrified version of “allies” that just support each other from a comfortable distance, and instead become “accomplices” in the fight against oppression. The Indigenous Action Media (2014) further articulated this idea of accomplices: “Accomplices are realized through mutual consent and build trust. They don’t just have our backs, they are at our side... As accomplices we are compelled to become accountable and responsible to each other, that is the nature of trust.”

Social justice work is done *in solidarity* with others whose marginalized identities we do not share. In doing so, we must take care not to claim too much space. We must not make our own voices too loud or too central. We must respect work that has already been done, and join with others who are already doing the work. We must commit time and energy to this work. We must work across identity categories within and outside of LGBTQ communities, and see that even this within/without dichotomy is a box that we need to get out of. Social justice means *centering on the margins* and listening to voices that have not been heard. It means using our privilege to call people out, call people in, educate, and intercept oppression as we see it.

Transformation means changing LGBTQ communities on both depth and surface levels. Words matter, but so does substance. The name change in Division 44 is about real people being included, not just about the identity labels themselves.

Transforming our communities requires personal growth. Ask yourself, “*In what ways do I need to undergo metamorphosis to shed the baggage of oppression, privilege and social norms?*”

Transformation also challenges us to grow as professionals. Ask yourself, “*What is my unique contribution to transforming LGBTQ psychology and Division 44 to be more truly diverse and inclusive?*” We each have an important role to play in the multifaceted transformation that is needed.

We also have to transform the way that we relate to each other across differences. In the Division 44 Preconvention workshop this year, Dr. Konjit Page (2017) encouraged us to “talk in first draft” as we grappled with dismantling oppression within LGBTQ communities. We have to be willing to take risks, accepting the inevitability of putting our foot in our mouths, and then make repairs when they are needed. In the words of Audre Lorde, “Change means growth, and growth can be painful” (1984).

Finally, **liberation**. Definitions of liberation tend to focus on either 1) being set free, or 2) working for equal rights for a group. Together, these definitions echo my statement that getting out of the box has both personal and community dimensions. LGBTQ psychology need to be liberated *from* the box. We are divided into social categories that keep us from knowing ourselves and knowing each other. Liberation is our history: LGBTQ psychology emerged out of a framework of “gay liberation” in the 1960s and 1970s. Later, the concept of trans liberation began to take hold. Leslie Feinberg said, “The sight of pink-blue gender-coded infant outfits may grate on your nerves. Or you may be a woman or a man who feels at home in those categories. Trans liberation defends you both” (1998, p. 1). Now, in 2017, we can draw upon the liberation psychology framework of Martin-Baro, as Russell and Bohan (2009) and Singh (2016) have begun to do. In the words of Martin-Baro, liberation psychology seeks “an opening— an opening against all closure, flexibility against everything fixed, elasticity against rigidity, a readiness to act against all stagnation” (1994, p. 183).

In a liberation framework, we can reclaim and reinvent the concept of “coming out” within LGBT psychology. Rather than telling a single story of a White gay or lesbian person having an “aha” moment and doing a big reveal, we can tell multiple stories of all of us coming into truer senses of ourselves. We can come out over and over again, as our truer selves evolve and change in our shifting social contexts. Getting out of the box means making room for both sameness and difference, recognizing our common struggles but also differentiating those struggles that are unique. To quote my colleague Dr. Jan Habarth in a Facebook post earlier this week (Habarth, 2017), “Decentering makes more space for all of us.” And to quote myself from the Division 44 Spring 2017 Newsletter, getting out of the box means “opening our eyes to the ways in which many of us don’t fit in the boxes of L, G, B, or T, while respecting the fact that many of us do” (Balsam, 2017).

And so the final box I want to leave you with, the final binary we need to break down, is the *binary between the oppressor and the oppressed*. We have to take responsibility for the fact that these both live within each and every one of us. Facing this, my friends, is how we will achieve true liberation. In the words of the great Audre Lorde, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (1984). When we look at the truth of intersectionality and non-binary identities, we see that this is the box that we desperately need to get out of.

Liberation means envisioning the world we want to live in. As I come to the end of this year as Division 44 President, I can tell you that my vision is of a world where we dismantle and make amends for the historical and current racism, sexism, heterosexism, biphobia, transphobia, classism, nationalism, ableism, and other oppressions that plague us. I dream of a world in which we give each other support and breathing room to heal from oppression and *grow into the very best version of ourselves*.

And so, my final question to you, to all of us, is this:

What can we create together when we listen, deeply, to each other’s’ truths?

I look forward to our future conversations – out of the box!

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