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# Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference Keynote Address: Counselling Psychology at the Crossroads: Discipline or Social Movement

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## **Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference Keynote Address:**

### **Counselling Psychology at the Crossroads: Discipline or Social Movement**

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#### **Abstract**

Due to the work of a small number of dedicated counselling psychologists, in 1986 the Canadian Psychological Association's Section on Counselling Psychology was established. Since that time, the Section has reached a number of important milestones such as, the accreditation of counselling psychology programs, the establishment of the Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, the development and approval of the official definition of counselling psychology, the Inaugural Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference, and the creation of the Section's archive. Additionally, there have been a number of formative articles published in Canadian Psychology, including articles about identity and the first Special Section of within an Issue of Canadian Psychology on Counselling Psychology, as well as, the first edited book entirely devoted to Canadian counselling and counselling psychology. While, this work has laid an important foundation for the field, Counselling Psychology as a discipline is at the crossroads. The history and contributions of counselling psychologists highlight that counselling psychology has been innovative in the field of psychology, especially in the areas of career psychology, feminism, multiculturalism, social justice, and qualitative research. As other disciplines within psychology begin to take on topics that historically have been the domain of counselling psychology, moving forward; What needs to happen to ensure that counselling psychologists continue to be innovators and forward thinkers in psychology? This keynote applies social movement, advocacy, and activist frameworks to challenge the current state of the discipline, and to implore counselling psychologists to challenge the status quo and continue to be leaders and innovators in psychology .

#### **Keywords**

counselling psychology; social justice

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#### **Preamble**

The first goal of this keynote was to take stock of the history of the discipline, in particular the history that relates to the development of social justice frameworks within counselling psychology. A second goal was to motivate counselling psychologists, especially future generations of counselling psychologists, to consider counselling psychology's role in forwarding a social justice agenda both within counselling psychology and the broader psychological community. Thus, this keynote is a call to action and implores counselling psychologists to take stock of what is happening in psychology and the unique and viable role that counselling psychologists have in bringing about positive and lasting social change; informed by diversity, inclusion, and social justice. As such, below is the address as presented at the conference, with dashes and dots demarking pauses or emphasis. The hope is that the reader will engage with the content, even though it might be provocative.

### **The Address**

Thank you for inviting me to be a keynote speaker at this very important and monumental conference. I am really touched and honored. First, I want to apologize to those of you who would benefit from a visual presentation of my address; however, I chose not to use PowerPoint as I do not want to be bound by the slides and honestly, I was not sure how to put the ideas I am about to put forth into slides.

That said, before I begin, I want to say that this address is meant to be both provocative and controversial. It is also personal. Anyone who knows me -- knows that I do not shy away from controversy. My goal here is to challenge you to consider how we as a discipline might need to rethink the ways we are currently doing business and reflect on the idea that we may need to adopt a more activist and advocacy orientation, to advance the discipline of counselling psychology in Canada.

I want to start by acknowledging the journey that our predecessors have taken to bring the discipline of counselling psychology to this moment – to this conference. As many of you know, a small group of dedicated counselling psychologists, including but not exclusively, Drs. Mark Schoenberg and George Hurley were instrumental in establishing the Canadian Psychological Association's Section on Counselling Psychology in 1986, and others including Drs. Richard Young and Vivian Lalonde were early leaders in the section that secured its success.

I am not going to go into the history of the section prior to 1986 or the history up until 2010, because at the last conference Drs. George Hurley and Richard Young did a wonderful job of presenting that history to conference attendees. The history is well documented in a number of articles, which I would be happy to share with you and I implore you to read. Knowing our history is important.

However, it is also imperative to note that since 1986, the section reached a number of important milestones. These include; the accreditation of counselling psychology programs in Canada, the establishment of the *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, the development and approval of the official definition of counselling psychology (initiated by Dr. Vivian LaLonde), the creation of the section archive, and the *Inaugural Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference (ICPC)* held in Montreal in 2010.

While, each of these milestones has been significant in the advancement of the discipline, and at the risk of sounding as if I am promoting myself – which I hope I am not - I would like to take a moment to talk about the ICCPC, as I believe that conference was foundational to why we are here today. Unlike this conference, ICCPC was not a section initiative, it was not a CPA initiative, it was an independent conference, with no funding. As founder and Chair of ICCPC, I was not on the section executive – The conference was just this idea I had and the activist in me wanted to make it happen.

How did I come up with the idea for ICCPC? In 2009, the CPA convention was in Montreal. I went to the meetings about the definition of counselling psychology and at that convention; the definition was officially adopted by the section. After those meetings, I was sitting in the lobby of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, with a number of my students and I looked at them and said; “We need a conference”. They all looked at me, as if I was nuts (maybe I was and still am) – but at our next lab meeting I pitched the idea and ICCPC was born.

Next, I had one of my students develop a spreadsheet of every counselling and counselling psychology program and internship in Canada. On that spreadsheet was a list of everyone who worked in those programs, I proceeded to call every single person on that list inviting them to come to the conference. “Hi, I am organizing a conference, I have no funding but I think this conference is going to be important – will you come” (some of you here today received that phone call). I then invited presenters and workgroup leaders from across the country. Students submitted posters, which they presented at a session called *Pool, Posters, and Pinot Noir*. At the poster session, we read posters, drank wine, and played pool.

The conference was structured around the definition of counselling psychology with symposia and workgroups designed to address each of the six components of the definition:

- (1) Professional Issues and Identity,
- (2) Multicultural Counselling, Social Justice, and Advocacy,
- (3) Career Development,
- (4) Counselling, Training, and Supervision,
- (5) Research and Scientific Issues
- (6) Health, Wellness and Prevention

Why ICCPC? The reason I thought a conference was essential -- in that moment -- in the history of Canadian counselling psychology – was because I believed, we had an opportunity as a discipline to move beyond discussions of identity.

In my mind, the definition was pinnacle in the history of Canadian counselling psychology, as it clearly articulated ...Who we are, ...What we believe, ...What we do, and ...What we value.

The definition gave us a foundation,... a foundation which created a time,... a time to move forward,... forward from a foundational space,... a unified space,... a space where we could articulate our future,... and a space where we could clearly document and take stock of who we are and our contributions to the broader field of psychology.

I firmly believed that ICCPC was an opportunity for the discipline to move beyond identity and territorial debates. By territorial debates, I am talking about areas of research, scholarship, and clinical practice that we as counselling psychologists have deemed our purview.

In my mind, ICCPC was an opportunity to deconstruct the divisions between counsellors and counselling psychologists. As well, I wanted to move beyond the debates about what we share and how we part from clinical psychology. I hoped that by clearly understanding ourselves as a discipline, how we compared to other disciplines would become irrelevant.

As a minority discipline, my contention was (and still is, to a certain extent) that we fell into the same trap that often befalls people who live in minority social locations. That is, we experience pressure to justify ourselves, in the same way that racialized individuals, sexual and gender minorities, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized populations are asked to justify who they are and their right to hold a position or point of view.

As a lesbian, I have had to learn how to stop justifying “who I am”, and the legitimacy of my achievements to people in power. There was a time, when I had to prove, that I earned my job as a professor – legitimately because of my knowledge, skills, and credentials and that I was not just “a diversity hire”. As a result, of those experiences, I have learned that -- *My Diversity is My Strength*.

When I hear counselling psychologists justifying who they are through research and other means, I want to scream – *Our Difference is Our Power*. We do not have to justify our discipline – members of our discipline have made and continue to make, enormous contributions to the field of psychology.

At the same time, my message to the broader field of psychology is, if you listen to counselling psychologists, and respect counselling psychologists, you can learn a great deal from us, from our knowledge, and our expertise. That said, ICCPC was successful in bringing together counsellors and counselling psychologists from across Canada to discuss and debate the future of these disciplines. As well, the conference led to some landmark publications: the First Special Section on Counselling Psychology published in *Canadian Psychology* in November 2011; and in 2015 – a book entitled, *Canadian Counselling and Counselling Psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* was published by McGill-Queens Press. This book was the first book in the history of Canadian Counselling and Counselling Psychology that brought together all the scholarship, written by Canadian counsellors and counselling psychologists and published in a single volume.

Nonetheless, ICCPC achieved what I hoped it would achieve in that it documented and secured the history and foundation of these disciplines in Canada. However, ...sadly... I am not sure that it achieved my second goal of moving beyond identity and territorial debates.

After ICCPC, in 2012, I became Chair of the CPA Section on Counselling Psychology. The spirit of the executive was to have another conference. However, I was clear that I was unwilling to engage in a conference about identity and territory. I strongly believed that we needed to be distinct about the goals of the next conference in order for it to be meaningful. It was difficult for the executive to articulate what the next conference would or could be. As a result, during my tenure as Chair, no conference was planned.

Yet, I am excited to see that we are now at a place to engage in a dialogue about the future of the discipline in order to advance the field and, hopefully...hopefully...identify new directions. The theme of this *Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference (CCPC)* is *Advocating for Ourselves, Advocating for Our Communities* is laudable.

However, I caution you, in the conversations you will have in the next few days about advocating for ourselves, be cognizant that advocating is NOT justifying. We need to move away from justifying who we are and what we do. We need to move towards advocating for the importance and uniqueness of our expertise in career, multicultural, diversity, health, wellness and other areas of psychology as highlighted in the definition.

Our days of justifying -- need to be over -- it is time for acknowledging and advocating to begin. As such, in the next part of this address – I hope to challenge you to think about this theme of advocacy – What do you think this theme means and how do you think this theme has the potential for advancing the discipline?

I surmise that we as a discipline are confronting another milestone. We are at the crossroads. Since ICCPC and being Chair of the section, I have had many roles within CPA and the broader psychological community. Wearing an “array of hats”, I have attended CPA, APA, ICP, SOGI, ICAP, ACPRO, CCPPP, ASPPB, and many other meetings. At these meetings, I have interfaced with government officials, regulators, accreditors, clinicians, and researchers, to name just a few. I know that there are many people across the fields of clinical, counselling, and school psychology who are working hard to address issues around globalization, mobilization, social justice and diversity... and they are doing it with thoughtfulness and integrity.

However, more often than not, I am the only counselling psychologist at the table, even though historically counselling psychologists have been at the forefront of identifying and confronting those very issues and challenges related to social justice and diversity. Then I listen to counselling psychologists, who frequently sound like they are victims of the broader fields of counselling and psychology; in particular victims of clinical psychology, without necessarily insisting, they be at a table where they can have a voice to bring about change. As such, I am tired,... I am tired of:

Complaints coupled with complacency  
Rhetoric without action  
Good intentions without courage

So, what do I hear? And what can we do about it?

A common complaint I hear from counselling psychologists, is that other areas of psychology are saying “they do what we do”. I interpret this complaint as other areas of psychology are encroaching on our territory. The territory often referred to in this complaint is -- diversity, multiculturalism, and forays into qualitative research.

I have heard counselling psychologists say that they think this encroachment is problematic. They are concerned that counselling psychologists are being made redundant – unnecessary – or that what has been our purview is being taken over and executed in ways with which we do not agree. However, I do not share these concerns. I have a different perspective.

Counselling psychology was founded in social justice in the early work of Frank Parsons (the founder of vocational psychology) in the early 1900s. As well, feminist, multicultural, and career psychology, have long been cited as the pillars of counselling psychology. Thus, since its inception, counselling psychology as a discipline has been concerned with social justice, diversity, human rights, and human dignity.

To give you some perspective on what I am about to say, I am going to provide you with a bit of history – my history – but history nonetheless. While the Canadian Section for Counselling Psychology was in its infancy, I was the graduate student coordinator, at the first cross-cultural roundtable (now known as the multicultural roundtable), organized by counselling psychology faculty, in particular Dr. Sam Johnson, held at Teachers College/Columbia University in New York City in 1987. -- One year after the founding of the section. -- As far as I know, (and I am pretty confident about this information), that meeting was the first conference specifically devoted to discussing cross-cultural psychology in North America.

I was also a workgroup leader at the *Advancing Together Conference*, held in Michigan in 1998 – Organized by the leadership of the *Section for the Advancement Women*, in particular Drs. Linda Forrest and Ruth Fassinger. The section was a subgroup of the *American Psychological Association's*, then called, *Division 17 Counselling Psychology*. The goal of this foundational meeting was to discuss the intersections of feminism and multiculturalism – a major step toward what is now called Social Justice. Simultaneously, the first *Multicultural Summit* was being developed by Dr. Rosie Bingham as her, *Division 17 Counseling Psychology*, Presidential project, and subsequently held in 1999.

These three conferences, founded and chaired by counselling psychologists, each were the first of their kind. These conferences laid the foundation for our current discussions about diversity and inclusion.

Racialized people, LGBT+ people, Indigenous people, feminists, and others from marginalized social locations founded and organized these conferences. Brave People -- People with Courage -- The very people who were, and in some ways still are, marginalized by mainstream psychology had the courage and conviction to develop forums to discuss diversity, oppression, and discrimination; At a time when the laws did not necessarily protect minority populations in general, and Indigenous peoples and sexual minorities in particular.

During that period, the late 1980s and mid to late 1990s, the goal of these conferences – these social movements within counselling psychology -- was to change the broader discipline of psychology. That is, the goal was to let mainstream psychology know -- that it had a role in oppressing, marginalizing, and pathologizing certain persons and peoples – certain individuals and groups.

At these conferences, the meetings were about activism. The discussions focused on the oppressive and the discriminatory nature of training, research, and practice in psychology and how it needed to change.

That said, when I presently hear, the previously mentioned territorial and encroachment concerns, I believe that counselling psychologists embracing this ideology have “missed the boat.” When I see that other areas of psychology have taken on the diversity discussions – although, I am not always pleased with the way in which these discussions are held, though mostly I am impressed with the complexity of analysis these discussions present. – The very fact that these discussions are happening is a testament to counselling psychology. We should not be threatened that these discussions are happening outside of counselling psychology or that they have entered the broader discourse of psychology. *We should be celebrating counselling psychology’s contribution* -- And the success of our social movements.

Thus, the feminist and multicultural work that historically has been the purview of counselling psychology is being integrated into other areas of psychology. That was the hope -- that was the goal of those social movements in counselling psychology. The goal was to move the margins to the center... We should be proud!

It was counselling psychologists who had the courage to give voice to the oppressive nature of psychology and it is counselling psychologists who need to continue to identify and give voice to oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable populations.

That said, instead of worrying that these conversations about diversity are being held outside the purview of counselling psychology or that our “territory” is being encroached upon; We need to be cognizant and even concerned about the ways in which these conversations about diversity are being held and how cultural competent practices are being applied in the broader psychological community. We need to be the leaders in this discourse.

However, as typically happens to minority populations, and counselling psychology is a minority discipline in Canada, -- their voices, -- their histories are not prioritized, and oftentimes are made invisible. We should be concerned that the historic contributions of counselling psychologists to multicultural, feminist, and social justice psychology are being rendered invisible, as other areas of applied psychology take on this work -- as if it is a new idea -- without reading or citing the research done by counselling psychologists over the past 30 years.

For example, in 2016, there was an article published in *Canadian Psychology* (which I will not name) about diversity, this article did not cite a single counselling psychologist though many counselling psychologists have published and done much foundational work in the areas discussed in the article.

Is this omission a deliberate erasure? Is it an artifact of the silos prevalent in psychology? Or is it an example of the marginalization of counselling psychology research and scholarship?

While, I cannot answer these questions – I can suggest that we have a responsibility to combat our own marginalization and not marginalize other disciplines – such as counseling; A discipline that shares much of our history and our marginalization. In fact, we may be contributing to marginalization through being complacent and insular versus making sure we are sitting at the powerful tables available to us at Canadian and International forums.

Further, are we guilty of making our own history, and the history of counsellors who have contributed to that history invisible? That is, by calling the work we do, social justice without attending to the important contributions of feminist and multicultural counsellors and psychologists who were foundational to this work -- Are we participating in marginalizing the histories of counsellors and psychologists of color, LGBTQ+ counsellors and psychologists, feminist counsellors and psychologists, Indigenous counsellors and psychologists, just to name a few.

As previously mentioned, psychologists who live on the margins often found their home in counselling psychology because counselling psychology was a discipline discussing diversity -- long before the discourse around diversity became popular. The erasure of the voices of feminist, multicultural, and Indigenous scholars, in the current diversity discourse reproduces the marginalization and discrimination of the very same persons, peoples, individuals and groups for whom counselling psychologists have worked so hard to centralize their voices. Counselling psychologists may be inadvertently participating in this process of erasure. Therefore, it is important that we recognize and honor our history so we can build upon and advance the social justice, multicultural, and feminist foundations of the discipline.

Furthermore, we know that diversity leads to innovation. Counselling psychology as a discipline has a history of inclusion, advocacy, outreach, and activism. As such, the history of the discipline is a tribute to counselling psychologists as innovators.

Being forerunners in the areas of career, multicultural, feminist, and social justice psychology – counselling psychologists have been innovators in the field of psychology. Perhaps as a minority discipline, we have had no other choice but to be innovators. However, we were innovators nonetheless.

Nevertheless, I caution you, if presently we continue to focus on identity and territory we will lose our edge in being innovators in the field of psychology and -- our impact -- our social movements -- run the risk of being minimized, marginalized, and rendered invisible.

Moreover, territorial concerns and an orientation to identity preservation – is counter to my proposal that counselling psychology is a discipline of innovators. Identity preservation and territoriality requires us to metaphorically close our borders – closed borders suggests we need to protect ourselves – in our case those borders have often been about protecting ourselves from clinical psychology and/or counsellor education.

We have spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to define the borders between these three disciplines. I think it is time to take a critical look at why we thought we needed to define borders in the first place versus building alliances -- and if we needed to define borders -- Why we chose the borders we chose?

In reality, I think borders have only served to further marginalize our discipline and make invisible our contributions. Borders may result in us feeling secure but they are counter to inclusion. Preservation does not and cannot lead to innovation. Closed borders do not allow for new ideas. In fact, closed borders are counter to counselling psychology's values of inclusion and diversity, which, are clearly articulated in the Canadian definition of counselling psychology.

A respect for the diversity of persons, peoples, thoughts, and practice is not possible with closed borders. Open borders and diversity leads to innovation – Innovation requires controversy. Diverse thinkers are not going to agree all the time.

Anyone who knows me well, knows -- I firmly believe that controversy is essential for social justice to occur – Without controversy – rich discussions – and challenging dialogues – growth cannot happen. I am not talking about conflict, which suggests that there is a winner or loser – a right and a wrong. Conflict, oftentimes, is used to describe war. We are not at war with each other or any other specialty. We need to hold on to a spirit of inclusion around disagreement and difficult dialogues.

Without difficult dialogues there is no innovation... without innovation there is no social change -- without social change there is no equity or justice. The founding of the Section and those early conferences, were fraught with controversy and, -- nonetheless, they brought about an enormous amount of change in psychology.

However, I am not sure we are having those difficult dialogues in counselling psychology in Canada. I am concerned that we may have become complacent and comfortable with identity and territorial conversations and complaints. We need to stop comparing ourselves to other disciplines – *What does it matter?*

Creating 'us and them' binaries does not lead to innovation and inclusion. While, there may have been a time that identity discussions were essential -- that time is over.

Going forward, we need to take stock of our achievements and shift the dialogue. Psychology needs innovation and counselling psychologists are the innovators – *You in this room are the innovators.*

Counselling psychologists were pioneers in founding vocational psychology, they were activists when they founded the section, and -- counselling psychologists were innovators when they engaged in the conversations – the social movements -- about feminist, multicultural, and social justice psychology.

We – counselling psychologists – have changed mainstream psychology, mainstream psychologists are having the diversity discussions, and while counselling psychologists may not be given enough credit for being the architects of that work.

*We need to celebrate our success!*

In these celebrations, we need to honor those people who came before us -- the architects of counselling psychology. We need to make sure their contributions are not rendered invisible. At the same time, we need to ensure that our voices are heard and that our contributions are not marginalized and that we are not marginalizing other disciplines.

What's next? Where do we go from here? I believe it is our destiny – to be forward thinking – the innovators in psychology. Quibbling over who owns diversity, multiculturalism, qualitative methods, or any other area of counselling and psychology is a waste of time.

*There is far too much social justice, activist, and advocacy work that needs to be done.*

Psychology is light years from being inclusive – New anti-oppressive and social justice challenges present themselves every single day. It only takes 30 seconds of watching or streaming news from around the world to understand -- that the intersections of social justice, human rights, and mental well-being are profound.

*Why are we here? At this conference? At this moment in time?*

At this conference, we have the opportunity to be innovators,-- to engage in controversy, -- to ask hard questions,-- and to identify areas where activism and advocacy are essential. At this conference we have the opportunity to push the field of psychology forward, to start a new social movement in psychology – to better serve a diversity of peoples, persons, and communities.

Counselling psychologists have been the innovators,-- the risk takers -- and the activists in the field of psychology. That is our legacy, and this conference is an opportunity to recognize and honor that legacy. I implore you, -- if you need to hold on to identity politics and even if you do not, -- I implore you to embrace the identities of innovator, advocator, and activist as central to being a counselling psychologist.

If any group of people can address societal inequities, -- it is the group of people -- sitting in this room today. We need to stop looking inward toward who we are – We need to start looking outward to who we want to become and how we want to honor our history, while advancing the discipline.

*What important “tables” should we be sitting at? I invite YOU to sit at those tables.*

How are we –YOU – going to be innovators and activists to change the future of psychology -- such that it serves competently, with integrity, and justice -- all persons, all peoples, all individuals, and all groups?

That said, I wish you all a challenging, enlightening, innovating, empowering, and, at times, controversial conference. In tribute to the legacy of counselling psychologists, I hope at this conference, you/we start the next social movement in counselling psychology.

Thank You!

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### **Author Biography**

Ada L. Sinacore, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University and the Director of the Social Justice and Diversity Research Lab. Dr. Sinacore is an CPA Fellow and won the Distinguish Member Award from the Counselling Section.

### **Author Note**

This paper was an invited keynote address presented at the Canadian Counselling Psychology Conference, Calgary, AB.

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