

Canadian Counsellor
 Conseiller Canadien
 1982, Vol. 16, No. 3, 153-161

REFLECTIONS ON SELF-AWARENESS

LLOYD W. WEST
University of Calgary

Abstract

This article examines the prominent role that self-awareness now plays in popular psychology and in current speculations on counsellor education. Some lavish claims regarding the value of self-awareness are noted. The content of self-awareness is considered and the various means by which it is achieved are described. The presumed relevance of self-awareness for counsellors is discussed and research related to that topic is briefly reviewed. In conclusion, a miscellany of counterviews is presented as an antidote to the potential excesses of prevailing opinion.

Résumé

La place de premier plan que la conscience de soi occupe en psychologie populaire et dans les débats actuels sur la formation des conseillers constitue l'objet d'analyse de cet article. L'auteur dénote quelques revendications inconsidérées quant à la valeur de la conscience de soi. Il analyse ensuite le contenu de la conscience de soi et décrit les divers moyens qui en favorisent l'accès et le fonctionnement. On trouve aussi, fondée sur une brève analyse des recherches appropriées, une discussion de la présumée pertinence que la conscience de soi peut avoir pour les conseillers. En conclusion, l'auteur présente une série de contreparties susceptibles de servir d'antidote aux excès que peut engendrer l'opinion la plus répandue.

The pursuit of self-awareness has a long and venerable history. Many centuries ago, the Delphic oracle "Know Thyself" was inscribed on the temple of Apollo and the Greek poet Pindar expressed the goal of self-actualization as "Become the one thou art". In our age, humanistic psychology has rediscovered the benefits of self-knowledge and the human potential movement has promoted self-awareness as the "new" panacea.

Unfortunately, self-awareness is an amorphous concept which has no precise and commonly accepted meaning. Social psychologists (e.g., Duval & Wicklund, 1972) use the

This article is based on a paper presented at the 8th Biennial Congress of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association at Calgary, Alberta in June, 1981.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Lloyd W. West, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4.

term to refer to the focus of one's conscious attention. In this very restricted sense, self-awareness is regarded as a temporary state of self-reflectiveness or self-consciousness. The term, however, enjoys a much broader usage in popular psychology and in counselling literature. Here, Self-awareness refers not only to a temporary "state" of self-focused attention, but also to an enduring dispositional "trait" made possible by a relatively accurate, complete, reliable, and easily accessible repertoire of self-relevant information. From this broad perspective, self-awareness is viewed as a system of organized self-knowledge along with the capacity or readiness to access that self-knowledge when and as appropriate. In short, self-awareness is construed as self-knowledge in action.

Although the value of self-awareness may be taken as axiomatic, an all-absorbing pursuit

of self-awareness can easily become self-defeating. Hence, counsellors must exercise reasonable caution in the promotion of self-awareness. Programs in counsellor education should also proceed slowly, carefully, and with adequate evaluation to include activities designed to increase the self-awareness of counsellors. This paper critically examines the prominent role that self-awareness now plays in popular psychology and in speculations on counsellor education. Some lavish claims regarding its value are noted. The content of self-awareness is considered and the various means by which it is achieved are described. The particular significance of self-awareness for counsellors is discussed and research related to that topic is briefly reviewed. In conclusion, a miscellany of counterviews is presented as an antidote to the potential excesses of prevailing opinion.

The Promise of Self-Awareness

Extravagant claims are sometimes made regarding the value of self-awareness. It has been portrayed not only as a means to some desirable end, but as the major goal of personal development. Jourard (1968) claimed that "I am my awareness, and if my awareness expands, I have grown" (p. 8). Corey (1981) observes that "the basic goal of existential therapy is to expand self-awareness and thus increase choice potential" (p. 195).

Modern advocates eagerly reassure us that self-awareness will unleash a flow of creativity, spontaneity, psychoemotional freedom, self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, game-free human relations, authenticity, peak experiences, real joy, and unlimited possibilities for growth. Such zealotry tends to create the impression that sooner or later, self-awareness will come to be recognized as the ultimate of human achievements.

The popularizers of self-awareness and its companion concept, self-actualization, also have been busy "spreading the word". The psychology book shelves in most book stores display a wide selection of popular self-help manuals with catchy titles like *Please Touch* (Howard, 1970), *Be the Person You Were Meant To Be* (Greenwald, 1973), *How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life* (Brothers, 1978), *How to Take Charge of Your Life* (Newman & Berkowitz, 1977), *How to Be a Winner* (Hill, 1976), *How to Sell Yourself* (Gerard, 1979), *How to Be Your Own Best Friend* (Newman & Berkowitz, 1974), *The*

Power of Positive Thinking (Peale, 1956), and more recently, *How to Cure Yourself of Positive Thinking* (Smith, 1976). By and large, these little handbooks for effective living implore us to actualize our full potential through a variety of self-awareness and self-help stratagems. The market for this material is bullish. Commercialism seems to have replaced professionalism and glib promises based on overly optimistic views of the human potential for change appear to substitute for traditional caution and modesty. Unfortunately, the mass-marketed writers in the field, by no means all of which are psychologists, have done very little to enhance the credibility of counselling as a professional discipline. Schur (1976) observes that "some of their books are quite simpleminded and it is easy to make fun of them" (p. 3). Moreover, the practice of counselling through the mass media raises various ethical issues which are yet to be resolved. Surely this slick and overly simple approach is not what Miller (1969) had in mind when he advised psychologists to "give psychology away".

Although we may abhor the extravagant promotion, popularization, and commercialization of self-awareness, we must not overreact by throwing out the baby with the bath. Self-awareness is indeed a useful concept which plays a critical role in the theoretical underpinnings of much that is solid in counselling practice. It can be shown, for example, that self-awareness is a necessary component of "informed" or intelligent behavior. Kepner and Brien (1970) tell us that:

"The aim of Gestalt therapy is to develop more "intelligent" behavior; that is to enable the individual to act on the basis of all possible information and to apprehend not only the relevant factors in the external field, but also relevant information from within." (p. 43)

The three stage model of Carkhuff and Berenson (1977) assumes that constructive change or growth results from self-exploration, leading to self-understanding, leading to self-initiated activity. At the highest level of self-exploration, the individual "actively and spontaneously engages in an inward probing to discover feelings or experiences about himself and his world" (p. 16). Self-awareness enables the individual to determine where he/she is in relation to where he/she would like to be. In short, it provides the necessary information for a personal "needs assessment".

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At its highest level, self-awareness also suggests the preferred courses of action that one might take to narrow the discrepancy between "what is" and "what is desired". A systematic implementation of these action plans concludes this three stage process of growth.

The Content of Self-Awareness

The Baconian claim that "Knowledge is power" needs some qualification. The utility or "power" of any item of knowledge, obviously depends upon our goals. For any given purpose, a knowledge of some things is irrelevant, but a knowledge of other matters may be crucial. Self-awareness, as we have seen, may be viewed as self-knowledge in action, and thus we may expect the assorted "content" of self-awareness to be differentially useful. Accordingly, we are faced with the problem of having to discern which specific aspects of the self we should focus our attention upon, become aware of, and get to know.

One of the functions of a taxonomy or set of descriptive categories is to identify and draw to our attention the more salient aspects of our subject matter. For example, Wrenn (1980) views the "real self" as a composite of three major components -- "the self I *want* to be, the self I see myself to *be* now, and the self *others* see me to be" (p. 165). Each of these taxonomical categories suggests a corresponding content area for self-awareness. On the basis of Wrenn's taxonomy, the content of self-awareness would include a knowledge of a) one's goals and aspirations, b) one's perceived characteristics, and c) one's impact upon others.

If we want to effectively manage or take charge of our lives, it seems reasonable that we should seek to understand the dynamics of our behavior. Since behavior is greatly influenced by various personal, contextual, and cultural factors, this line of reasoning suggests that the content of self-awareness which will be most relevant to making life choices may be classified according to the level of dynamic forces that underly human behavior: a) intrapersonal or individual, b) interpersonal or dyadic, c) small reference group (e.g., family), and d) social network or cultural. This "broad spectrum" classification of the content of self-awareness highlights the importance of extending our quest for self-knowledge beyond a concern with internal or covert events. Surely, an awareness of our wants, values,

thoughts, feelings, and fantasies will help us to make more rewarding life choices, but an awareness of the characteristic ways in which we relate to others, the distinctive pattern of our behavior in small groups, and the typical responses that we make to the norms and role requirements of our culture will also help us to negotiate more effectively our way through life.

Historically, psychoanalysis has promoted "unconscious motivations" as the major content area for self-exploration. Relatively "healthy" people often enter into lengthy analysis primarily to get to know and to rationally integrate their unconscious drives. Sociobiology, a new but controversial discipline, suggests a similar if not synonymous content area for self-awareness -- our genetically mediated behavioral predispositions, or what Barash (1979) calls "the whisperings within". According to sociobiological theory, human emotional responses and the behavioral tendencies which follow from them have been genetically programmed to a substantial degree by natural selection over thousands of generations (Dawkins, 1976; Wilson, 1975). "Biology whispers deep within us", according to Barash (1979), "and if we use our knowledge of natural selection to eavesdrop, we may yet hear these whisperings and discover something terribly exciting about ourselves" (p. 45). Although their origins in evolution may not be understood nor acknowledged, it is precisely these natural whisperings deep within, as opposed to cultural demands or the ways others want us to be, that constitute the "real self" for many advocates of self-awareness.

It must be emphasized at this point that biological predispositions are not determinants of behavior, but merely inclinations, whisperings, or what people of another generation may have called "temptations". We are not compelled to heed their urging. Culture, language, and critical thought processes enable us to transcend biological tendencies by bringing behavior under the control of rational considerations and cultural guidelines (Pugh, 1980; Turchin, 1977).

Since people are biological organisms and must learn to live with and to care for their bodies, an understanding of their physiology might be included as content for self-awareness. Quite apart from the behavioral predispositions of interest to sociobiology, this content area may deal with topics such as nutrition, allergy,

chemical dependency, exercise and fitness, stress and relaxation, biorhythms, biofeedback, etc. The discovery that health is a function of life-style has produced a surge of interest in health psychology. Hopefully, this recognition will also awaken us to a greater awareness of our physiological selves.

The Methods of Achieving Self-Awareness

Many routes to self-awareness have been proposed throughout history. Schur (1976) describes three rather different, but by no means mutually exclusive approaches: a) communication, b) expressiveness, and c) detachment. To this list we might add the psychoanalytic procedures of free association and dream analysis. Various drugs and hypnotic states have also been used to expand awareness thus enabling one to get in touch with the "unknown self". Virtually all these methods have been explored as potentially therapeutic or growth facilitating tools and all continue to have their serious proponents.

The communicologists (e.g., Devito, 1978) emphasize the reciprocal relationship between self-awareness and interpersonal communication. Communication entails the exchange and processing of information and as a route to self-awareness will normally include some form of self-presentation, focused attention, reception of feedback and the processing of feedback information. Self-disclosure, perception checking, authentic feedback and other communication skills may be used to promote self-awareness by increasing the "open" self and by reducing the "hidden" and "blind" selves (see Luft, 1970). Many psychoeducational and consciousness raising programs achieve their goals through these communication processes. Procedures such as values clarification (Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966), values therapy (Rokeach & Regan, 1980) and various structured exercises or experiential group designs also fall within the communication category.

The expressive route to self-awareness includes a variety of procedures designed to produce catharsis or a corrective emotional experience. It is assumed that emotional tensions block awareness and that by stripping away the "body armour" people can get in touch with and reclaim aspects of their personality which are now emotionally dead. Many of the expressive techniques are strongly body-oriented and non-verbal in nature. Attention is focused on the voice, posture,

and body movements for clues to the emotional tension which they betray. The expressiveness which liberates can take many forms ranging from creative art through psychodrama to the primal scream. The "emotional flooding therapies" described by Prochaska (1979) as well as various Gestalt exercises and games fall within the expressive route to self-awareness.

The detachment route to self-awareness includes isolated retreat, sensory deprivation, yoga, meditation, and other Eastern derivatives. Here the emphasis is placed on filtering out perceptual and cultural distractions. When external stimuli are gated out, internal stimuli can emerge more readily into consciousness. If these internal stimuli are of no interest to us, they too may be emptied from consciousness. Such is the nature of transcendental serenity.

One route to self-knowledge which has lost favour with many counsellors is the psychometric approach. The decline in prestige of this approach probably stems from the observation that psychometric data readily lend themselves to misinterpretation and discriminatory uses. Moreover, the apparent objectivity of measured data give them a written-in-stone quality which makes them hard to challenge or to change. A disdain for the psychometric approach, however, is debilitating since it greatly limits the cost-effective options available for self-exploration. Although in many ways crude and inadequate, psychometric instruments can provide much useful information in economical and summary forms. Measurements of interests, values, attitudes, skills, abilities, and achievements can provide some of the self-knowledge required for intelligent behavior. At minimum, the psychometric approach to self-awareness can be a very useful adjunct to the experiential approaches.

A further approach to self-awareness, although admittedly speculative, arises from recent progress in behavioral genetics. Assuming that the sociobiological portrait of human nature (Barash, 1977, 1979; Dawkins, 1976; Wilson, 1978) is indeed accurate, and further assuming the existence of significant individual differences in behavioral genotype (Eysenck, 1980; Wilson, 1979) we may anticipate serious future efforts to chart our unique behavioral biograms. We can imagine situations which are likely to evoke inherent predispositions minimally influenced by cultural norms and socialization processes. The unstructured,

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ambiguous encounter group is a case in point. In a relatively "culture free" setting where previously learned patterns of behavior are questioned and even rejected, where new norms and roles have yet to be established, and where a premium is placed on "real self being", there is little an individual can do but rely upon his/her more basic behavioral predispositions. Certainly elements of raw human nature sometime surface in such groups.

Genetically based behavioral predispositions are also likely to become manifest and observed in children before they have learned, through socialization, to modulate their behavior in socially prescribed ways. Our characteristic temperament and behavior in early childhood, thus may serve to disclose our unique behavioral biogram. Where reliable records of early childhood behavior are not available as indicators, the recapitulation of such behavior through hypnotic regression or through transference in psychoanalysis may be possible.

The spontaneity of feelings, thoughts and behaviors which occur in dreams has often been noted. Many psychologists since Freud have considered dreams to be the major window to the "unknown self". If this unknown self is largely comprised of our unconscious biologically mediated behavioral predispositions, then dream analysis and dream work may also be a useful route to self-awareness in the sociobiological sense.

Self-Awareness and the Counsellor

Research on the topic of counsellor effectiveness, like that on teacher effectiveness, has failed to pin down single traits or constellations of traits which consistently distinguish the effective practitioner from the ineffective (Loesch, Crane, & Rucker, 1978; Rowe, Murphy, & DeCsiptes, 1975; Shertzer & Stone, 1974). Despite a lack of empirical evidence, a remarkable consensus of professional opinion regarding which counsellor characteristics are most salient to successful practice is often found.

In a Delphi survey of counsellor educators, counsellor supervisors, practicing counsellors, and counselling students across Canada, Jevne (1978) found that all groups ranked "self-awareness" first among the necessary characteristics of effective counsellors. The high priority assigned to the self-awareness category, in combination with the remarkable consensus

observed among all subgroups of the counselling profession, prompts us to examine more carefully the role of self-awareness in counsellor education.

In order to ascertain the content of self-awareness which is of greatest relevance to counsellors, Jevne (1978) included seven self-awareness content categories in her Delphi study. Arranged in order of their importance to counsellor effectiveness as perceived by the Canadian counselling community, these categories are: a) values and attitudes, b) professional competencies and inadequacies, c) personal needs, wants, and aspirations, d) impact of personality on others, e) emotional reactions, defenses, hostilities, fears and anxieties, f) personal limitations, and g) developmental history.

There is an obvious logic to the observed rankings in the Jevne study. It is often claimed that awareness of personal values and attitudes will enable counsellors to prevent those values and attitudes from unconsciously and perhaps negatively influencing the counselling process. The same also may be said regarding counsellor awareness of personal needs, wants, and aspirations. Moreover, an awareness of professional competencies and inadequacies is necessary to assure that counsellors will engage only in those practices in which they are competent.

There is often very little that people can do about their personal limitations and developmental histories. Hence, it is not surprising that a demand for self-awareness in these areas should rank low. An exploration of personal limitations and developmental histories should not be ignored, however, when it is possible to reconstrue them in more constructive ways. When positive reframing is likely to occur, attention to one's infirmities, though fraught with anxiety, can be growth facilitative.

There is a dearth of research regarding the relationship between counsellor self-awareness and counselling effectiveness. The findings of those studies which have been reported, however, are generally negative. Gump (1969), for example, found that counsellors who strive for self-awareness and who consciously attempt to relate their self-understanding to their work (i.e. sophisticated counsellors) scored lower on all available measures of counsellor effectiveness. This study suggests that sophisticated counsellors may in fact be less effective than their more naive counterparts.

One is reminded of the study by Truax and Lister (1970) which found that clients who made the greatest progress were treated by untrained counsellor aids.

Most of the research on the topic of counsellor self-awareness simply fail to establish a relationship between self-awareness and effectiveness. After evaluating the effectiveness of Gestalt self-awareness exercises in a counsellor training paradigm, Salmon (1972) concluded that such exercises had no significant influence on counsellor effectiveness. Another study conducted by Blackburn (1978) indicated that accuracy of perceived needs of counselling students was unrelated to their counselling effectiveness. Wagenfeld (1976), on the other hand, did find a small but significant relationship ($r=.37, p<.01$) between counsellor self-awareness and empathy for clients. The symbolic interaction assumption that both self-awareness and empathy derived from a capacity for role-taking, however, nicely explains this relationship and thus we must not infer that self-awareness will improve empathy.

A sizeable body of research and theory has developed around the question of what happens when attention is focused upon oneself (e.g. through presence of mirrors or hearing recordings of one's voice). The research on self-focused attention although not directly related to counsellor self-awareness, does suggest some rather surprising possibilities. Several studies, for example, indicate that when attention is directed toward the self, people tend to strive for social approval, become susceptible to group pressure, conform to social norms, and behave more consistently with their initial self-concepts (Wicklund, 1979). In general, these behaviors are not the outcomes for which counsellor education programs strive. There is, however, a definite possibility that such responses become characteristic of people who habitually direct a great deal of their attention toward themselves in efforts to achieve self-awareness. Although this hypothesis is yet to be tested, we must remain alert to the possibility that the self-preoccupation implicit in a quest for self-awareness may have unanticipated and perhaps negative side effects.

The scanty research relating counsellor self-awareness to counselling effectiveness, at best, fails to support the growing consensus of professional opinion regarding the importance of self-awareness for the counsellor.

Much well designed and carefully conducted research in this area is needed. Meanwhile, counsellor educators should exercise appropriate caution in the development of learning experiences intended to promote the self-awareness and personal growth of student counsellors. The potential benefits of counsellor self-awareness may be far fewer and the potential costs far greater than we have previously assumed. Several general objections to the prevailing doctrine of self-awareness, discussed in the concluding section of this paper, should also be taken into account when designing counsellor education programs.

A Miscellany of Counterviews

One of the hallmarks of the self-awareness credo is an overly optimistic view of human nature. The natural, authentic, and spontaneous are highly prized. Traditional roles and norms of society are regarded with contempt. Our basic instincts are revered and we are advised to place our trust in them. The only true guides for our behavior are declared to be internal and it is often argued that there is never a basis for external judgments about individual life-styles.

The father of Gestalt therapy, Fritz Perls (1971), claimed that "the organism knows all. We know very little" (p. 23). On this basis, Perls often advised his clients to get out of their heads and start "listening" to their bodies or to "lose their minds and come to their senses". In a similar fashion, Rogers (1959) postulated the existence of an "organismic valuing process" which serves as a guide for human choice. According to client-centered theory, "fully functioning people" experience themselves as the locus of evaluation; their valuing process is continuously organismic, and they find this organismic valuing to be a trustworthy guide to the most satisfying behavior.

Neither history nor science support such romantic views of human nature. Sociobiology, as we have seen, challenges the assumption that "gut consultancy" can provide a reliable guide to effective living. Moreover, a blind faith in human nature ultimately boils down to a repudiation of culture. Maxims like "Do your own thing", "If it feels good, do it!", "Be the person you were meant to be", and "Pull your own strings", essentially fly in the face of the shared norms and values of our society. Clearly, such doctrine implies that the inherent wisdom of the body is a better guide to modern

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living than the cumulative wisdom of the culture. Accordingly, through self-awareness and self-assertion, we are urged to transcend cultural bondage in order to experience joy, spontaneity, and freedom. From this perspective the goal of counselling becomes "liberation" and all forms of "adjustment" psychology are viewed as anathema.

Misplaced trust in human nature, disrespect for cultural tradition, and a zeal to liberate ourselves and others from social restraint may have far reaching implications which we do not fully comprehend. Campbell (1975) argues that a process of cultural evolution has supplied us with recipes for living that have been tested and winnowed by many cultures through hundreds of generations. He further contends that "on purely scientific grounds, these recipes for living might be regarded as better tested than the best of psychology's and psychiatry's speculations on how lives should be lived" (p. 1103).

Campbell's argument must not be construed as a plea for the status quo. He is careful to emphasize that:

The wisdom produced by evolutionary processes (biological or social) is a wisdom about past worlds. If there are grounds for believing that the relevant aspects of these worlds have changed, past adaptations may now be judged to be maladaptive (p. 1104).

Perhaps it is a matter of how we assign the "benefit of doubt". Campbell argues that cultural wisdom must be taken as wise until proven otherwise!

It appears that the "real self" which we are sometimes urged to know and to actualize may be equivalent to the genetically determined predispositions or inherent whisperings from within that are of specific concern to sociobiologists. As we have seen, it can be argued that awareness of these predispositions will enable us to bring them under conscious control, to make informed life choices and thus to live more intelligently. The assumption that self-awareness and conscious self-management always produces "effective" behavior, however, is open to serious question. At some point, our species evolved the capacity and the propensity to make use of the commonly known defense mechanisms. In order to be selected as part of human nature, these self-deceptive strategies must have served an

adaptive function. Under some circumstances they still may do so. According to Goleman (1979), the stress research of Richard Lazarus has led him to believe that "denial (refusing to face the facts) and illusion (false beliefs about reality) have their usefulness in coping with stress and may indeed be the healthiest strategies in certain situations" (p. 44). Generally speaking, self-awareness may be considered facilitative when it provides the motivation and the direction for effective action. But, when nothing can be done about an unhappy situation and when self-awareness would only undermine the hope that allows one to carry on, it must be considered destructive.

Perhaps there is a time and a place for the defenses and illusions which sustain us. Hence, we must always determine that the circumstances are appropriate before we force too much awareness upon ourselves and others. To help regulate our judgement on this matter, it is generally useful to enter into a contract with others regarding the kinds of confrontive feedback, if any, they and we are willing to accept and also the manner in which they and we are willing to receive that feedback. An interactional contract of this type will do much to assure that confrontive feedback will lead to constructive self-awareness.

One further concern demands our attention. It is well recognized that human awareness is limited. The more attention we direct toward ourselves in an effort to gain self-awareness, the less attention we can direct toward other matters. In his book, *The Awareness Trap: Self-Absorption Instead of Social Change*, Schur (1976) treats the search for self-awareness as the new opiate of the people. Essentially, he believes that by directing our attention inward we become self-involved, lose social consciousness, and neglect the sociopolitical action necessary to promote social progress. Certainly not all the obstacles to effective living can be dealt with by self-awareness and self-help methods. Self-awareness may lead to psychoemotional freedom, but human rights, civil liberties, and a safe environment are achieved and maintained only through concerted and collective action. Those who would counsel others should seek to understand the essential dynamics of the whole ecosystem or global village in which life today must be lived. A narrow emphasis on self-awareness and self-actualization must not be allowed to detract us from the larger views and the larger purposes.

We can have too much of a good thing (e.g., food, money, population, etc.). Like many ecological "goods", self-awareness may be intransitive in nature, such that beyond some optimal level, "more" becomes toxic. Perhaps the most prudent course of action in the quest for self-awareness, then, is to avoid extremes and to aim for the optimal level or the "golden mean".

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lloyd West received his Ph.D. from the University of Alberta in 1968. He is now an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary. Lloyd is an active member of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association. He has served as associate editor of the *Canadian Counsellor* for four years. Currently, he is Alberta Director on the Board of Governors, Chairman of the Awards Committee, and a member of the Research Committee of CGCA.