
Transformational leaders in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association: An Interview With William A. Borgen

Leaders transformationnels de l'Association canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie : une entrevue avec William A. Borgen

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ABSTRACT

This article, the third in a concurrent series highlighting leaders who have been instrumental in shaping the profession in Canada, is an interview with William A. Borgen, a prominent leader in the Canadian counselling profession. This article focuses on Bill's achievements during his career and his recommendations for the future of the profession in Canada. In particular, the interview provides insight, guidance, and wisdom for influencing future leaders in counselling.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article, le troisième d'une série d'articles parus en même temps pour présenter des leaders qui ont eu une influence formative sur la profession au Canada, est une entrevue de William A. Borgen, un leader important pour la profession du counseling au Canada. Cet article traite surtout des réalisations de Monsieur Borgen au cours de sa carrière et de ses recommandations pour l'avenir de la profession au Canada. Plus particulièrement, les leaders à venir de la profession puiseront dans cet article savoir, orientation et sagesse.

This is the third interview in a concurrent series of articles focusing on counselling leaders who have been instrumental in shaping the profession in Canada. The flagship article with Blythe Shepard was published in 2018 (Kozak & Gray, 2018). This article series aims to take the pulse of the field of counselling in Canada, outline its possible trajectory, and share insights from influential leaders in Canadian counselling. The purpose of this series is to educate readers on the history of the rapidly expanding profession and inspire engagement in its future.

Dr. Borgen joined the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia in the Counselling Psychology program in 1976. Since that time, he has taught a range of research, theory, and practice-based courses in the master's and doctoral programs. He has served as the research supervisor of numerous master's theses and doctoral dissertations while also carrying out many leadership roles at UBC. He was head of the Department of Counselling Psychology from 1982 to 1994, and the head of the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education from 2008 to 2015.



Dr. Borgen has extensive experience conducting research and developing programs regarding life transitions and career development. His work has been translated and adapted for use in Bhutan, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, and Sweden. In 2005, the University of Umea awarded him an honorary doctorate for his leadership in the development of counsellor education in Sweden.

Dr. Borgen has had an enduring involvement in the development of counselling and counselling psychology nationally and internationally. Nationally, he was the president of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (now the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association) from 1993 to 1995 and was awarded Honorary Life Membership in 2001. He has co-chaired the Canadian Council for the Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs since 2003. In 2011, he received the Stu Conger Award for leadership in career development in Canada. Additionally, he has been active in promoting the accreditation of doctoral programs in Counselling Psychology in Canada and in 2018 was made a Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association. Internationally, Dr. Borgen served on the Board of Directors of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance from 2011 to 2019 and received the Outstanding Educator of Career Professionals Award by the Asia Pacific Career Development Association in March 2020. Dr. Borgen has had long-standing involvement with the International Association for Counselling; he served as the president of the association from 1998 to 2006 and was re-elected as president in 2019. He believes that the IAC's historic and current contributions are multifaceted in contributing to the development and enhancement of counselling practice, education, research, and policy around the world.

Daniel: Dr. Borgen, I appreciate you making time for this interview. To begin with, could you give us an overview of your career and background?

William A. Borgen: Well, it's been surprising to see where I've ended up in my career, considering where I began. I came from a working-class background in which most of my role models were teachers. When I finished high school, I was interested in many different subjects, and so I wasn't sure what area of study to pursue. I drove an hour and a half to the university I was hoping to attend and took three hours' worth of career-related tests. I came back a few weeks later and the test administrator told me I had scored in the top 5%, and that I could do pretty much whatever I wanted. I was hoping to get information that would help me narrow my options so didn't find the assessment to be very helpful. There was a sense of, "Well, what do I do now?"

So, I ended up staying with what I knew best, and entered the Faculty of Education with the aim of becoming a mathematics teacher because math was my best subject. After one year, I switched to the Faculty of Science to complete a BSc in math and then returned to Education to complete my preparation to be a teacher. I then taught high school math, chemistry, and physics for two years. During that time, I learned that I loved the study of these subjects but ultimately became bored with the repetition of teaching them. Going through the motions of a curriculum and mastering lesson plans did not interest me. However, it was the late 1960s and I was impressed with the courage of the students in challenging the system and was fascinated by how I could positively impact the development of certain students in my classes and fail to accomplish this task with other others. I was very much intrigued by the interactional dynamics in my classes and learned that classroom management was mediated by the establishment of norms for communication, maintaining student engagement, and carefully handling with humility the power inherent to the teaching role. A colleague noticed my commitment and interest in the students and suggested that I consider the field of counselling.

I applied to a master's in counselling program and, early on, I learned that it wasn't about the counselling skills so much as me authentically using them that would make me effective. Looking back, I believe that it was also my authentic interest in bringing out the best in my students that had made me an effective teacher.

When I finished the program, my plan was to become a high school career counsellor, given my previous experience with the high school system and my comfort working with adolescents. However, the position open to me was at an elementary school in a low-income area known for having a high rate of disciplinary and social issues. At the urging of my boss and the principal and despite my perceived lack of competence with the elementary population, this is where I ended up. In retrospect, it was the best thing that could have happened to me:

I was forced to confront my background and figure out who I was personally and professionally.

During my first year, there was a single week where a student was picked up for breaking and entering a bicycle shop, a student stole their father's car and led a police chase down icy roads in the middle of winter, and the father of a student got into a physical altercation with a teacher.

Very quickly, I discovered that I could not stand to see children in neglect, and I drove the social workers crazy trying to get help for my students. But then I realized my focus was problem-oriented, I was only looking at what was missing, and with that view I was probably part of the problem. That realization helped me to understand that my job was not to see what was wrong here but instead to identify strengths and help the students build on them.

My next realization was the limitation of my role in isolation when it came to trying to help these children; I felt like I was pouring water into a bottomless well. At the end of my first year, I stood before my colleagues and said, "My magic wand is broken. I can no longer fix children by myself." After a discussion with staff members, we agreed to join in partnership to address students' needs. From then on, I was increasingly observing classrooms and consulting with teachers and parents. Also, I partnered with an Adlerian psychologist to organize an orientation program for students entering kindergarten that involved the participation of parents, teachers, and administrators. We would engage the parents in various activities using common items found in the household that could be used to develop children's psychomotor, language, and social skills, as well as parent confidence in their children. These activities included sorting buttons for size, shape, or number of holes, walking on a low balance beam, talking about details in a picture, planning a family activity, and discussing what their children could learn by helping with tasks at home. In each of the six sessions of the program, we would tell parents that engaging their children in these activities at home would aid their school performance. We underscored the idea that every important adult involved in their children's lives needed to be in a partnership for the benefit of the child's development. After I left that position, they continued this program for 17 years. From this early experience, I learned the three levels of counselling that are often written about: remedial—helping people experiencing difficulties, preventive—working with the system to reduce individual difficulties, and developmental—preparing people for life transitions. The experience also taught me I would never be the expert: there was always more to learn. After my work as a school counsellor, I applied to a doctoral program at the same university where I had received my master's. When I graduated in 1976, I applied to the University of British Columbia (UBC) for a one-year position that converted into tenure, and I've been there ever since.

Neal: Your area of research includes career counselling. Could you elaborate more on what brought you to have an interest in this topic?

William A. Borgen: When I came to the university, my mindset was more professional than academic because of my work in schools and lack of research positions. Therefore, it took some time to get acquainted with the research process and to develop my research interests. This process received a kick start in 1979 when a colleague, Dr. Norm Amundson, and I were approached at a conference in Newfoundland by the Canadian government. They were interested in designing a career group counselling program and were unsure whom to ask, so they asked both of us. In working on this project, we became fascinated by the way that unemployment was viewed. At that time, career counselling was more one-dimensional and pragmatic. You're out of a job, you get help, you search, and then you find work. But there was this whole other dimension to unemployment that hadn't been investigated since the 1930s during the Depression—the subjective experience of unemployment.

In the early 1980s, we put in a proposal for grant funding to find out more about the experience of unemployment. Serendipitously, we received that grant at the same time there was a massive recession in Canada. In our province, 25% of people under the age of 25 were unemployed and there were large numbers of professionals unemployed for the first time in their lives; the whole labour market was in turmoil.

And so, we began interviewing people and realized that the experience of unemployment was highly emotional and psychologically challenging. This exposed a real missing link in the extant literature. With my background in mathematics, I approached issues quantitatively. However, here was an issue concerning individual experience so we thought that qualitative methods would be needed. So, with a quantitative mindset and a qualitative methodology, we interviewed 110 unemployed people—including youth, and adult men and women who were born in Canada and those who had recently immigrated—from a number of employment sectors.

Given the nature of qualitative research, we were left with the Mount Everest of data and were thus hard-pressed in deciding upon a method of analysis. In the end we came up with an innovative solution and were able to map out patterns of the experience of unemployment, which led Norm and I to develop the roller coaster model of unemployment (Borgen & Amundson, 1987). The research resulted in a number of publications for academic and professional journals, and the development of a range of training programs. Also, the Canadian government asked that we write publications for the general public. One of these was a booklet that was made available free of charge and has been read by 900,000 unemployed individuals over the years following its dissemination.

That launched a 25-year partnership with Norm, as well as a line of research inquiry into career life transitions, and I have continued this pursuit in different

ways since then. My approach has very much been framed by the lens of counselling psychology; the question has always been, "How do you help people get themselves psychologically prepared such that they are able to benefit from the kind of services that career professionals offer?"

I remember observing a career group where the woman running the group was providing very good information on looking for work. There was an older gentleman sitting next to me, and I was in the audience as an audience member, not an identified researcher. At the end of the group, the fellow looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, "I can't believe I'm here." And I thought, "He's heard nothing of what she said because he was not in a place to hear it." The despair and disbelief from the emotional impact of joblessness had reduced his receptivity to information that could help him find work. Many individuals without a job did not imagine they would ever be unemployed for an extended period of time, or that the job they left would no longer be available to them. In turn, there are psychological ramifications of unexpectedly losing one's livelihood and those ramifications will come to bear on the career counselling process.

In counselling, first you identify the client's perspective and then you can help them see another one. That was largely absent from employment/career services in the 1980s; information was offered with little consideration for the psychological, emotional experience of the individual that framed how much they were able to learn from the information. And so, we had to start considering what people are ready to hear.

My research has been adapted in other cultures and populations in Hungary, Sweden, Bhutan, Denmark, and Finland. It has been interesting to see how none of the work translates completely, but there are those universal parts that overlap and speak to the human experience, like desire to be heard and understood, the significance of personal connection and community, having a sense of safety, and hope for the future. Still, there will always be cultural differences that change the experience of what helps in a particular culture and what people find useful. In our own cultures, we often discuss the methods we use in our research, and what are the best methods given our research questions and the context. But when applying theory or research ideas internationally, we often need to question our assumptions. This basic point has been made evident to me many times in my work with the International Association for Counselling, which began in 1982 and was called the International Round Table for the Advancement of Counselling at that time. I have been involved with the association since then and currently am serving as president. The many interactions that I have had through the association with counselling researchers, educators, and practitioners have made it clear that, because most counselling approaches originate in the context of Western first-world countries, we need to recognize our own cultural encapsulation and approach all interactions with cultural humility and a sense of open inquiry.

Daniel: What are some of the biggest challenges to professional counselling licensure in Canada?

William A. Borgen: I believe that it is important to talk about professional licensure within the context of counsellor certification and accreditation of master's level counsellor education programs in Canada. The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA), then called the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Association (CGCA), was already offering counsellor certification when I was president of the association in the early 1990s. Similarly, discussions regarding accreditation, which began in the 1970s, continued at that time. Both certification and program accreditation have continued to evolve since then. In 1998, Dr. Sharon Robertson from the University of Calgary and I were asked to set up standards for accrediting counsellor education programs in Canada. The Council on Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs (CACEP) standards were approved in 2003.

Both accreditation and certification have laid a foundation for counselling as a stable and credible profession in Canada and have provided a context for provincial governments to consider the creation of regulatory colleges. The CCPA has worked very hard for a number of years to advocate for colleges to be formed, and the association's Canadian Counsellor Certification (CCC) standards have been adopted or adapted as the requirement for licensure in the provinces that have formed colleges. This represents a step in the right direction in terms of holding counselling professionals accountable to the public. One of the challenges experienced in establishing the colleges is the understanding of the word "counselling." Many professionals, like physicians, nurses, and social workers, see themselves as using counselling in their work. This has resulted in modifiers being used on the word by the colleges, the most popular being "counselling therapist." An ongoing challenge as the colleges evolve will be working towards some uniformity across provinces to facilitate mobility of counselling professionals across provincial borders. But then also, the standards of accrediting bodies tend to change and evolve over time, so this process is in some ways continuous. Overall, I think we are evolving in a good way and headed in the right direction.

Neal: What are your hopes for the future of graduate counsellor education accreditation in Canada?

William A. Borgen: The CCPA has just completed a 5-year process of reevaluating and rejuvenating the standards. Sharon Robertson and I remain as Co-chairs of CACEP and have been centrally involved along with other leaders in Counsellor Education in Canada. The revised standards were approved by the CCPA Board in August of 2022 and will be launched over the fall and winter. My hope is that these will be adopted by more universities in Canada and become the guiding principles when counsellor education programs are benchmarking how they would like to develop.

The 2003 standards have been updated and have much greater focus on issues related to social justice. The perspective of Indigenous groups in Canada also has greater prominence as a lens to use in developing and offering master's level counsellor education programs in Canada.

Additionally, we previously had a requirement that universities be formally chartered. Now private universities that would have been excluded from seeking program accreditation are eligible to apply. We will see what level of interest there is as we move forward. All in all, my hope is that we continue to move in the direction of widespread accreditation and see more and more programs adopt the CACEP standards.

Daniel: What are your hopes for future counsellor supervision in Canada?

William A. Borgen: Supervision is a vital part of counsellor education and counselling practice. It is central to quality assurance in the delivery of counselling and thus to the credibility of the counselling profession. In terms of counsellor education—students need to be encouraged to utilize the supervision they receive to embark on a process of self-reflection and develop an understanding of their strengths and areas of needed growth. When they complete their master's degrees, students will need to continue that process as they enter and continue in the profession, which is most easily done with a supervisor. Some counselling professionals involved in a group practice are able to discuss cases and provide and receive supervision. In other work settings, and particularly in rural and remote settings, this is often not possible. Over the past few years the CCPA, through the work of the Counsellor Educators and Supervisors Chapter, has been instrumental in advancing the quality and availability of supervision for counsellors in Canada.

Also, as the self-regulating colleges evolve there will be a requirement for their members to engage in and document continuing education to maintain and expand their level of competence.

My hope for counsellor supervision in Canada is that we adopt a process similar to that used by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy; they require their certified counsellors to have supervision their entire working life. Whatever approach is used, it will be important to normalize the need to consult with others, to recognize the boundaries of our competence, and to seek supervision if we want to move our work into new areas.

Neal: What could future and current Canadian counsellors do to help further grow the field of counselling?

William A. Borgen: At present, there is a high demand for counsellor education in Canada and internationally. The membership of CCPA exceeded 10,000 in early 2022. So, the field is growing in terms of the number of people offering counselling service and in the diversity of educational opportunities available to those who want to enter the profession. The focus now needs to be enhancing

and developing what we already have, so the profession has the support it needs to further develop. I believe that will require some homogenization of licensure requirements across the country, and the ongoing review of these requirements that take into account the greater complexity of client issues counsellors face and the growing awareness of the need for the counselling profession to be an agent for change in helping to address issues of systemic bias and discrimination.

It must be mentioned that, over the past two years, counsellor education and counselling services have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. What we have witnessed is that the experience of some counsellors was starting to mirror the emotions and presenting issues of clients. My wife, Dr. Roberta Borgen, and I recently gave presentations and published an article regarding how counsellors are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and unappreciated due to the pandemic. In response, I think the field of counselling will need time to build counsellors back up individually and teach them how to maintain enough joy in their daily life to help others. This pandemic has really magnified some aspects of this profession that need to be reevaluated.

Through the lens of the pandemic, we have seen how a normal human reaction to very bad situation can be perceived as symptoms of mental illness. It has become more apparent that the main goal of counselling is to promote mental health and wellness. We are not here solely to serve those who have a DSM diagnosis but instead to help anyone who is feeling down or experiencing suffering. The treatment and maintenance of mental health does not always have to involve a mental illness.

From an ecological perspective, this is the first time in my life when policy directives on the outer edge of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) model have affected what I can do in my daily life. What has been intolerable for many people is that their sense of personal freedom is limited and they react accordingly. In a behavioural sense, I think what we have right now could be called experimental neurosis. This is an older term that originates from experiments with rats where researchers would put them in mazes with certain areas that had an electrified grid. For many the COVID context is similar: being stuck in a restrictive or punishing environment and not being able to leave it. We've had individuals managing their children and always having their spouse 10 feet away working remotely. There were students in small studio apartments having to sit in the closet during their Zoom classes because it was the only place they could have privacy. This is the state of the world for over two years, and I think how we come out of that as a profession represents a great opportunity to demonstrate our worth.

Daniel and Neal: Dr. Borgen, thank you for sharing your early career experiences and perspective on the future of counselling in Canada.

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